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Eric Loo
University of Wollongong, eloo@uow.edu.au

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Reporting Religion beyond the Conflict Frame

Abstract
Perhaps if journalists were more educated and experienced in the universal teachings of Christ, Muhammad, Siddharta, and Baha'ulah, we would see more enlightened coverage of religionrelated issues from environmental conservation, world hunger, and poverty to sectarian conflicts, population displacement, and fair trade. Add to this utopian state of journalism the philosophies of Gandhi, Gibran, Plato, Confucius and Ibn Sina1 - the media might be much richer in its coverage of ethno-religious affairs. Which is attainable – if journalists take time to reflect on alternative methods of reporting when, amid fast breaking news and competition to be first with the stories online, accuracy in content and context is occasionally compromised for immediacy. The unintended consequence is the homogenization of media coverage of world affairs, a tendency to report what everyone else is reporting. This reflective article shows examples of how the homogenization of religion-related issues occurs in today's journalism. It concludes with a few proactive journalism models to take reporting of religion beyond the dominant conflict frame.

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Reporting Religion beyond the Conflict Frame

By Eric Loo | eloo@uow.edu.au

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29)

When you are greeted with a greeting, greet in return with what is better than it, or (at least) return it equally. (Qur'an,4:86)

Words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world. (Gautama Buddha)

It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens. (Baha'ullah)

Perhaps if journalists were more educated and experienced in the universal teachings of Christ, Muhammad, Siddharta, and Baha'ulah, we would see more enlightened coverage of religion-related issues from environmental conservation, world hunger, and poverty to sectarian conflicts, population displacement, and fair trade. Add to this utopian state of journalism the philosophies of Gandhi, Gibran, Plato, Confucius and Ibn Sina[1] - the media might be much richer in its coverage of ethno-religious affairs. Which is attainable – if journalists take time to reflect on alternative methods of reporting when, amid fast breaking news and competition to be first with the stories online, accuracy in content and context is occasionally compromised for immediacy. The unintended consequence is the homogenization of media coverage of world affairs, a tendency to report what everyone else is reporting. This reflective article shows examples of how the homogenization of religion-related issues occurs in today's journalism. It concludes with a few proactive journalism models to take reporting of religion beyond the dominant conflict frame.

First, an example of how realities are reduced to digestible story capsules in the news routine when journalists, isolated from incidents as they break, report their stories from talking only to the victims. On November 30, 2008, my nephew returned to Sydney after a harrowing escape from the terrorist attacks on the Oberoi and Taj Mahal hotels in Mumbai. He was one of the Australian trade delegates staying at the Oberoi. He managed to escape from the 15th floor via the emergency exit stairs when the so-called Deccan mujahideens invaded the lobby. More than 100 people were shot and killed – the majority local Indians. A minority were white Westerners.

Hearing his eyewitness accounts, and not being there, I wondered how I would have filed a fair, balanced, and accurate account beyond the routine Islamist-terrorist frame – which was the dominant news frame in the Indian and foreign media coverage. I had made short visits to parts of India in the past. I had seen Hindus and Muslims living among the poorest of the poor. I had visited the opulent Taj Mahal Hotel where the bejewelled local rich and foreign tourists dine and mingle, oblivious to child beggars on the streets, and where about a kilometer away the poor live in slums with no clean water or basic toilet facilities.

The gap between dire poverty and excessive opulence in India begs more questions when one reads the daily reactive reports about the youthful mujahideens, said to have been brainwashed by al-Qaeda teachings, who had attacked the symbols of decadent wealth. One of the mujahideens, who took part in the siege of the Oberoi, told the Indian media via telephone:

"Muslims in India should not be persecuted. We love this as our country, but when our mothers and sisters were being killed, where was everybody? … Release all the mujahideens, and Muslims living in India should not be troubled."[2]

That said, few journalists tackled the stories in the mujahideens' statement nor looked into how Muslims in reality were or were not persecuted in India when other minorities – Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, other Muslims – have lived peacefully with the Hindu majority throughout the country's history. The picture emerging from the media texts was of entrenched religious and ethnic animosity between Hindus and Muslims in India – which, as far as I could see, was less evident at the grassroots.

After the smoke had cleared, the Indian and foreign media delved into the source of the mujahideens' financial support and training camps, the implications for the Indian economy and relations with Pakistan. Would a religion reporter, educated in comparative religious studies, experienced and immersed in the environment of the poor and disenfranchised in India and Pakistan, tell a different story and provide a clearer context into the plausible causes of the attacks? I believe so, based on my experience that journalists are essentially products of their cultural, social, political, and economic milieu. Like their audience, journalists naturally react to explosive events with religious, ethnic, and political underpinnings through filtered glasses. To understand the context, one would have to search for stories and commentaries across multiple media outlets that represent different political ideologies.

A second example, closer to my experience as a journalism educator in Australia, was the suicide bombing in 2002 in Kuta, Bali, in Indonesia, which killed more than 200 people, including 88 Australians. Media coverage understandably focused on the Australian victims. The Bali bombers were framed as "mad murderers" - the best known was Amrozi, the "smiling assassin."

The story in the Daily Telegraph read:
"AMROZI, the smiling assassin, was not so brave when faced with his own death. His elder brother Mukhlas was more defiant and praised God to the end. But when the time came, the three Bali bombers accepted their fate without struggle as they were shackled and taken from their cells to the execution ground."

Few stories provided Australians with deeper insights into the bombers' radicalized and deviant political interpretations of the Quran. Islam and Muslims were demonised in the coverage, and Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiah, was depicted as having inspired the Bali bombers.

A 2006 foreign policy telephone opinion survey of 1000 Australians conducted by the Lowy Institute based in Sydney noted that "international terrorism" (73 percent) and "Islamic fundamentalism" (68 percent) were considered vital threats to Australia's interests. The respondents perceived Indonesia as a "dangerous source of Islamic terrorism" and a military threat to Australia (Cook 2006: 2, 11 & 14).[3]

Mahony (2008) said the Australian media were central to creating these perceptions despite the fact that the majority of Indonesians were moderate and tolerant Muslims, that Jemaah Islamiah and Islamic law did not have widespread community support.

"Indonesia is now more often linked to Islam or referred to as Australia's 'Muslim neighbour,' rather than 'Asian neighbour,' as it was more commonly referred to before the 'War on Terror' … Indonesian Islam and Indonesian values have generally remained constant but Australian public and media perceptions of them have changed. Indonesia is now framed in Islamic terms and largely in relation to terrorism."[4]

The violent Islamic fundamentalism frame was recently reinforced in the Australian public mind by the protests by Coptic Christians in Sydney on May 21, 2011. They had called on the Australian government to "bring strong diplomatic efforts to bear on the interim Egyptian government and the United Nations in support of persecuted religious minorities." The chief of staff of the Australian Christian Lobby said in the report that they were concerned "a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood plans to run for the presidency in the September election … [that] an Islamist leader in Cairo would be a setback for Copts and minorities in Egypt."[5]

The picture that emerged from the frames and tone in the stories was: Coptic Christians are persecuted and attacked by belligerent Muslim extremists. What led to the clashes between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Cairo was not clearly explained. That there are different groups in Islam – just as there are different denominations in Christianity – was not reported, a phenomenon I attribute to the reactive nature of commercial journalism and the journalistic tendency to reduce complexities to digestible story capsules.

It doesn't help either when incidents which involve a minority of the Muslims are read as representative of the wider Islamic community. On August 27, 2006 an Islamist political group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, distributed graphic pamphlets in Sydney and various Muslim-dominant suburbs calling for the destruction of Israel in a jihadist holy war. Politicians rightly condemned the protesters and called for Hizb ut-Tahrir to be outlawed, just as it has been outlawed in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, parts of Central Asia, and the Middle East.[6]

Amid the number of public protests by Australian Muslims, the Australian Jewish News subsequently reported on February 16, 2007 that "Australia should cap its Muslim immigration." The report quoted a Jewish academic, Raphael Israeli from Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who told the Sydney Morning Herald that "when the Muslim population gets to a critical mass (about 10 percent of the total population) you have problems. That is a general rule, so if it applies everywhere (for example, in France), it applies in Australia."[7]

Conflict between Australians and their Muslim citizens often gives politicians fuel to gain traction among their constituents. In the weeks leading up to the New South Wales state election on March 24, 2007, the Christian Democratic Party leader, Fred Nile, a church minister and member of the New South Wales Parliament, called for a 10-year moratorium on immigration of Muslims, predominantly from Iraq and Afghanistan, into Australia pending a study of the socio-cultural, religious, and economic implications.[8]

The story was splashed across the mainstream papers, and aired on radio talk shows although Muslims, according to the 2006 census, account for only 1.7% of the total Australian population, of which 0.6% were born in Australia.[9] This, even though parts of the Torah, Bible, and Quran all condone "holy war" and all describe the apocalyptic end of times prophecies in quite similar metaphors and figurative texts.

The Australian (March 12, 2007), a national daily owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, reported Nile as saying:
"There has been no serious study of the potential effects upon Australia of more than 300,000 Muslims who are already here. Australians deserve a breathing space so the situation can be carefully assessed before Islamic immigration can be allowed to resume … [Meanwhile] Australia should extend a welcoming hand to many thousands of persecuted Christians who are presently displaced or at risk in the Middle East."[10]

The CDP's ideology of exclusion headlined in mainstream newspapers and aired on talkback radio. Public reactions were polarized. Stories of immigration with racial and religious underpinnings are by journalistic conventions framed by selective factualizing,[11] which is akin to tabloid sensationalism. Media coverage of the CDP's press statement reflects traditional

journalistic routine where conflict and controversy more commonly frame the stories than context and informed exposition. Being professionalized to report about what is seen, what is knowable, verifiable, and provable, journalists are inclined to skim over issues of faith, which essentially deal in things unseen and unknowable.

I would also argue that a fairer and more accurate examination of mainstream media coverage of religion and faith issues would be in the context of how the stories are packaged over time as follow-ups to previous controversies. For instance about three weeks after the Fred Nile election win, the Sydney Morning Herald, one of the major daily broadsheets in Sydney owned by Fairfax Media Limited, published a feature "Islam in Australia: A diverse society finds a new voice" (April 28, 2007)[12] and, months later, a special issue The Face of Islam on Aug. 20, 2007.[13]

Dedicated newspaper series on institutionalized religions, as illustrated in the following example from Sydney Morning Herald, are becoming common practice in multicultural societies, especially during significant religious occasions such as Ramadan for Muslims, Easter for Christians, Diwali for Hindus, and Wesak for Buddhists.

The Face of Islam illustrate how religion, which impacts on people's lives, can be humanized and packaged in text and images that readers can relate to and which give its followers a space to talk about their faith and how it affects their daily lives.[14]

A recent example is a series of features in the News Review (SMH, April 22-24, 2011) titled 'Leap of Faith'[15] that charts the changing spiritual landscape in Sydney. The section 'Religions and their followers find a safe haven'[16] explains in an average of 400 words for each religious group the history of the Mandaeans, the Mar Thoma, the Ahmadiyya, and the Buddhists. Albeit rare in the normal running of a daily newspaper, the religion feature series represent one of the positive changes in the Australian mainstream media portrayal of the country's cultural and religious diversity.

Dealing with ambivalence in reporting religion

Currently, religion remains at best a peripheral issue in mainstream media for unsurprising reasons – editors' lack of interest in religion, reporters' lack of knowledge, lack of diligence in finding out and learning more about the complex issues from politics to theology of the religion in question. Other suppositions point to hostility by secular media towards religion, and editors (and their journalists) being overly cautious about not offending particular religious denominations that could lead to sectarian conflicts. How do we tackle this dilemma?

Approaching faith-based issues and religion related stories beyond the conflict frame will involve journalists consciously redefining the fundamental elements of newsworthiness, re-assessing their knowledge base and understanding of interfaith issues, learning how to ask circular questions with religious sources unfamiliar with the media, and finally re-constructing the information and reactions gathered into a narrative with a clear goal in mind – which is to inform, contextualize, elucidate, and educate their audience. Religion reporting does not necessarily delve into believers' faith, theological teachings or doctrinal issues, which one could often read in newsletters published by churches, temples, madrasahs, mosques, and other religious institutions.

Religion reporting is more subtle than explicit when, in writing about an issue - for example, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, capital punishment, the global financial crisis, corruption, feudalism, and political transformations in the Middle East[17] - one defers to different theological or scriptural interpretations reflective of the community's dominant religious affiliation. The challenge for religion reporters in the mainstream media is to show the subtle influences of religious and spiritual values on these issues in more explicit terms as expressed by diverse community sources, particularly the believers.

Plausible approaches to reporting religion

Unless a more inclusive methodology for reporting religion is found, journalists will continue to employ the dominant frame of conflict, visceral sounds and images - in reporting on the fly without the luxury of time to step back and reflect on the many facets of events as they unfold, such as the persecution of Coptic Christians by Muslims in Egypt, tribal clashes in the Middle East, forced marriages of young Muslim girls in Yemen, disenfranchisement of women in Afghanistan, sexual segregation in Saudi Arabia, Arab-Israeli conflict, struggle for a Palestinian state, honor killings. As Mustafa Akyol, deputy editor of Turkish Daily News, in a talk in March 2011 at the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in the United States noted, are we confusing, nay focusing, too much on the diverse traditions of Islam and not enough on its core beliefs?[18]

Smock (2008) in a special report for the United States Institute of Peace, noted:

"While religion is an important factor in conflict, often marking identity differences, motivating conflict, and justifying violence, religion is not usually the sole or primary cause of conflict. The reality is that religion becomes intertwined with a range of causal factors - economic, political, and social - that define, propel, and sustain conflict. Certainly, religious disagreements must be addressed alongside these economic, political, and social sources to build lasting reconciliation."[19]

Smock points to the imperatives of looking at religion as a positive force in peacemaking where its leaders "can mediate in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing sides." He cautions against "an almost universal propensity to oversimplify the role that religion plays in international affairs."[20]

Marshall et al. (2009) echo this point in a compilation of essays by journalists, editors, and social analysts commenting on the misunderstanding of religion in the media. CNN political analyst William Schneider was quoted as saying:

"On the national level, the press is one of the most secular institutions in American society. It just doesn't get religion or any idea that flows from religious conviction. The press is not necessarily contemptuous of serious religion. It's just uncomprehending."[21]

Schneider's comment draws heavily on how reporters for years, while maintaining the need for fairness and accuracy, have made avoidable mistakes in their stories about specific religions because they overlooked the context of what they were reporting, thereby affecting the story's direction. While the essays were limited to case studies of misguided reporting of religion in the American media, they represent how journalists in the Middle East, parts of Asia and Australia, where religion issues inescapably stir public fervor, are equally prone to mistakes when they report through their preconceived notions of religion, beliefs, and spirituality.

This was evident in the Western and Arab media "mis-representation" of Pope Benedict XVI's lecture on "faith, reason and the university" on September 12, 2006 at the University of Regensburg in Germany. The controversy was caused by what, in hindsight, was journalists' taking out of context the Pope's remark in his lecture: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."[22]

Commenting on how easy it is to take things out of context and journalism's "attraction to conflict and confrontation," Abdallah Schleifer, national bureau chief of Al-Arabiya, said in a lecture in 2006 that the Western and Arab media had overlooked the fact that the Vatican since the days of John Paul II had consistently worked to strengthen interfaith dialogue between

Catholics and Muslims. He said Pope Benedict had previously met with Muslim communities in Cologne in 2005 when he called on Catholics and Muslims to seek new paths of reconciliation.[23]

Schleifer explained that despite the Western media's "secularist bias," their coverage was often "balanced" by its professional routine of providing space for diverse reactions and analyses in its op-ed pages of controversial issues, such as Pope Benedict's misconstrued papal offensive against Islam. Which contrasts with the Arab media in which, according to Schleifer, demagogues dominate the pages that often reflect a "stark discontinuity between the events and the reportage," and where, when a confrontational line is drawn, facts and contexts are often overlooked.

"There has been little interest in most of the Arab press in gathering more facts to the story than one paragraph taken out of context, and no significant reference to the facts of Catholic-Muslim relations over the past few decades. It is also significant that the two immediate violent episodes centering around that one paragraph following the first press reports - the murder of a nun and the torching of Catholic churches - occurred in two of the three most lawless parts of the Muslim world: Somalia and the West Bank (the other, of course, now being Iraq). The most obvious and absurd point about the violence in the Muslim world in response to the Pope's quotation (and burning the Pope in effigy is metaphorical violence) is that all this violence is to protest against a Pope reportedly saying that Islam is violent."[24]

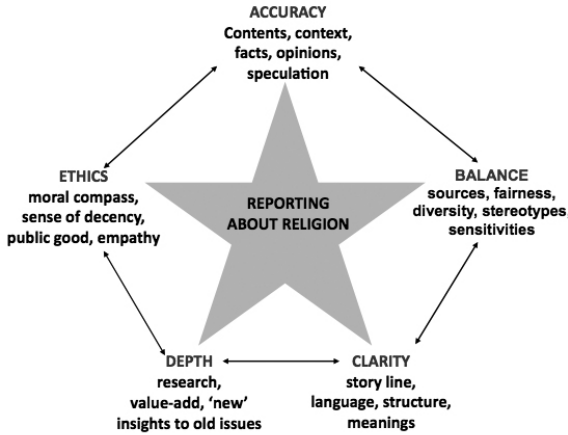
Just as the Arab media are wont to react strongly to Western comments on Islam, as Schleifer implies, likewise, the risks of Western journalists' taking the other extreme are ever present – that is, the position of "extreme secularism" in reacting to religious fundamentalism and eschewing the influence of "religion" and faith on the daily lives of people. And, if there were any reports about religion, they were mostly confined to the Church's shortcomings.

Where to from here?

Just as a business reporter focuses on the financial dimensions of a story, and a celebrity-lifestyle reporter on entertainment and entertainers, a religion reporter essentially sieves for relevant religious and spiritual implications of issues. Overlooking this side of the human experience is to miss the core of many stories that emerge from the enduring human spirit to overcome life's adversities. Thus, the imperative for religion reporters to know how to ask questions – across different faith lines with respect and sensitivity - tailored to explain to the public why certain groups believe and act as they do without necessarily legitimizing their actions.

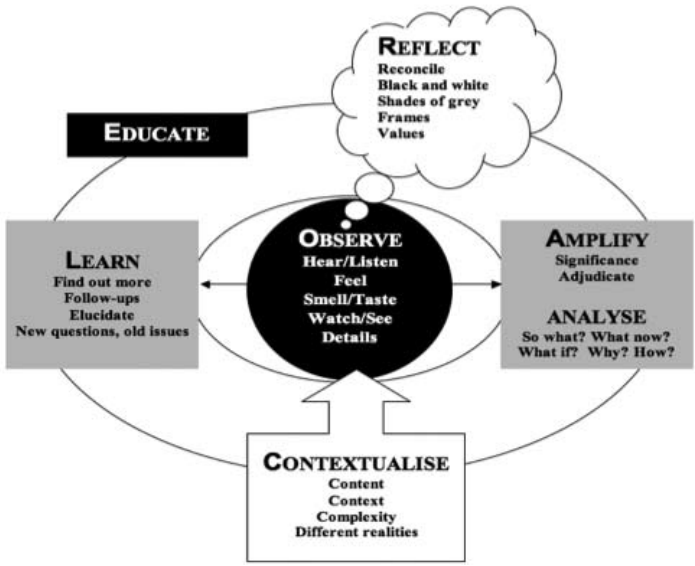
Here, I propose a few proactive reporting models on how to go about reporting about religion.[25] These models are generic and applicable across all types of reporting. The ABCDE of reporting illustrated below refers to: Accuracy (in context, content, facts, opinions, speculation); Balance (sources, fairness, diversity, stereotypes, sensitivities); Clarity (storyline, language, structure and underlying meaning); Depth (adding value to story, research, new insights to old issues); and Ethical principles (one's moral compass, common decency, empathy, and a sense of the public good).

This ABCDE model reminds journalists of the fundamental elements of good reporting where accuracy is seen in terms of getting it right in the content and context of issues, and the need to clearly separate facts from opinions or mere speculation. "Balance" and "clarity" refer to the tone and valence that come across in the reporter's choice of sources, story angle, and narrative structure. "Depth," often lacking in reactive journalism, refers to the imperative of vigorous research and conversations with multiple sources to gather "new" insights into old issues.
For example, is there no other explanation about "terrorism" than an act of jihad by "suicide bombers" driven by deviant teachings of Islam, which for many Muslims essentially is a "religion of peace," but which according to right-wing Christian demagogues is a myth?



To improve the quality of religion reporting, journalists can be more proactive and anticipate the trends of, for instance, Islamization among migrants from the Middle East who have settled in the West. "Proactive" means "creating or controlling a situation by causing something to happen rather than responding to it after it has happened." By contrast, "reactive" means "acting in response to a situation rather than creating or controlling it." To get a picture of what's happening on the religion (Islamic revival) front, I defer to the legend of the Oracle.

Below is a model based on the acrostic "Oracle" to illustrate the process of proactive reporting. The dictionary defines an Oracle as "somebody or something considered to be a source of knowledge, wisdom, or prophecy." Formerly, when the public's main source of information was the media, journalists were seen as the oracular source of knowledge and wisdom. Readers relied on journalists for guidance, direction, and explanation of complex issues.



Applying the ORACLE acrostic to the process of reporting about religion, one sees how proactive journalists can approach their work. Proactive journalism refers to journalists taking the initiative to act or break a story instead of being led by events. Proactive journalists go through a continual thinking and narrative process by:

• Observing their environment to make sense of events, abstract issues, and people. Here lies the capacity of journalists to perceive and see what others overlook.

• Reflecting on and recording what is observed, reconciling the differences between what's seen, heard, or felt with what's commonly assumed. Listen to your own counsel and conscience.

• Amplifying and analyzing the significant aspects of the events, issues and people involved to agitate for positive change.

• Contextualizing one's reflection and analysis to clarify and connect with readers. How can you include different perspectives and ideas on the issue?

• Learning more about what you have uncovered and elucidating the true from false, right from wrong. Report and write beyond one in-depth story.

• Educating, enlightening, and enabling your readers to find out more about issues and people in the stories. Because journalists are limited in what they can do to influence public policies, we will need to work together with the public to uncover the truth and seek possible solutions to religion-related issues.

Taking a more proactive approach and through their "considered package of stories" journalists can be a force for good during times of interfaith conflict. Indeed, journalists should develop their knowledge of the world's religions and belief systems, be better educated on the significance of religion in world affairs, and, ultimately, report with a better understanding of what and why people believe and act as they do.

Endnotes

[1] Ibn Sina Abnu Ali Al-Husayn (980-1037), http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/sina/art/ibn%20Sina-REP.htm [Accessed June 7, 2011]

[2] Mumbai attacks: Who are the Deccan mujahideen? National Post, Ontario, Canada. Nov.27, 2008 http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/posted/archive/2008/11/27/mumbai-attacks-who-are-the-deccan-mujahideen.aspx [Accessed June 8, 2011]

[3] Cook, Ivan. (2006). Australia, Indonesia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy. In The Lowy Institute Poll, Lowy Institute for International Policy.

[4] Mahony, Inez (2008), Representations of Indonesian Islam in the Australian Press, paper presented at the 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne, July 1-3, 2008. Mahony compared the Australian press representation of Indonesian Islam following three events: the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, and the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta.

[5] Jones, Benjamin (2011) Thousands of Copt Christians to protest in Sydney CBD, Christian Today Australia, May 21, 2011. http://au.christiantoday.com/article/thousands-of-copt-christians-to-protest-in-sydney-cbd/11104.htm [Accessed May 27, 2011]

[6] Hizb ut-Tahrir, founded in 1952-3 in Jerusalem (or 'Al-Quds' in Arabic as cited in Hizb ut-Tahrir's official website) believes in the re-establishment of a world Islamic caliphate. It preaches a return to the Islamic way of life, opposes (Western) democracy and Muslim integration into non-Muslim society. It hosted a lecture in 2006 in Sydney titled "Israel is an illegal state that Muslims will never accept". A video promoting its conference in Sydney on January 27, 2007 and aired on YouTube claimed the world was "plunged into darkness" on March 3, 1924, the date when the Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk ended the Ottoman caliphate. Source: The Age, Melbourne. Jan, 9, 2007 http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/local-push-for-islamic-state/2007/01/08/1168104922239.html (Accessed June 7, 2011)

[7] Barney, Zwartz (2007), 'Limit Muslim immigration, Australia warned', Sydney Morning Herald, Feb.16. http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/limit-muslim-migration-australia-warned/2007/02/15/1171405374552.html [Accessed June 7, 2011]

[8] The 2006 Census shows about 340,000 Muslims live in Australia (or about 1.6% of the total population of 21 million), of whom 128,904 (or 0.6%) were born in Australia and the rest overseas. In addition to migrants from Lebanon and Turkey, the other major source countries are: Afghanistan (15,965); Pakistan (13,821); Bangladesh (13,361); Iraq (10,039); and Indonesia (8,656). http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/muslims_in_Australia.html (Accessed June 7, 2011).

[9] According to the 2006 census, other religions by percentage of the Australian population are: Roman Catholicism (25.8%); Anglican (18.7%); other Christian denominations (19.4%); Buddhism (2.1%), Hinduism (0.7%) and Judaism (0.4%). Sikhism and Indigenous beliefs (2%); no religion (18.7%).

[10] 'Nile wants to stop Muslim immigrants,' The Australian, March 12, 2007 http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21364439-2702,00.html
No more Muslims, press release on March 10, 2007, by Fred Nile, Christian Democratic Party website. http://www.cdp.org.au/fed/mr/2007/0703010f.asp [Accessed June 8, 2011]

[11] In the context of this chapter, "factualising" is defined as a process of "objectifying" an issue by bringing to the news narrative sourced empirical data to establish a cause-and-effect

explanation of the issue or event. The problem arises when journalists, by their professional creed, operate on the premise that they are "objective" as long as they give both sides of the story by citing empirical data, which, without critical reflection, often falls out of context. In this case, instead of the adage "never let a fact get in the way of a good story," it goes the other way: "never let a good story get in the way of the facts." Selective factualizing, in this context, effectively transforms statements of opinion into facts without due consideration of the antecedents of the event. Hence, context is sacrificed for publishing the contents because of, among other factors, the pressure of news deadlines.

[12] McDonald, Hamish. (2007), http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/islam-in-australia-a-diverse-society-finds-a-new-voice/2007/04/27/1177459982288.html (Accessed June 8, 2011)

[13] The Face of Islam, Sydney Morning Herald, Aug.20, 2007 http://www.smh.com.au/specials/islam/ [Accessed June 8, 2011]

[14] Being a Muslim, Sydney Morning Herald, Aug.20, 2007 http://www.smh.com.au/multimedia/islamoz/main.html [Accessed June 8, 2011]

[15] http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/a-leap-of-faith-for-church-and-state-20110421-1dqoo.html [Accessed June 3, 2011]

[16] http://www.smh.com.au/national/religions-and-their-followers-find-a-safe-haven-20110421-1dql8.html [Accessed June 3, 2011]

[17] 'Middle East turmoil: A secular or relgious revolt, or both?' Religion Link, http://www.religionlink.com/topic_11021.php [Accessed June 8, 2011]

[18] Mustafa Aykol (2011) Faith versus tradition in Islam, TED Talks. http://www.ted.com/talks/mustafa_akyol_faith_versus_tradition_in_islam.html [Accessed June 7, 2011]

[19] Smock, David (2008), Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace: Special Report No.201, February 2008, United States Institute of Peace, p.3 http://www.usip.org/publications/religion-world-affairs-its-role-conflict-and-peace [Accessed June 7, 2011]

[20] Smock (2008), ibid, p.1

[21] Marshall, P., Gilbert, L., Roberta, G.A. (2009) Blind Spot: When journalists don't get religion. New York: Oxford University Press.

[22] Pope sorry for offending Muslims, BBC News, Sept.17, 2006 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5353208.stm (Accessed, June 7, 2011). Pope Benedict XVI was quoting from a text written in 1391 by the Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, one of the last Christian rulers before the fall of Constantinople to the Muslim Ottoman Empire. According to his lecture, the quote essentially expressed Manuel II's aversion to 'forced conversion' as irrational, which Pope Benedict cited to explain that spreading one's faith by violence was unreasonable compared to conversion through reason and knowledge. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html [Accessed June 7, 2011].

[23] Schleifer, Abdallah, A (2006), Media and religion in the Arab/Islamic world, Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Oct. 11. http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20061011.middleeast.schleifer.mediareligionarabislamicworld.html (Accessed June 7, 2011])

[24] Schleifer, ibid.

[25] I have demonstrated these models at journalism training workshops in Malaysia, India, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and most recently at the reporting religion conference and workshop in Singapore, April 8-9, 2011.