Welcome to Reporting Islam

This session was developed as part of the Reporting Islam Project – a multi-year Australian project (2015-2018) designed to help improve the ways some mainstream Western news media report stories involving Islam and Muslims. The problematic nature of such coverage by some Western news media has been well established by researchers (see for example Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Such coverage includes negative stereotypes, portraying Muslims as unwanted “others” and portraying of Islam as a backward and barbaric religion that poses a threat to Western ways of life. The Reporting Islam training is based on one of two training scenarios: a mosque development proposal and a terror arrest. Both scenarios are highly relevant to Australian journalists and future journalists.

The Reporting Islam Project recognised that current journalists as well as future journalists (students) have different training needs.

Workshops for Journalists

Journalists participating in this training will most likely be time pressured. Your newsroom trainer will guide you through one of the two training scenarios which will be followed by a discussion and feedback.

These workshops can run between one hour and two hours depending on what has been negotiated with your newsroom.

Workshops for Students

Students participating in this training will generally first attend a one-hour lecture focusing on basic facts about Islam and Muslims as well as the problematic ways Islam and Muslims have been portrayed by some mainstream Western news media. Your lecturer will also provide you with a short list of readings.

This will lay the foundation for your lecturer to guide you through the workshop focused on either training scenario. The workshops can run between one hour and two hours depending on your class schedules.

Reporting Islam Resources

A key part of the Reporting Islam Project has been the development, trial and refinement of a range of resources specifically designed for Australian journalists (and future journalists) covering stories about Islam and Muslims. Your trainers or lecturers will guide you through these.

Two experienced journalism educators (Associate Professor Jacqui Ewart and Professor Mark Pearson), both of whom had previously worked as journalists and newsroom trainers, developed the Reporting Islam Project’s two training scenarios and resources. They were supported by a team of researchers. Input was sought from a range industry and community groups (including Muslim community groups).

For information about the Project please contact Jacqui Ewart j.ewart@griffith.edu.au or go to www.reportingislam.org
Need to Know – Islam fact sheet

Islam is a monotheistic religion that belongs to the Abrahamic religions. The Qur’an is a religious text considered by Muslims to be the verbatim word of God (Allāh). Sunni Muslims accept the teachings and normative example (called the sunnah composed of accounts called hadith) of Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–8 June 632 CE), (PBUH – ‘Peace Be Upon Him’) – who is considered by all Muslims (Sunni or Shia) to be the last prophet of God. Those who don’t believe Muhammad to be the last prophet are not deemed Muslims by mainstream Islam. An adherent of Islam is called a Muslim (sometimes spelled "Moslem"). [Spellings of key words in Islam will vary according to your media organisation’s Style Guide because there is no single method of translation from the original Arabic.]

Islam is based around five pillars that each adult Muslim (male or female) is obligated to follow, including declaration of faith (shahada), five times daily prayer (salat), charity (zakat), fasting (sawm) and pilgrimage (hajj). These basic obligations are found across almost all sects of Islam. Some may, however, undertake other acts of worship as well. Islam is considered a code of living that covers every aspect of life and society, providing guidance on multifarious topics from banking and welfare, to family life and the environment.

Dress code. Islam is a religion of modesty and requires both men and women to be modest in how they present themselves. (Muslim men are required to be modest and have their own dress code.) Media outlets and sources often mistake the names of Muslim women’s head dress. Remember, not all Muslim women cover, and not all covered women are Muslim. Muslim communities around the globe refer to the veil by different names including jalbab, hijab, burqa (burka), niqab, khimar, abaya, chador and dupatta.

Three main types of Muslim women’s head dress (hijab) are the hijab, niqab and burqa (burka). The term ‘hijab’ can refer to the head scarf, but is also used as the general term for dressing modestly.

| Hijab – head scarf, and the general term for dressing modestly. Photo: Cory Wright | Niqab – garment covering the face leaving the area around eyes visible. Photo: Wiki Commons | Burqa (Burka) - covers entire face and body, with vision through a mesh screen. Photo: Wiki Commons |

An identification, understanding and appreciation of these names and different forms of veils is crucial for practising journalists and editors.

Jihad is an Arabic word that means “struggle” or “striving” (inwardly and outwardly) and is an important concept in Islam. It can be understood as a spiritual struggle to become a better person, living through difficult times, struggling through personal dilemmas and in some contexts it can mean participating in war. However, it is commonly misused by Western media and extremist groups as a direct translation of ‘religious war’. Islamic scripture distinguishes jihad of warfare from other types
by calling it *qital* (fighting). Declaring a war however is the responsibility of the state, governed by strict rules of engagement, and is not valid if declared by individuals or groups. *Jihad* does not mean ‘holy war’. A *jihad* of fighting is considered illegitimate if it violates the rules of engagement such as the killing of any innocent person or bystander.

**Branches and movements.** Most Muslims are of two denominations: Sunni (75–90%) or Shia (10–20%). Islamic spirituality is commonly known by the term ‘Sufism’ — a traditional label more appropriately known today as ‘Islamic psychology’. It has a spectrum of definitions. Essentially, Sufism or Islamic spirituality is concerned with the purification of the self. Sufis are to be found in all Islamic sects. Terms such as *Salafi* and *Wahabi* are not different sects of Islam - they are Sunnis, but their adherents are considered to follow a very conservative form of Islam. [Note: *Sikhism*, followed by *Sikh people*, is not part of Islam. *It is a monotheistic religion which originated in South Asia in the 15th century*].

**Religious leaders.** There is no direct equivalent of ‘priesthood’ in Islam. Muslim religious leaders go by a range of titles including *imam, mullah, mufti* (Sunni), and *ayatollah* (Shia). They are also often described in the news media using the term ‘cleric’. Although the use of the term ‘cleric’ is not offensive, many Muslims disagree with the use of the term because they do not see it as applicable to the role and function of such individuals in Islam.

**Festivals and pilgrimage.** Muslims have two major celebrations throughout the year, known as *Eid*. The first is *Eid Al-Fitr* (“festival of breaking of the fast”) which comes at the end of *Ramadan* (the month of fasting). The second is *Eid-Al-Adha* - also called the Feast of Sacrifice or *Bakr-Eid*, which honors the willingness of Abraham (*Ibrahim*) to sacrifice his son, as an act of submission to God’s command, before God then intervened. The celebration of *Eid Al-Adha* starts on the tenth day of the month of the pilgrimage – the *hajj*. The *hajj* is an annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and a mandatory religious duty that must be carried out at least once in their lifetime by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey and who can support their family during their absence.

**Prophets.** Many journalists do not realise that Islam acknowledges and reveres Jesus Christ and the Old Testament prophets. Muslims believe that God is one and incomparable and that the purpose of existence is to worship God. Muslims also believe that Islam is the complete and universal version of a primordial faith that was revealed many times before through prophets including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ.

**Cultural practices.** Journalists can find themselves in a range of culturally sensitive situations when covering stories involving Muslim people. Most matters of cultural or religious sensitivity also apply to other religions, including:

- sensitivities over diet including fasting during Ramadan, and abstinence from the eating of pork and consumption of alcohol
- less physical contact between genders in social situations, such as a male extending his hand to a female on introduction or greeting
- modesty in clothing, particularly with the covering of the shoulders and limbs when visiting a place of worship.

The visual portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in illustrations or cartoons is also offensive to most Muslims.

**Law and ethics.** As further detailed in this guide, a range of laws or ethical codes might apply to a story about a mosque proposal including discrimination and vilification laws (with some qualifications), the MEAA Australian Journalists’ Code of Ethics, and defamation laws.
Reportage. Stories about divisive issues like proposals to build mosques are best handled by stating simply the nature of the dispute, reporting fairly and accurately, avoiding discriminatory and inflammatory material, by ensuring the views of all key stakeholders and legitimate experts have been sought, and by fact checking the claims made by those sources. [See the reporting tips and key questions for journalists in this guide].

Statistics. With about 1.62 billion followers or 23% of the global population, Islam is the world’s second largest religion by number of adherents and, according to many sources, the fastest-growing major religion in the world. About 13% of Muslims live in Indonesia which has the largest Muslim population of any nation and is the largest Muslim-majority country, followed by Pakistan. India, a non-Muslim country, has the third largest Muslim population in the world. The fourth largest is in Bangladesh. South Asia, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa have large Muslim populations. Sizable Muslim communities are also found in Europe, China, Russia, and the Americas. Converts and immigrant communities are found in almost every part of the world. At the 2011 Census Muslims constituted 2.2% of the Australian population, Islam was Australia’s third largest religion, and Australian Muslims came from 183 different countries. Australia’s oldest permanent mosque was built in Adelaide in 1888.

Sources: Adapted with input from Professor Mohamad Abdalla and Joumanah El Matrah by Reporting Islam Project research assistants Yasmin Khan and Abdi Hersi from Bedar & El Matrah, 2005; International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, 2015; National Imams Consultative Forum, 201).

Other useful sources of basic facts about Islam and Muslims are What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam by John Esposito (2011) and Islam: A Very Short Introduction by Malise Ruthven (2012).
In the next four decades the proportions of all religions in the world population will remain the same or decline except Islam.

- The Muslim population is expected to increase from 1.6 billion or 23% of the world population, to 2.76 billion or 30% of all people in 2050. ...
- Twenty years later in 2070 Islam will be largest religion in the world...
- At 47% Christianity will still be the largest religion in Australia... Islam with 4.9 percent of the population will be the second largest religious community.
- This will mean that there will be almost one million more Muslims in Australia in 2050 than in 2010.
- Contact between Muslim Indonesian fishermen from Southern Sulawesi and Indigenous people in northern Australia from around the 1750s is the earliest evidence of a Muslim connection in Australia.
- However, it was not until the 1860s with the arrival of Afghan cameleers that Muslims settled in greater numbers in Australia. At the peak of exploration and settlement of central Australia, around 3000 Afghans worked as camel drivers carting water and goods in the difficult terrain...
- In the postwar period, mainly due to migration from Turkey and Lebanon, the Muslim population increased markedly, rising to 200,885 in 1996.
- According to the 2011 Australian Census there were 476,290 Muslims in Australia, of whom about 40% were Australian born.
- Muslims constitute 2.2% of the Australian population, making Islam Australia’s third largest religion.
- Australian Muslims come from 183 different countries, making them one of Australia’s most ethnically and nationally heterogeneous communities.
- About two fifths of Australian Muslims are of North African or Middle Eastern origin and about a quarter are of South and Central Asian origin.
- Australian Muslims are overwhelmingly urban dwellers. In fact, three quarters of them live in Sydney and Melbourne.
- The Muslim population is increasing more rapidly in the other major Australian cities, though, with the highest rate of increase in Adelaide.
- There are concentrations of Muslims in certain state and federal electorates, giving them noticeable political influence in some parts of Australia.
- Muslims tend to be younger than the Australian population as a whole.
- Muslim women also tend to have more babies than the average Australian woman.
- In the 2011 Census almost three quarters of Australian Muslims nominated ‘Australian’ as their national identity. This figure would probably be higher if it weren’t for the large number of recent migrants in the Muslim population.
- Muslims overwhelmingly agree that it is possible to be a good Muslim and a good Australian. Studies consistently show, though, that Australian citizenship and identifying as an Australian are no protection from stereotypes and prejudice.
- About 70% of Australian Muslims report good or very good proficiency in the English language. This is significant in light of a recent study which shows that, for the great majority of Australians, being able to speak English is a more important marker of being Australian than being born in Australia.
- The evidence presented in this report shows that Australian Muslims in general are young city dwellers who are optimistic about life in Australia. They are bringing up children, enrolling in higher education, and embracing the English language and an Australian identity.
- Muslims are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty or in prison.
- Despite their high levels of education, Muslims are less likely to work in the professions and less likely to be granted a job interview than the average Australian.
- They are more likely to have completed Year 12 and Muslim men are more likely to have a bachelors or postgraduate degree.
- A larger proportion of Muslims are in full-time education compared with all
Australians mainly due to their younger age structure.

- Muslims are less likely to be employed than Australians in general and this labour market disadvantage is worse for younger Muslims.
- Muslims are also under-represented in high-status professional occupations and overrepresented in other occupational categories, which tend to have lower status.
- Applicants with Middle Eastern names are less likely to be given an interview than applicants with identical resumes but Anglo-Saxon names.

*Source:* International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, 2015
Impacts of poor media practice on Muslim people

There is ample evidence, both empirical and anecdotal, of the negative impact of current news media reporting on the attitudes and feelings within the Australian Muslim community and its potential role as a motivating factor encouraging foreign fighters and the news media’s role as a factor inspiring violence against law-abiding Muslim citizens.

We are profoundly concerned that violent religious extremism is malignant and metastasizing. Every religiously related hostility—every attack, every hate crime, every insult, every humiliation—is amplified in the media and sends out a polarizing wave that is fueling a rise in social hostility, that—in turn—can add to the seductions of violent religious extremism. New forms of social media are being widely and skillfully used to recruit youth to violent religious extremism (Religions for Peace, 2014, p. 1).

Tahiri and Grossman (2013) in their Commonwealth funded research project, Community Radicalisation: An examination of perceptions, ideas, beliefs and solutions throughout Australia, acknowledge this issue. This frustration and anger typically leads to community tension and feelings of isolation and victimisation - widely agreed causal factors of radicalisation (further reinforced by Veldhuis and Staun (2009) in their paper, Islamist Radicalisation; A Root Cause Model.

In theirARC-funded paper, Avoiding Community Backlash in the Fight against Terrorism: Research Report, Murphy, K, Cherney, A and Barkworth, J found ‘there was a strong belief across the focus groups that media reporting exacerbated the stigmatisation and negative labelling of the Muslim community’ (2015, p. 15) and ‘Muslims carry the burden of stigmatisation and experience a form of collective attribution by the constant conflation of Islam with terrorism’ (2015, p. 25). Murphy et al. (2015, p. 25) stated ‘there is a real risk that the types of experience … play into the hands of Islamic violent-extremist by providing fuel for a key narrative they use to justify their actions: that Muslims are a suppressed and victimised minority’.

Awan (2008, p. 14) highlighted a range of factors that could lead to ‘a predisposition for TREs (Transitional Religiosity Experiences’). In particular these included “diverse socio-economic factors are most often-cited and typically include high levels of unemployment, poor job prospects, low educational attainment, a disproportionately high prison population, and poor housing facilities, compounded by the presence of endemic and often institutionalised racism and Islamophobia’ (2008, p. 14). News media stereotyping of Muslims is one form of institutional racism.

Brown et al's (2015) study showed that their study participants categorised their perceptions of news media representations of Islam in three ways: 1. Muslims are terrorists, 2. Muslim countries are strict and conservative, and 3. Muslim countries are dirty, backward and uneducated. The power of the media to influence people's views and behaviour was underlined by all of their study participants, who felt that they experienced a direct impact of media representations through their (mis)treatment by members of the host society (England). According to participants in this study, such misrepresentations have led to Muslims being treated with suspicion by the non-Muslim community,
and to occasional acts of physical and verbal abuse. Misrepresentations also negatively impact on collective self-esteem and cultural identity. The evidence of this study supports the call for news media organisations to be sensitive to the impact of their portraits of cultural and faith groups on public perceptions and attitudes, and to therefore monitor and correct bias and pejorative association (Brown et al., 2015, p. 57). Another important factor raised by this study was whether the sojourner’s well-being and mental health are compromised by their perceptions of media representations of Islam.

Research has highlighted that news media representations have impacts on the way Muslims construct themselves. For example Güney (2010) undertook fieldwork from 2002 to 2004 in Bradford, an impoverished northern “milltown” in Britain that witnessed violent protests known as “race riots” in 2001. Güney (2010, p. 169) explored ‘how Asian youths perceive the news media coverage of the wars in the Middle East and how this influences their identification as Muslims and their sense of belonging to an imagined global Muslim community’. He found a correlation between news media reports about wars in the Middle East and the ‘construction of a global Muslim community with which youths associate themselves’ (Güney, 2010, p. 168). The youths noted that ‘the mass media’s biased reports about Muslims and terrorism – as experienced by the informants – cause a backlash, reinforcing identification with Muslim identity. It can therefore be argued that the Western mass media have an impact on the youths, alienating them from Britishness and encouraging the Othering process through their way of “covering Islam” (Said 1981) and Muslims. One could even say that, through their reporting of the wars, the mass media actually induce and support the establishment of Muslim identity as a primary marker’ (Güney, 2010, p. 179).

Aly (2007) sought to examine a gap in the research by examining the way in which Australian Muslims interpret and respond to the discourse of terrorism in the media, in which their religion is increasingly being implicated. She found that the most common perception of the media among participants was the identification of Australian Muslim as “other”, which creates fear within the broader community by equating Islam with terrorism. Participants expressed an intense distrust of the media and a propaganda view of its influence on public opinion. Aly suggested the construction of the news media as anti-Muslim has become the lens through which Australian Muslims interpret news media discourse.
What Australian and New Zealand Muslims say about media coverage

The young people will not be scared as such, but they would be angry, frustrated, annoyed, and the negative portrayal of Muslims further marginalises them, and those who are extremely vulnerable among the young people become more frustrated, angry, especially if they are also not working, and can’t find a job because they happen to be a Muslim, and unfortunately, that sometimes makes them susceptible to radical ideology. - Professor Mohamad Abdalla, Director, Centre for Islamic Thought and Education, University of South Australia

I can’t imagine what it would be like for young, often disenfranchised Muslim men who feel constantly bombarded and attacked by the media... There’s this real feeling of wanting to declare your faith a lot more strongly. And, I wouldn’t say radicalisation but yeah the real strengthening (of faith). This isn’t just an issue of faith, it’s political. And Islam is already a very political sort of religion. - “Maya”, Australian Muslim journalist

They’re a threat to our way of life. They have only recently started coming along. Even the popular narrative about how Muslims are meant to be foreign and trying to change the Australian way of life, in reality out of the 500,000 Muslims in Australia at least a third of them were born here. That notion of Islam as foreign to Australia is something that should be questioned but it’s not going to be questioned in the day to day run of newsrooms across Australia. - Dr Nasya Bahfen, senior lecturer in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University

There are some elements of positive reporting in Australian media about Muslim community or Muslim issues. (But) there is a tendency of easily and quickly accepting that terrorism or terrorists (applies to a story). In many instances journalists don’t use their critical faculty, their self-conscious agency to justify whether the very use of the term terrorists or terrorism is justified or not. - Dr Akhteruz Zaman, journalism educator, Massey University

As long as the textbooks teach that conflict makes news, and peace doesn’t, you will have the same conditioning of the people. That perception needs to be changed. But sometimes a nice headline for a story might result in something far more serious. How do the semantics and how do the words play a role – a very important role? So the use of words can actually be so provocative that they can disrupt social harmony. – Dr Rukhsana Aslam, NZ journalist and academic
Ten Reporting Islam tips for journalists

1. **Get the basics right.** Be fair and accurate, attribute opinion, verify facts and assertions, behave ethically, and seek out a range of sources. If in doubt, check it out. If still in doubt, leave it out. Ensure the images, vision and audio also tell the story without perpetuating stereotypes.

2. **Find the best sources.** Consider using sources informed about the issue – experts with credibility and Muslims from a variety of cultures and demographics who might have a different perspective.

3. **Be legal, ethical and respectful.** A host of laws and ethical codes might be relevant to your story. Anti-discrimination and vilification laws and codes and defamation, contempt and national security laws might apply to some stories. Be respectful of people’s cultural and religious customs when approaching and interviewing.

4. **Watch your language.** Avoid using inaccurate or misleading terminology. Be very wary of “Us versus Them” terminology which separates Muslims from other Australians and language that homogenizes Muslims.

5. **Stick to the facts.** State the basic facts of the matter if a topic has the potential to inflame passions and tensions in the community. Sometimes this means fact-checking an assertion someone is making rather than just quoting them and spreading a falsity or a rumour with painful consequences.

6. **Select your stats.** Cite an authoritative source like the Australian Bureau of Statistics rather than using a figure peddled by someone with a vested interest or an agenda.

7. **Reflect on your angle.** Decide on your story angle after canvassing a range of views and accounts. Remain flexible about adjusting your story angle, especially to help reduce conflict and community tensions.

8. **Acknowledge diversity.** Include a host of perspectives from Muslim people and those with other backgrounds and views. Acknowledge there are extreme and unrepresentative beliefs and actions to be found in many sections of society.

9. **Direct the debate.** Consider whether to open web and social media comment streams and only do so if you have the resources to moderate them. Intervene to correct errors and to encourage online civility.

10. **Plan your follow-up.** Many important stories involving Islam and Muslim people have layers of complexity deserving follow-up coverage. These often involve other perspectives and can shed light on the impacts on people’s lives beyond the immediate news.
## Ten questions to ask yourself when covering Islam / Muslim communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Key questions for journalists</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Does my story distinguish between Islam as a religion and the radical philosophies that inspire extremists? Or does it conflate/confuse them?</td>
<td>Pintak &amp; Franklin, 2013; Rane, Ewart, &amp; Martinkus, 2014; Rupar, 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Is the language carefully considered? Does it adopt an alienating tone that is emotive, immoderate, alarmist or abusive? Does it seek to avoid negative labels and stereotypes?</td>
<td>Greater London Authority, 2007; Gunaratne, Pearson, &amp; Senarath, 2015; Pintak &amp; Franklin, 2013; Rane et al., 2014; Robie, 2011; Rupar, 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Does my story avoid an ‘us and them’ dichotomy in its coverage?</td>
<td>Dreher, 2007; Greater London Authority, 2007; Rane &amp; Ewart, 2012; Rupar, 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Have I ensured my angle is evidence-based and checked I have not leapt to any assumptions based upon someone’s name, religion or physical appearance?</td>
<td>Dreher, 2007; Greater London Authority, 2007; Rane &amp; Ewart, 2012; Rane et al., 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Does my proposed angle make the basic error of portraying Islam and Muslims as a threat to national identity and a particular way of life?</td>
<td>Dreher, 2007; Greater London Authority, 2007; Rane &amp; Ewart, 2012; Rane et al., 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Have I taken time to reflect carefully and self-critically upon this story: my purpose with it, approaches to it, and the lives it might affect?</td>
<td>Burns, 2013; Gunaratne et al., 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Have I reflected upon and identified my own views, prejudices and positions on the topic?</td>
<td>Burns, 2013; Pearson, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Does my research acknowledge the diversity of opinions and practices within Islam as a religion and between Muslim communities and avoid portraying a single Muslim position?</td>
<td>Rane &amp; Ewart, 2012; Rane et al., 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Do I portray people as human beings or focus unreasonably on their membership of an ethnic or religious group?</td>
<td>Dreher, 2007; Pintak &amp; Franklin, 2013; Robie, 2011; Rupar, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Are the images and/or vision accompanying the story appropriate and in context?</td>
<td>Ewart &amp; Rane, 2013; Greater London Authority, 2007; Pintak &amp; Franklin, 2013; Rane et al., 2014; Robie, 2011; Rupar, 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Güney, Ülkü. (2010). ‘We see our people suffering’: the war, the mass media and the reproduction of Muslim identity among youth. Media, War & Conflict, 3(2), 168-181. doi:10.1177/1750635210360081


