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### Media representations of the hijab

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## Media representations of the hijab

### Abstract

Over the past decade, the appropriateness of traditional clothing worn by some Muslim women, particularly the head covering known as the hijab, has been the focus of often fierce media debates. The hijab debate has come to symbolise the clash of cultures fanned by links between Islamic extremism and 21st century terrorism. While in several Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iran, the full covering, known as the chador or burqa, has been mandatory, a backlash against Muslim culture has seen such clothing banned, along with the much more common hijab, in the interests of secularism. In this context, Muslim women are portrayed by the Western media either as veiled victims in need of liberation in foreign lands because of a lack of free choice, or a threat to the Western societies in which they reside because of their choice to adopt traditional Islamic dress. The hijab is essentially a scarf-like piece of cloth worn by Muslim women in some Islamic cultures to cover the hair as an expression of piety, based on interpretations of Qur'anic directives for modesty. It has been branded a threat to the notion of the separation between church and state and banned in schools and government institutions in some secular states, including Germany, France and Turkey, as a form of inappropriate religious identification. It has divided the feminist movement with conflicting claims that it is a symbol of both oppression and freedom of expression. It's seen as an act of non-conformity and defiance by conservative Western political opponents and even portrayed as a terrorist threat in itself because of its potential use by suicide bombers to disguise their intentions. The coverage of these debates – which have become front-page news and have dominated talkback radio whenever they arise - has in turn sparked controversy about racism and ignorance within the media.

### Keywords

hijab, representations, media

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## **Media representations of the hijab**

**Julie Posetti**

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, the appropriateness of traditional clothing worn by some Muslim women, particularly the head covering known as the hijab, has been the focus of often fierce media debates. The hijab debate has come to symbolise the clash of cultures fanned by links between Islamic extremism and 21st century terrorism. While in several Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iran, the full covering, known as the chador or burqa, has been mandatory, a backlash against Muslim culture has seen such clothing banned, along with the much more common hijab, in the interests of secularism. In this context, Muslim women are portrayed by the Western media either as veiled victims in need of liberation in foreign lands because of a lack of free choice, or a threat to the Western societies in which they reside because of their choice to adopt traditional Islamic dress.

The hijab is essentially a scarf-like piece of cloth worn by Muslim women in some Islamic cultures to cover the hair as an expression of piety, based on interpretations of Qur'anic directives for modesty. It has been branded a threat to the notion of the separation between church and state and banned in schools and government institutions in some secular states, including Germany, France and Turkey, as a form of inappropriate religious identification. It has divided the feminist movement with conflicting claims that it is a symbol of both oppression and freedom of expression. It's seen as an act of non-conformity and defiance by conservative Western political opponents and even portrayed as a terrorist threat in itself because of its potential use by suicide bombers to disguise their intentions. The coverage of these debates – which have become front-page news and have dominated talkback radio whenever they arise - has in turn sparked controversy about racism and ignorance within the media.

In the Australian context, news stories about the hijab have been triggered by politicians bringing the matter into the public arena, by the actions of schools or community organisations which have sought to regulate the wearing of the hijab, through the demonisation of Muslim women by talkback radio hosts and by the vilification of Muslim women following terrorist attacks such as those in the US, Bali and London. There was also the anomalous personification of the debate in the form of MichelleLeslie, a swimwear model who claimed to be a Muslim convert and temporarily adopted traditional Muslim dress including the hijab and cover-all burqa after being charged with drug possession in Bali.

While the media can't be held solely responsible for the construction of national identity nor blamed for societal attitudes towards minority cultures and religions, they play a significant role by providing "the lens through which reality is perceived" (Henry cited in Bullock & Jafri, 2000). While the Western media sees itself as a democratic institution, it is often held accountable for legitimising and spreading racism and bias against religious communities such as Muslims (Bullock & Jafri, 2000).

Most Australians source their information from the news media, with television news the primary source (<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2004/3789/>). Thus the news media are the main source of information on Islam for the Australian community. According to the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria: "...for many Muslims residing in Australia the question, and indeed the possibility of their acceptance into Australian society, is profoundly connected to how the media portrays their place in Australia." (Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, 2005, p. 4)

In recent years, there has been a shift in the reporting of issues relating to Islam and Muslims in this country, with the framing within news and current affairs coverage shifting from politics to religion (ibid). This trend has been accompanied by the homogenisation of diverse cultural groups, resulting in widespread and damaging application of generalisations and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. As the Islamic Women's Welfare Council notes, "Media representation of Arab and Muslim communities has long been of concern and a source of much distress among Australian Muslims. It is clear some media outlets and journalists have portrayed Muslims accurately and sensitively; it is also clear the great majority of Muslims feel that the representations of Australian Muslims has been problematic." (ibid, p. 50)

As the controversial report on the Australian media's coverage of multicultural Australia, "Race for the headlines", recognised, the media have the power to "...shape public opinion in a positive sense and affect change and understanding" (McCausland, NSW Anti Discrimination Board, 2003, p. 6). The same study observes that "today's media is now more pervasive and more persuasive than ever. With that power comes great responsibility. We are not convinced that this responsibility is always exercised as maturely and as wisely as we have the right to expect that it will be" (ibid, p. 5). It argues that it is "critical to challenge the everyday discursive practices of the media around the racialisation of debates and the pillorying of racial or ethnic minority communities" in order to "highlight the impacts of institutional racism in the media, and the implications for the entire Australian community" (ibid, p. 6).

This case study will focus on ABC Radio Current Affairs programs' treatment of the issue through coverage by AM, PM and The World Today. These programs are regarded as agenda-setting and influential among fellow journalists and the nation's policy-makers and power brokers. The context of the coverage will also be explored via a timeline of related events over the past decade.

## **Theoretical context – literature review**

The literature indicates that negative stereotyping and reactionary reporting have historically typified coverage of Islam and Muslims. Muslim women are almost invariably portrayed as oppressed and veiled, a terrorist threat or exotic, sexualised beings. This is in line with Said's theory of Orientalism (Said, 1978), which contends that the Muslim world and its inhabitants are considered backward, barbaric and outsiders to Western society. This "othering" of Muslims is notable in the media in terms of the coverage of Muslim women. Most representations of Muslim women involve them wearing traditional Islamic clothing such as the hijab, and their role in the media is generally limited to commentary on issues such as the veil.

Three underlying themes run through the reporting of the hijab: media attitudes to reporting Islam; the social/religious/political context of stories about Muslims; and the social/religious/political context of the hijab.

Based on an analysis of 12,000 articles in the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) and the Daily Telegraph, Manning (2004) concluded that the coverage of Arab and Muslim affairs has been imbued with an increasingly negative and racist tone. He found that asylum seekers were portrayed in the leading print media as tricky, ungrateful and undeserving, concluding that "the Sydney Morning Herald and the Telegraph had a very damaging, demeaning view of Arabic and Muslim people" (The Age, October 10, 2005). He argues that the global impact of September 11 has resulted in the misidentification and interpretation of criminal events (such as terrorist attacks) as essentially religious ones. He further argues that journalists are aiding the development of an antipodean version of "Orientalism". More recently, Manning labelled the Australian media's coverage of Muslims as being tainted with racism (Munro, 2006). He argues the media portray Muslims as "tricky, sleazy, sexual and untrustworthy", as uniformly violent, as oppressors of women, and as members of a global conspiracy opposed to Australian values (ibid). He also criticises politicians for "stoking up the embers of racist hatred ... As a nation I think we are awash with misunderstanding about Islam" (ibid).

Poynting et al have documented cycles of attacks on Australian Muslims and people of Middle Eastern backgrounds before and after September 11, 2001. He identifies "racist media panics which criminalise whole communities" as a form of attack along with "racial vilification for political advantage, physical assault and property damage, and police and security service raids which compromise civil links between racist attacks and stereotyped constructs of Middle Eastern ethnic groups" (Poynting, 2002). He argues that political opportunism and sensationalist headlines lead to, and give licence to, racist attacks in shops, streets and workplaces, and he identifies a dramatic upsurge in such attacks since September 11. Poynting has also documented the racist targeting and labelling of young people of Arab and/or Muslim background which can result in the mis-identification of complex problems generally associated with class and education as racial ones (Poynting et al, 2001).

Drawing on the research of Poynting & Noble, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission examined a period covering the aftermath of the Bali bombings, the Sydney gang-rape trials and the asylum-seeker debate. The report concluded that: “The need for action is urgent. In the current environment of fear and suspicion fostered by terrorism and the ‘war on terror’, our multicultural values of social equity and respect for diversity are at risk of diminishing.” (HREOC, 2003, p. 1)

After analysing calls to a hotline set up by the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW, Dreher concluded that a climate of fear and insecurity continued to impact on experiences of citizenship and belonging among the communities targeted (Dreher, 2003).

In a report exploring the Victorian print media’s representation of Muslims and Islam in news stories between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2004, Akbarzadeh and Smith reach the “unavoidable” conclusion that balanced and careful news coverage of sensitive issues about or impacting on Muslims is vital (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005).

Dunn has also criticised the Australian news media’s coverage of Muslims and Islam, arguing that Australian Muslims have surpassed Asians as one of the country's most marginalised religious and ethnic groups (Morris, 2003). Dunn blames “Islamophobia” on media representations of Muslims and a heritage of Western antipathy to Islam.

Perhaps the most controversial research on the coverage of racism in the Australian media was sponsored by the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board. Launched in 2003, the report “Race for headlines” (McCausland, 2003) was pulped by the State Government shortly after its launch. Forthright and damning, it concludes that sections of the NSW media, in the period analysed, actively fuelled racial hostilities by their portrayal of stories that are inflammatory, rather than explanatory. In the context of the historic representation and understanding of race, the report analyses media debates over an 18-month period (including the 2001 federal election), highlighting how a “new racism” has come to permeate media narratives and how mainstream debates have become racialised – either deliberately or in more subtle, coded ways. This study directly links the media’s reporting of such issues to an increasing level of racial vilification against Muslims.

### **Depictions of Muslim women**

Against this background, Macmaster and Lewis identify the shift in the European media’s portrayal of veiled women from exotic to a danger to society (Macmaster & Lewis, 1998, p. 121). They point out the juxtaposition of representations of Muslim women as concurrently oppressed and threatening, while Kolhatkar highlights the depiction of Muslim women as “shapeless blue-clad forms of Afghan women” (Kolhatkar, 2002, p. 34).

The identification of Muslim women in the media via traditional Islamic dress has been noted by Begum, who argues that “images of Islamic dress are increasingly used in the media as a visual shorthand for dangerous extremism, and ... Muslims all over Europe are suffering from the consequences of such associations” (Begum, 2005, p. 1). In France, a hotbed of media and political debate about the hijab, the issue has had a polarising affect on the Muslim community and a divisive impact on society and feminism, according to Ezekiel. She writes about the effect of the French Parliament’s banning of the hijab (and other “conspicuous signs of religion and politics”) in February 2004. In the first year of its operation, the legislation saw the expulsion of 48 Muslim girls and three Sikh boys from government schools. The capture of two French journalists by terrorists in Iraq who demanded the French Government lift the ban fanned the debate in August 2004. When the hostages were taken, hijab-wearing French women took to the streets demanding their release, reportedly saying “send me instead” and “I don’t want my hijab stained with blood”. The media’s portrayal of these women went from sinister symbols of Islamic extremism to brave heroines of the republic overnight (Ezekiel, 2005). But since then, the French media have reported on the suspension of a Muslim meter reader who wore a hijab under her hat, the banning of a fashion show of veiled women, the prevention of hijab-wearing mothers from volunteering in schools; the refusal of service to a student wearing a hijab by a university cafeteria and the banning of a witness to a civil service wedding from signing the documentation because her hijab prevented her from being formally identified (ibid). Clearly, the hijab story remains newsworthy in France, and Muslim women’s identities are inextricably linked to the headscarf as a result.

Ezekiel cites research which identifies a total of 10 articles in French-language newspapers in 1989-90 which make reference to the hijab or “Islamic headscarf”. By comparison, there were 150 such articles in 1993-94, with an exponential increase in 2003-2004 to 1000 articles about the same issue, with Google identifying 45,000 hits for hijab.

Ezekiel argues that a resurgence of secular French republican identity and nationalistic sentiments including staunch anti-Americanism have seen the construction of the hijab as a “dire threat to this identity and the ban as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism and American-style multiculturalism” (Ezekiel, 2005, p. 231). She argues that the resurgent Far Right in French politics contextualises the hijab debate. Accompanying this has been a re-framing of racism by the French intelligentsia seeking a justification for cultural oneness: “The rejection of international utopias and of revolution, the rise in the neo-fascist right, the rise in anti-Americanism, the rejection of multiculturalism ... The veiled girls singularly embody these historical processes.” (ibid, p. 232)

According to Ezekiel, sexism and racism intersect in this debate. On one side of the feminist debate about the hijab, there are those who demand veils be banned from French streets as they encourage the harassment of unveiled women. But at the other end of the spectrum, feminists advocating a Muslim woman’s right to choose to wear

or not to wear a hijab have aligned themselves with fundamentalist Islamic leaders, arguing that it's a Muslim woman's obligation to wear a hijab and demanding the ban be overturned.

In Canada, the hijab has also been the subject of intense national debate and media scrutiny. Manji and Clarke argue that the Canadian media's focus on women as oppressed figures in far-off lands undermines the plight of all women in Canada, which has the second highest rate of "woman-killing" in the world (Manji & Clarke, 1992, p. 35). "There's a journalistic jihad afoot in Canada ... In recent editions of the *Globe and Mail*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Montreal Gazette* or the *Vancouver Sun* in the space of just three weeks, each ran features 'unveiling' the horrors of woman abuse in the Muslim world." (ibid) These authors suggest the focus on the hijab, for example, stems from the development of a "new Cold War" in which Islamic fundamentalism has replaced Communism as a rallying point for opponents of Western society.

Drawing on a study utilising focus groups of Muslim women, Bullock and Jafri found that: "Muslim women are often presented in mainstream Canadian media as outsiders and members of a religion that does not promote Canadian values." (Bullock & Jafri, 2000, p. 35). They conclude that Muslim women's identities will continue to be excluded from the construction of "women" in the broader context until there is a better understanding of Muslim cultures and Islamic beliefs. "Our argument is that Muslim women are presented as outsiders: as foreign, distant 'others', and as members of a religion (Islam) that does not promote 'Canadian' values but anti-Canadian values such as indiscriminate violence and gender oppression."

A review of five Canadian daily newspapers between 1993 and 1997 found 96 articles on Muslim women, with 73 (76 per cent) about Muslim women in foreign countries and only 23 (24 per cent) relating to Muslim Canadian women (Jafri cited in Bullock & Jafri, 2000). Twenty of the 23 articles (87 per cent) were specifically about the issue of women wearing the hijab in Canada. "Whether in the guise of the exotic Oriental beauty, the veiled and oppressed victim, or the scarf-wearing, gun-toting fundamentalist fanatic, this constant linkage of Muslim women to hijab, and hijab to oppression/violence, reinforces the Orientalist paradigm of Muslims as un-Canadian." (ibid, p. 38)

The authors argue that because of the media's cultural fixation on Muslim women's dress as a symbol of oppression, Muslim women often have to focus on that aspect of their identity as well, even if they would rather discuss something else. They suggest that even responsible journalism about Muslim women tends to relegate them to the role of a reactionary source in the hijab debate. "In sum, it is clear that Muslim women are predominantly presented to the Canadian public as foreign, 'exotic', oppressed, or threatening 'others' rather than as one's 'unexotic', unthreatening next door neighbours." (ibid, p. 7)

## **Australian perspectives**

The representation of Muslim women in the media is regarded as a problem by Muslim Australians.

... the absence of Muslim women in the coverage of Islam and Muslims is as striking as it is unjust. The capacity and role of Muslim women exceeds comments on the hijab or issues of gender oppression. It is crucial that women's expertise be recognised in all matters relating to Islam and their contribution should be sought beyond the "women's perspective" approach. Until the role of women is acknowledged, it will not be possible to understand Muslims or Islam. (IWWC, 2005)

The media guide to reporting Islam and Muslims produced by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria identified seven characteristics of concern about the portrayal of Muslims:

- 1) A constant association between Islam, Muslims and conflict/violence, particularly since September 11;
- 2) The frequent identification of race/religion when the story is about individuals of Islamic faith. In many instances such references are not relevant to the story and run counter to journalistic codes of conduct;
- 3) The stereotypical representation of women as veiled, even though a significant number of Muslim women do not use any form of veiling. Muslim women are typically portrayed as submissive, oppressed and abused. Similarly, Muslim men are regularly portrayed as bearded, although the majority are not. The representation of Muslim men in the media typically runs a narrow gamut from conservatism, misogyny and violence to militancy and terrorism. In general, Muslims appear to be portrayed exclusively through their religion as a one-dimensional identity (e.g. portrayed as kneeling in prayer, hijab issues, halal food), and are otherwise largely invisible in the media;
- 4) Absence of Muslims in the media as speakers on issues of concern and their relative absence as experts, even on issues in which Muslims might be actively involved. Connected to this is the overuse of key organisations or public figures on all issues about Islam, even when those individuals/organisations do not necessarily have sufficient expertise on the issue in question;
- 5) The diversity of Muslim life is not adequately represented. This includes issues of sectarian and ethnic diversity, but also diversity in ideology and other forms of political affiliation;
- 6) Inaccurate reporting. There have been numerous instances in which

communities have been frustrated by the misinformation or misrepresentation of issues associated with them. Some of these instances have been minor, but others have been quite significant.

7) Muslims and Islam appear in the media only to the extent that they are assumed to be of interest to a non-Muslim audience, whether as a threat, an object of concern or an object of exotic interest and curiosity. Further, Muslims in the media are typically required to act in their own defence, to respond to and often apologise for issues put on the agenda by mainstream media. Very rarely are they represented in their own terms as presenting issues and stories that most concern them.

The impact of media coverage of Muslim Australians is also being felt among school children. A study of Victorian secondary school students in years 10 and 11 found that most view Muslims as terrorists and a third believe they are “unclean” (Leung, 2006). Waleed Aly from the Islamic Council of Victoria described the results as troubling:

What it demonstrates is that Muslims are being viewed in a way that is really subhuman ... The only way you can combat this kind of prejudice is on a personal level – it’s much harder to hate people when you actually know someone in that social group. (ibid)

And this may mean a need for participatory journalism or advocacy journalism from well informed reporters with cultural connections to or at least excellent contacts within Muslim communities – these are issues the author intends to explore further. But early results from qualitative research underway on this issue indicate this is a perspective favoured by Muslim women. As part of her PhD studies on the representation of Muslim women by the Australian news media, the author has conducted preliminary interviews with four Muslim women of differing ethnic backgrounds and divergent opinion on the significance of the hijab and all expressed concern about the way Muslim women are portrayed and the disconnection of journalists from their collective experiences. The comments of one woman in particular, Sarah Malik, a recent journalism-law graduate from the University of Technology in Sydney are pertinent to this case study.

Malik wore the hijab throughout most of 2005 as an expression of her developing faith, and she says many of her friends were shocked by her decision. She was one of a growing number of young Muslim women seeking to express their faith externally in this way, often at significant social cost and in contravention of their parents’ wishes. She decided to remove the hijab after forming the view that she had learned to overcome her fear about being publicly identifiable as a Muslim.

And she blames her pre-existing fear of being a recognisable Muslim woman in a hijab in part on the media’s portrayal of Muslim women. “You feel defined by representations you see in the media ... it affects your self-esteem” (ibid) and “that’s why (as a journalist) you need to be responsible. Not uncritical, but sensitive”. (Posetti, 2006)

Malik has particular insight into the issue of media representations of Muslim women and ways by which reporting standards can be improved:

... It's about exposure – it's weird because I'm the media and I'm Muslim. Muslims need to get into the media and help demystify the situation ... there aren't many good Muslim spokespeople ... it's actually hard for journalists to get the right information ... there's so much crazy stuff out there. (ibid)

And she has some simple advice for non-Muslim journalists: “Make a Muslim friend ... be open minded and take the time to talk to people and really understand them ... it's like knock and you will find.” (ibid)

If Ms Malik succeeds in breaking into the mainstream media she will be one of the very few practitioners identifying as Muslims in that realm. (Forde, S 2005). As noted by Green, an increase in ethnic diversity within newsrooms may assist the development of more balanced and informed reporting on issues affecting and involving minority groups, such as the hijab debates. “This is not tokenism or political correctness. This is about good journalism”. (Green, K 2004)

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### **Content analysis**

As evidenced by the timeline featured at the end of this case study, the Australian media has extensively covered the hijab debate, with the issue being most prominently featured at three flashpoints in the past decade:

- 1) A call from NSW MP the Reverend Fred Nile during the 2002 state election for a ban on the burqa;
- 2) Calls from two federal Liberal MPs for a ban on the hijab in schools, a week after a national Muslim summit called by the Prime Minister to address disaffection and promote cultural harmony;

- 3) The controversy triggered by convicted drug-taker and swimwear model Michelle Leslie, who claimed to have converted to Islam and wore a hijab and burqa during her trial in Indonesia before reverting to revealing Western clothing on her return to Australia.

The coverage of these stories by the ABC Radio Current Affairs programs *AM*, *PM* and *The World Today* is the subject of this study. *AM* has been identified as one of the most influential and respected sources of news and information in Australia (Brand & Pearson, 2001), and the high status of these programs among journalists means they also have the capacity to influence other news media.

A search of the ABC's online archive from 1997 returned 230 stories flagging the hijab, with 255 hits returned for "headscarf" – although not all of these referred to the Islamic form of scarf (search undertaken August 18, 2006 at <http://www.abc.net.au>). A narrower search of the publicly accessible archives of the Radio Current Affairs stable of programs returned only 31 stories referencing hijabs and Islamic headscarves during the period January 1999-August 2006. Of these stories, 13 (42 per cent) were foreign stories involving characters and places that were distant and representing the women featured as oppressed – by Islamic states enforcing veiling or by secular states prohibiting it – terrorists or struggling for independence. For example, Jim Gale reported on Iranian women in 1999:

In Iran women in public must remain modest; they must wear the hijab, covered from head to toe in a scarf and a long cloak. It makes sport difficult and unappealing ... Unless they're married, men and women aren't seen together in the street. The buses are strictly divided – the front for men, women in the back. Women lead two lives – a public, restricted life dressed in the black hijab, and a life behind closed doors where they wear the Western clothes that can be found everywhere in smart boutiques. She-va is a young lawyer. She says the separation of the sexes is the hardest thing for women in Iran.

SHE-VA: The Iranian women – the women like their religion, but everything is not religion, everything is not hijab. We need some recreation, we need some freedom to make relations with men. She has to work beside the men. (*AM*, July 24, 1999)

In 2002, Raphael Epstein reported a similar story on Afghan women: "...while the US has recently pledged to increase aid, the plight of most Afghan women appears unchanged. Many outside Kabul still suffer from the same brutal discrimination suffered under the Taliban." In 2004, reporter Emma Griffiths described one of the Beslan school siege terrorists as wearing "the black dress and headscarf and holding a pistol" on *PM*.

These programs reported on the issue of sanctions against veiled women and girls in France, the UK, Turkey and the Netherlands, but issues within Australia such as the expulsion of a Sydney schoolgirl for wearing traditional Islamic clothing and the disqualification of two young hijab-wearing soccer players went unreported. These programs did, however, devote considerable airtime to covering the experiences of

Australian Muslim women in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, raising awareness about racially motivated assaults which included targeting veiled women. Six stories were identified in this category. For example, only two days after the September 11 attacks, *The World Today* (*TWT*) reported a racist backlash against Muslim Australians on city streets around the country:

Arab Australians are again being harassed and intimidated it seems. Overnight a mosque in Perth was defiled. In Brisbane bottles have been hurled at little children in an Islamic school bus. And in Sydney a Christian Lebanese church has been vandalised overnight. But it's not only buildings and property, people are being targeted as well with abuse and one person even being spat on. (*TWT*, September 13, 2001)

As vox pops within the report demonstrated, hijab-wearing women were particularly vulnerable:

VOX POPS: Like an old man yesterday, he spat on a woman wearing a scarf. He spat on her. She just stared at him and, you know, she didn't say anything to him.

VOX POPS: Yes, well, maybe because she's wearing that scarf probably, I don't know.

REPORTER: The Muslim head scarf?

VOX POPS: Yes. (ibid)

Just over a year later, *TWT* reported on 40 racially motivated assaults that occurred in NSW in the aftermath of the first Bali bombing, prompting a call for victims of such crimes to report them and a warning from the Police Commissioner, Ken Moroney.

By and large these attacks have consisted of racial vilification; they also consisted of pulling the headdress from young Muslim women, and in a number of instances spitting at or upon these women. Now, there is clearly a very strong law in terms of racial vilification. (*TWT*, October 28, 2002)

While characterising Muslim women as victims, this story served an important community service by encouraging them to report such crimes while demonstrating the social unacceptability of racist assaults.

But these issues were not taken up again until after the London bombings in mid 2005. While the explanation for this may well lie with such industry realities as competing news agendas, a lack of visible contacts and diminished resources, it also reflects the pattern of "hit and run" journalism – that is, issues are identified and reported when they are considered timely but are then forgotten. This highlights the need for important issues affecting the social fabric to be prioritised and followed up regularly. When *PM* did take up the problem of ostracism and racially motivated attacks affecting Muslim communities, it was in the aftermath of terrorism via a feature interview with visiting British sociologist Tariq Modood, who discussed the problem in the UK and then extrapolated to the Australian environment. He also made this observation about the media's responsibility to distinguish between law-abiding Muslims and jihadist terrorists when reporting terrorism:

I think that divisive media images do have an effect, especially when people who know so little about Muslims and Islam are then influenced by those images to perhaps not even carry out violent acts, but even every time they meet a Muslim, they kind of are asking them: Well, what do you think about the terrorist action? What do you think about al-Qaeda, and so on, as if there's nothing else we have in common apart from I want to interrogate your views about Islamic terrorism. (*PM*, July 11, 2005)

Following the terror raids in November the same year, *PM* reported concerns of the Muslim community that they were at risk from rednecks emboldened by perceptions of a general crackdown against Muslims. The head of the Federal Government's own Islamic Advisory Council, Amer Ali (identified by the reporter as a "moderate"), demanded a meeting with the Attorney-General via the story:

So I am telling that there are rednecks in our society and they can take law into their own hands. I want the assurance from the Government that my community will be safeguarded. And they will be safe and they will not be subject to any unnecessary attack by the rednecks. (*PM*, November 9, 2005)

Earlier the same day, *TWT* had reported similar concerns highlighting fears that the integration of Muslim women into Australian society would be jeopardised:

AHMED KAMALEDINE: Last week I went down to the RTA (Roads and Traffic Authority) to get my car registered and I was serviced by a Muslim lady with a hijab on. Straight after that I took off and I went and got a takeaway drive through McDonald's. I was also serviced by a Muslim girl with a hijab. So I think this is a perfect example of the Muslim integration. And especially, we're not talking about male integration, we're speaking about females who have been for a very, very long time hidden behind the veil and behind doors, and this is, for the past decade has been happening that once the female is out there, it shows and it proves to the community that we are out there, we're integrating, we're communicating. But to have this type of fear among the community is going to pull back everybody behind doors and especially the females.

Then, just 10 days before the Cronulla riots in December 2005, *PM* carried a report about a Muslim youth summit which highlighted the sense of alienation and discrimination experienced, particularly by veiled women:

I'm a six-generation Australian white woman. But just because I wear a headscarf and I'm identifiable as a Muslim woman, you know, I'll get abuse on the streets. It's harder to get employment, you know, people ... you just don't get as good service in shops, that sort of thing. You certainly get extra attention at airports and that sort of thing. (*PM*, December 2, 2005)

At a time when the news was dominated by reports of the terror attacks and the Islamic terrorists suspected of perpetrating or planning them, these programs were behaving in a socially responsible way by reflecting some of the base reactions being inflicted on the Muslim community and implying criticism of such racially motivated behaviour.

Two other stories which intersect with these issues and target Muslim women for positive and empowering coverage were carried on these programs during the period assessed. The first, broadcast on *AM* on the second anniversary of the September 11 attacks, was a story about a group of young Muslim women who had launched their own magazine to help demystify Islam. One of the women described her experiences of the day after the attacks:

I was in Year 12 at that time and I went back to school and that day people were like “why did they do that?” and I was like “why are you asking me? How am I supposed to know, I’m in just as much shock as you are about this whole thing?” (*AM*, September 11, 2003)

Another of the women had similar experiences of being quizzed about her connections to terrorists with questions like this: “You know, is really Osama bin Laden your cousin, do you know Osama bin Laden? It’s like, you know, even those questions, as silly as they may be, but they are coming up.” (*ibid*)

Predictably, but reasonably, the story also addressed the hijab issue:

When I’d go down to the city, I could see people looking at you differently, very suspiciously. If you’re wearing a big hijab, a big scarf, they’d be wondering what’s underneath that.

PAULA KRUGER: Was it a difficult decision to wear the hijab after, you know, given that things have really changed over the last two years, that people do look at you differently?

FEDA ABDO: The funny thing is the whole point of the hijab is that when you see people and communicate with people, they don’t judge you by your outer appearance, you know, so they don’t judge you by the way you look. But the funny thing that happens after September 11 is that people are judging you by what you’re wearing on your head. (*ibid*)

The other story that fits into this category was a report about the graduation of Australia’s first hijab-clad police officer in Victoria. Maha Sukkar, an immigrant from Beirut, had her uniform adjusted to accommodate the hijab. And although this utilised the news value of “novelty”, potentially aiding the interpretation of this story as another example of Orientalism in the media, it served an important purpose in aiding the identification of a Muslim woman as someone other than a terrorist, an exotic seductress or a victim of oppression. This woman was able to declare she was more than just her head-cover, and the story helped to normalise the character of Muslim women in Australian culture.

This is really something that’s fairly new in Australia but it’s been practised in the UK. I mean, there are women police officers in the hijab in the UK and from all experience and information that I have, I mean, they are just like anyone else in the police service delivering an excellent service. (*PM*, November 26, 2004)

Her point was magnified by another interviewee – the director of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, Hass Dellal:

I think it's a very positive change. I mean, this is, it just gives us more and more recognition of diversity and that's what it says, that we're a culturally diverse country and therefore all of our services should reflect the type of community that we service and also, it also recognises people's religious and cultural backgrounds and it actually makes no difference to the quality of service people are going to receive and I think it's a very good thing. (ibid)

The programs also extensively covered the Australian hijab debates sparked by conservative politicians in 2002 and 2005, with four stories devoted to NSW Christian Democrats MP Fred Nile's call for a ban on the burqa and three reports on the call for a hijab ban in schools by federal Liberal backbenchers Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos.

Nile's call for a ban on the burqa in the aftermath of the Bali bombings coincided with the NSW state election. Nile, who drew attention to the role of burqa-clad female suicide bombers in the Moscow theatre siege, claimed the garment (and the similar chador) was a perfect disguise for terrorists because it could hide weapons and explosives, and he called on the NSW Government to intervene: "Will the Government, in view of the terrorist threat, as part of our new Australian security precautions, consider a prohibition on the wearing of the chador in public places, especially railway stations, city streets and shopping centres etcetera?" (*AM*, November 21, 2002).

*AM* reported on the call, made from the floor of the NSW Upper House, with a critical tone using language which highlighted the offence caused and the potential risk created to the Muslim community:

Well-known Christian fundamentalist and New South Wales State MP, Fred Nile, has created a storm by linking the wearing of traditional robes and headscarves by Muslim women with terrorism. In the State's Upper House he called for a ban on the traditional dress because it could be used by terrorists to conceal weapons and explosives. He's deeply offended Muslim women, who're already facing harassment after the attacks in Bali and in the United States. And he's being accused of fuelling ethnic hatred and fear. (*AM*, November 21, 2002)

In response, the story carried the voice of an authoritative Muslim woman – Maha Krayem Abdo, president of the United Muslim Women's Association of Australia – in the interests of balanced, fair and informed reporting:

Is he going to tell other people to stop wearing overcoats and jackets and stop wearing hats? It's a bit frightening really to think that comments like that would be made from a man of that calibre ... I feel fearful, I feel that Muslim women's lives in Australia are in danger and I can only just sort of begin to imagine what it is like going through shopping centres, going through the checkouts, people are going to be ... can you imagine? People are just going to be checking, you know ... it is the fear that he is breeding and promoting hatred and division in the Australian community. (*AM*, November 21, 2002)

Coverage of the story continued that night on *PM* with acknowledgement of the juxtaposition of an earlier report on the struggles of Afghani women to "throw off the

veil” and criticism of Prime Minister John Howard’s slow and guarded response to the call for the burqa ban. “I don’t have a clear response to what Fred’s put, I mean I like Fred, and I don’t always agree with him, but you know, Fred speaks for the views of a lot of people ... On the other hand, I feel it’s very important at the moment that the Islamic people don’t feel they’re being singled out.” (*PM*, November 21, 2002). This statement was labeled equivocal by reporter Annie White, who concluded her story with a sharp and witty aside that ridiculed Nile’s call: “It’s conceivable an overcoat could perform the same function as a robe and veil; but unlikely, insists Reverend Nile, because in the summer months a coat would be suspicious, which makes you wonder how Santa will go in his big red suit and beard, posing for photographs with his fans this Christmas.” (*ibid*)

The following morning, *AM* took the story up again, this time more closely scrutinising Howard’s equivocation. While Howard’s office eventually ruled out such a ban, his apparent entertainment of the idea attracted criticism from Muslim leaders and opposition politicians. Conversely, the NSW Government had instantly ruled out a ban. For an expert analysis of the situation, *AM* consulted respected managing director of the Washington-based Arab-American Institute, Jean Abinader, who called on political leaders such as the Prime Minister to decisively distance themselves from comments like those expressed by Nile:

Well, I think they have to be dismissive of it completely and immediately ... Does this mean that there is never going to be a problem and there might never be a terrorist who uses Islamic clothing to hide their whatever? No. But on the other hand, one has to look sometimes at the role of the greater good and the greater good here is that we don’t encourage discrimination and race or religion baiting against any one group and there is no reason for these kinds of comments to be made in the first place. (*AM*, November 22, 2002)

But later that day Nile went further, accusing all women who wear traditional Islamic dress such as the chador and hijab of being “extremists” and recruitment targets for Osama bin Laden, and *The World Today* tackled the story again. There may be an argument to suggest reporting Nile’s comments was an inflammatory move and responsible journalism would have resulted in him being rendered voiceless, but this doesn’t sit comfortably with the notion of presenting the facts to an audience to allow them to make an informed judgment.

This was the approach adopted by *TWT*, which reported Foreign Minister Alexander Downer’s lack of support for Nile’s comments and interviewed NSW Premier Bob Carr, inviting him to label Nile an “extremist”. Carr declined, but issued a clear warning about the responsibilities of politicians in regards to race relations:

I know Fred Nile, I respect him as a serious legislator and I just respectfully urge him to veer away from this stereotyping. I think we’ve got to avoid ever, ever encouraging, ever allowing, ever contemplating a stereotype about Muslims or about Jews or about Lebanese or about Greeks or Italians or whatever. Stereotypes are the first step in actual full-blooded racism. (*TWT*, November 22, 2002)

The issue was thrust back on the national political stage in mid-2005 by prominent federal Liberal backbenchers Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos, who called for a ban on the hijab in public schools, prompting another story about traditional Islamic women's dress on *TWT* on the day the PM was visiting an Islamic school in Sydney. In Louise Yaxley's story, the singing of the "Vegemite Song" by Muslim school children at Al Faisal College, where tolerance and compassion are featured curriculum values, was juxtaposed against Bishop's call for a ban on the hijab in schools. Bishop's comments, reported on *TWT*, that the claim expressed by some Muslim women that the hijab afforded them a certain freedom were extremely inflammatory: "I would simply say that in Nazi Germany, Nazis felt free and comfortable. That is not the sort of definition of freedom that I want for my country." (*TWT*, August 29, 2005)

Bishop went on to imply that women who wear the hijab are unpatriotic non-conformists: "... it is being used by the sort of people who want to overturn our values as an iconic emblem of defiance and a point of difference" (ibid). But these racially motivated comments were dispelled by the voices of Bishop's political allies as well as her opponents. The Parliamentary Secretary for Children and Youth Affairs, Sussan Ley, reacted immediately, saying while that she wasn't comfortable with schoolgirls wearing the face cover (niqab) she had no problem with the hijab and wouldn't agree to ban it:

I think we need as a community to embrace the Muslims within our number, and that involves a lot of different things, including a dialogue, including understanding, including talking to people, and in this way we won't encourage young Muslim people to a more rigid interpretation of their faith which could then lead to extremism. I think that's the key point here. (*TWT*, August 29, 2005)

This approach received bipartisan support and was backed by the Shadow Attorney General, Nicola Roxon, who told *TWT*:

Look, I think these comments just come from total ignorance about the sort of multicultural and tolerant community that we live in and want to live in. I think that their statements are entirely irrelevant ... This is actually demonising people for what they wear, there's no grounds for it, and I think it's a debate that it's silly for us to have in Australia, and it causes some harm to the women who do wear this headgear and peacefully go about their ordinary lives and don't need Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos to tell them what to wear. (ibid)

Yaxley's coverage of the issue was balanced and responsible, allowing the expression of inflammatory views but countering them with sensible comments from credible opponents of the philosophies of Bishop and Panopoulos. The exclusion of a Muslim woman from the story may seem regrettable, but needs to be understood in the context of the extreme deadline pressure faced by reporters working on this program and the editorial constraints imposed on story length, along with the need to appreciate the program as a whole. The very next story in the line-up dealt exclusively with the reaction of young Muslim women to the ban. In this report, one Sydney University student who wears the hijab was perplexed about calls for it to be banned in schools: "We're not trying to make a statement about Islam or anything; it's compulsory for us to wear the headscarf, so we wear it. It's about the rules of your religion." (*TWT*, August 29, 2005). The same woman said any such ban would be oppressive:

... Australia, until now, was very respectful to human rights, women's rights and freedom of speech, freedom of choice, and establishing a law like this just goes against all those. It would make Muslim women oppressed and discriminated against, probably I would feel that way. (ibid)

Importantly, imbuing both Muslim women and the story with credibility and authority, *TWT* sought the opinion of respected Muslim women in leadership roles, including the deputy chair of the New South Wales Youth Advisory Council, Iktimal Hage-Ali, who – having just returned from the Prime Minister's summit, described the call for a ban on the hijab as offensive and racist: "This call by Bronwyn Bishop is only taking us 10 steps back and causing even more angst and even more, you know, anger, within the community." (ibid)

While the Prime Minister was criticised for being slow to intervene in the Fred Nile controversy, he was quick to respond to the call from his own party room for headscarfs to be banned in schools, and this was the subject of the *PM* story that evening. But while he ruled it out, he did so on the grounds that to do otherwise would be "impractical". "I don't think it's practical to bring in such a prohibition. If you ban a headscarf you might for consistency's sake have to ban a yarmulke or a turban; it does become rather difficult and rather impractical." (*PM*, August 29, 2005) The report also carried comments from a recalcitrant Bishop and opposing views from several Liberal politicians, but the only Muslim voice belonged to a man – the president of the Islamic Council of Victoria, Malcolm Thomas, who said the concern in the Muslim community was spreading rapidly: "They're very worried about what they do with their children at school now. Their daughters are coming home saying, 'Well, do I go to school tomorrow, Mum, do I have to ... wear my headscarf? What am I to do?'" (ibid) While this stand-alone worked relatively well as a piece of political analysis, it didn't give Muslim women the voice they deserved in the debate.

Just one day after the hijab media storm created and sustained by Bishop and Panopoulos, Islamic dress was again a source of news for ABC Radio Current Affairs. This time it was because it was adopted by an Australian model, Michelle Leslie, who was facing drug charges in Bali. Alison Caldwell filed a story for *AM* which revolved around Leslie's adoption of traditional Muslim dress. The swimwear model first wore the hijab and then progressed to the burqa – a fact which featured in the introduction to the story: "As she was led from her cell in Bali's police headquarters yesterday, Ms Leslie wore a burqa, a traditional Muslim dress covering her face and body, prompting questions to her lawyers about her religious beliefs." (*AM*, August 30, 2005) In the package that followed, Caldwell quizzed Leslie's lawyer, Ross Hill, about her faith and her decision to don traditional Muslim dress:

ROSS HILL: I'm not really going to comment on the reasons why a Muslim person seeks to wear the hijab. You know, that's a matter personal to Michelle and that's really the end of the matter.

ALISON CALDWELL: Earlier you said that you thought ... it was just something that you all thought about just to keep her covered, just trying to keep things down, I think were your words – what did you mean by that?

ROSS HILL: Well, look, my own personal view is, you know, no one has any right to be taking dozens and dozens of photographs of her. If she chooses to wear the hijab for her reasons, well, I'm quite happy that she wears it because it keeps her face away from all the people in the media, and there's no reason why she should be disclosing herself to them.

ALISON CALDWELL: Do you think it would help though, given that Indonesia is the most populated Muslim nation on earth, does it help her now being publicly identified as a Muslim?

ROSS HILL: Look, I've got absolutely no comment to make on that. Religion's not a part of this case. (ibid)

By this stage, the Australian media had become obsessed with Leslie's choice of attire, and the discussion about her beliefs had taken on a sniping, cynical tone which fanned another series of stories on Muslim dress. *AM* wasn't alone in pillorying Leslie – who seemed to be portrayed as a traitor by the mainstream media and was eventually dismissed as a “fake Muslim” by the Islamic community. But this sort of coverage confused the hijab issue and further alienated Muslim women who choose to wear the garment. For the Muslim community it underlined concerns about media coverage of Islam.

None of the programs commented on Michelle Leslie's choice of clothing again until she returned to Sydney after a short stint in jail towards the end of November that year. In a live cross to Sydney airport, reporter David Mark told *AM*, “there was no sign of the Muslim veil that she had worn for her court appearances in Indonesia. She was dressed quite simply in jeans and a black shirt”, and he played a snippet of a media scrum he described as one of the most intense and aggressive he'd ever witnessed in Australia, in which a reporter is heard asking Leslie to comment on descriptions of her as a false Muslim. While some focus on these aspects of her story are understandable in the context of the news values of controversy, timeliness and novelty, the fact they dominated this story demonstrates the disproportionate emphasis on her “conversion” to Islam in the context of a tale about another Australian convicted of drugs charges in Bali.

Leslie's story, her choice of clothing and the authenticity of her Muslim conversion was again headline news when she told her story to the Packer program *60 Minutes* and tabloid women's magazine stablemate *New Idea*. In these stories she confessed she wasn't a Muslim and claimed she wore traditional Islamic dress during her trial to protect her from the media's gaze and from predatory prison guards. In this context, *TWT* reported the commencement of a police investigation into allegations Leslie profited from her crime through selling her story. This offered another opportunity to discuss her religious and sartorial convictions as highlighted by reporter Sabra Lane: “During her time behind bars, Leslie claimed she'd converted to Islam, and wore a burqa to prove it. But her decision to wear the head-to-toe dress, and the decision to abandon it on her release, caused a storm of controversy.” (*TWT*, June 5, 2006) The report also included an excerpt from the *60 Minutes* interview with Leslie in which she was quizzed again about her Muslim faith or lack thereof.

While the coverage of Muslim women (and the hijab issue in particular) by *AM*, *PM* and *TWT* was generally fair, balanced and responsible, there are some areas of concern

reflecting the broader problem of media representations of Australian Muslims. There was a tendency in some reports to disempower Muslim women by allowing men to speak on their behalf or to regurgitate stereotypes about their oppression. An editorial decision was also taken to cover international examples of the Islamic dress debate – such as the banning of the hijab and the burqa in the UK, Turkey and the Netherlands – while overlooking similar stories in Australia. It is true that day-to-day news agendas and normal editorial pressures may explain the exclusion of such stories, but in ignoring them these programs missed an opportunity to engage with the Muslim community and to undertake reflective, community-oriented journalism which could have contributed to society's understanding of Islam and the role of Muslim women. It also contributed to the representation of Muslim women as “foreign” and “other”, with international coverage of issues affecting and involving them taking precedence over the Australian experience.

## **Timeline**

### **1995**

- ◆ In Canada, Quebec's Human Rights Commission rules against a ban on hijabs in schools following the expulsion of a student who wore the headcover (<http://www.islamfortoday.com/hijabcanada.htm>).

### **1997**

- ◆ Turkey bans hijab in state-run institutions including schools, universities and military institutions. Female journalists wearing the hijab banned from government press conferences in the interests of maintaining a secular state.

### **1998**

- ◆ Turkish students banned from taking university entrance exams in Istanbul because of refusal to remove headscarves.

### **1999**

- ◆ Coverage of oppressed Iranian women (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s38744.htm>).

### **2001**

- ◆ September 11 terror in the US.
- ◆ Stories of racial abuse and assaults of Muslims around the Western world follow (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s369094.htm>).
- ◆ November – women unveil in the War on Terror (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s421306.htm>).

### **2002**

#### **April**

- ◆ Four Muslim girls in Singapore expelled from school for wearing headscarf (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200206/s577265.htm>).
- ◆ Hijabs and harmony (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/03/31/1017206166932.html>).
- ◆ *Compass*: encounters with Islam (<http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s538946.htm>).

#### **September**

- ◆ First anniversary of September 11  
([http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/090902\\_s2.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/090902_s2.htm);  
[http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/090902\\_s4.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/090902_s4.htm)).

## October

- ◆ October 12 – First Bali bombing. Terrorist blasts in the resort town of [Kuta](#) kill 202 people and injure 209, in the deadliest act of [terrorism](#) in Indonesian history. Most of the dead are foreign tourists, especially [Australians](#), although nearly one-fifth are Indonesian nationals.
- ◆ Attacks on Muslims escalate. Police report there have been around 40 attacks on Muslims in NSW since the Bali bombing, and the state’s police commissioner issues a warning (<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s712862.htm>).
- ◆ October 23 – Moscow theatre hostage crisis. 900 patrons taken hostage by Chechen Islamic extremists whose number includes women wearing burqas and niqabs. These female suicide bombers become known as “black widows”.



(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahidka>; <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s709550.htm>)

## November

- ◆ Swedish TV refuses to give TV reporter a presenter’s job on grounds her headscarf could distract from the program’s theme and content (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200211/s733137.htm>).
- ◆ Afghan judge sacked after removing headscarf during visit to US where she met with George Bush (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200211/s717380.htm>).
- ◆ Fred Nile calls for hijab ban ([http://news.ninensn.com.au/National/story\\_42698.asp](http://news.ninensn.com.au/National/story_42698.asp); <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s731622.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s732087.htm>).
- ◆ Howard’s veiled response (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/11/21/1037697806923.html>; <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s732403.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s732835.htm>).

- ◆ Reports of oppression of Afghan women via enforcement of burqa.
- ◆ National Headscarf Day – Australian women urged to wear headscarves as a sign of support for Muslim women who've been increasingly harassed in the aftermath of September 11 (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200211/s737209.htm>).

## **2003**

### **January**

- ◆ Dutch elections and the hijab (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s767599.htm>).

### **February**

- ◆ Australian Muslims under attack (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/02/18/1045330603395.html>).

### **March**

- ◆ Warnings issued after spate of attacks on Muslim women (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200303/s806593.htm>).
- ◆ Calls for media to be sanctioned for racial vilification (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/03/12/1047431094269.html>).

### **August**

- ◆ First Australian policewoman in hijab (<http://www.theadvertiser.news.com.au>).

### **September**

- ◆ Shiite cleric dies (<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s937548.htm>).
- ◆ Young Muslim women publish magazine (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2003/s943549.htm>).
- ◆ Quebec's Human Rights Commission investigates the expulsion of a girl from a private school for wearing a hijab ([http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2003/09/23/hijab\\_030923.html](http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2003/09/23/hijab_030923.html)).

### **October**

- ◆ US student sanctioned under anti-gang laws for wearing hijab (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200310/s964485.htm>).

### **November**

- ◆ Istanbul suicide bombings (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2003/s990431.htm>).

- ◆ French Government committee recommends headscarf ban (along with other religious symbols/outerwear such as crosses and Jewish yarmulkes) (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200312/s1008422.htm>).

## December

- ◆ Chirac calls for headscarf ban in France after schoolgirls defy school rules prohibiting them (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2003/s1008579.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200312/s1012303.htm>).

## 2004

### January

- ◆ Indonesian call for headscarf tolerance (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200401/s1023446.htm>).
- ◆ Hijab = conspicuous non-conformity (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/10/1073437518869.html?from=story>).
- ◆ Pro-hijab demonstrations (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200401/s1027377.htm>).

### February

- ◆ Iranian elections (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2004/s1050273.htm>).
- ◆ French MPs vote 494-36 to ban headscarves in schools (along with crosses and other religious icons) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/france/story/0,11882,1145402,00.html>).

### April

- ◆ German state (Baden-Wuerttemberg) bans school teachers from wearing headscarfs, with other states lining up behind the decision with similar legislation – in Berlin all public servants to be banned from wearing religious symbols.
- ◆ Victorian soccer referee orders a Muslim player to remove her hijab. She refuses; the game is stopped and an investigation instigated amid claims the referee breached anti-discrimination laws (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200404/s1095108.htm>).



Afifa Saad (ABC TV)

## May

- ◆ Referee stands aside (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200405/s1101822.htm>).
- ◆ Turkey bans hijab (<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2004/s1100438.htm>).

## June

- ◆ HREOC reports hijab wearers vulnerable as anti-Muslim vilification increases (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200406/s1133137>; <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/06/16/1087244970525.html>; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200406/s1134201.htm>).
- ◆ Second Muslim soccer player told to remove scarf (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200406/s1138174.htm>).
- ◆ Headscarf ban referee suspended (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200406/s1138836.htm>).

## July

- ◆ European Union Rights Court upholds Turkish state's ban on the hijab in an effort to protect the "rights and freedoms of others". The court claims "the verdict aimed to maintain public order in a country where the majority of people were Muslims professing a strong attachment to the rights of women and a secular way of life". (<http://islamicsydney.com/story.php?id=1679>; [www.islamonline.org/English/News/2004-06/29/article05.shtml](http://www.islamonline.org/English/News/2004-06/29/article05.shtml)).

## September

- ◆ Beslan school siege. Chechen Islamic extremists murder 344 people after taking 1200 hostage during a day of festivities at a school. Among the hostage-takers were female suicide bombers wearing the burqa and niqab (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2004/s1194949.htm>; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/world/04/russian\\_s/html/1.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/world/04/russian_s/html/1.stm)).

## October

- ◆ Schapelle Corby arrested.

## November

- ◆ Hijab police officer graduates (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2004/s1252618.htm>).

## 2005

## March

- ◆ British high school student wins court case after being refused permission to wear a non-regulation Muslim gown to class (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2005/s1315103.htm>; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/beds/bucks/herts/4310545.stm>).
- ◆ Abu Bakar Bashir, alleged spiritual head of terrorist organisation Jamah Islamiah, sentenced to 30 months' jail for conspiracy in connection with Bali bombings.
- ◆ House of Lords overturns Court of Appeal decision and upholds school ban on Muslim dress ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/4832072.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/4832072.stm)).

## April

- ◆ Bali 9 arrested.
- ◆ Sydney sheikh claims rape victims “ask for it” if they wear “skimpy ... Satanic” clothing (<http://smh.com.au/articles/2005/04/28/1114635686590.html>; <http://www.theage.com.au/news/Pamela-Bone/...3251680541.html>).

## May

- ◆ Auburn schoolgirl threatened with disciplinary action for wearing non-approved Muslim headdress (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Schoolgirl-punished-for-Muslim-dress/2005/05/13/1115843374379.html>).
- ◆ School backs down (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/School-backs-down-over-students-dress/2005/05/15/1116095857407.html>).



- ◆ Other schoolgirls don hijab in show of solidarity (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Peers-set-to-follow-Yasamins-dress-example/2005/05/17/1116095964754.html>).
- ◆ May 27 – Corby convicted.

## **June**

- ◆ First female Kuwaiti minister takes oath in hijab (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200506/s1396482.htm>).

## **July**

- ◆ Corby case reopened/re-hearing in High Court/Appeal.
- ◆ July 7 – London bombings.
- ◆ Muslims face hostility in aftermath of London bombings (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1411800.htm>).

## August

- ◆ Local aftermath of London bombings – racial assaults increase (<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1444534.htm>).
- ◆ Corby case remains in headlines as judgment awaited on re-hearing/sentence.
- ◆ Belgium bans the burqa and niqab and fines the wife of a suspected terrorist for refusing to comply (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/suspects-wife-stares-down-local-burqa-ban/2005/08/30/1125302566008.html>).
- ◆ August 20 – Bali police arrest 24-year-old Australian model Michelle Leslie, known professionally as Michelle Lee, after allegedly finding two ecstasy tablets in her handbag which she claims don't belong to her.
- ◆ August 23 – Prime Minister's Muslim summit (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1444513.htm>).
- ◆ August 29 – “Drug charge model goes under cover”. It is revealed that Leslie is a Muslim convert. The model is seen being led from her prison cell wearing a black hijab, completely masking her face. (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/drug-charge-model-goes-under-cover/2005/08/30/1125302517327.html>).



Michelle Leslie, dressed in black shirt and scarf  
Photo: Channel Ten News

- ◆ August 29 – Liberal backbenchers Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos call for a ban on the hijab in schools, claiming they're a symbol of defiance (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200508/s1448288.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1448343.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1448346.htm>).

- ◆ State governments reject school hijab ban call (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200508/s1448433.htm>).
- ◆ August 29 – Howard rejects headscarf ban as “impractical” (<http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/common/printfriendly.pl?http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1448680.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200508/s1448543.htm>; <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/AD105A1C-7FB0-4A75-B5F1-3AFF011072F6.htm>; <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2005/08/29/1125302510934.html>)



Impractical: Mr Howard says if headscarfs are banned other forms of dress would have to be included. (Reuters)



Making friends ... John Howard unveiled a building at Al-Faisal College in Auburn yesterday. Photo: James Alcock

- ◆ August 30 – Leslie questioned on hijab (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2005/s1449077.htm>).

## September

- ◆ Panopoulos repeats hijab ban call.
- ◆ September 11 – Muslim anti-terror summit held in Sydney as a report reveals an increased sense of fear and insecurity among Muslims and post September 11 hate crimes (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200509/s1457786.htm>).

## October

- ◆ Second Bali bombings. A series of explosions on [October 1, 2005](#), at two sites in [Jimbaran](#) and [Kuta](#). Twenty-three people killed – among them, four Australians. Three suspected bombers also die in the explosions.
- ◆ October 12 – Corby’s sentence reduced to 15 years.
- ◆ Hijab on parade. A fashion parade featuring Muslim women wearing hijabs is reported by ABC and *SMH*.
- ◆ Muslim women campaign for right to wear hijab (<http://www.mwa.org.au/attachments/Pro-Hijab%20Declaration%20signed%20as%20at%20261005.pdf>).
- ◆ Michelle Leslie condemned for being a “fake” Muslim. On her first court appearance, she is mobbed and taunted by Indonesian media. She faces two charges under Indonesia’s tough psychotropic drugs laws.

## November

- ◆ November 8 – terror raids. Counter-terrorist police raids leave Muslim communities in shock (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1501474.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1501037.htm>).
- ◆ Michelle Leslie trial continues. Leslie makes an apology in court to the people of Indonesia “for giving them a problem in their country”, asking for justice and mercy.
- ◆ November 18 – after a series of court appearances, Leslie is found guilty and sentenced to three months’ jail, a period she has already served.
- ◆ Leslie flies home to Australia wearing a skimpy singlet and jeans without hijab (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/leslies-muslim-dress-a-stunt/2005/11/21/1132421571419.html>; <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1512925.htm>).



Michelle Leslie following her arrest (left), as she appeared in court (centre) and on the plane to Singapore (right). Photo: Compilation

- ◆ November 21 – Leslie arrives back in Australia (<http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2006/s1706729.htm>).
- ◆ Australian Federation of Islamic Councils describes as a stunt Leslie's claims to be a Muslim (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200511/s1514200.htm>; <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/leslie-denies-muslim-stunt/2005/11/21/1132421573377.html>; <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2005/s1513207.htm>).

## December

- ◆ Dutch Parliament votes to ban burqa and niqab, saying they represent oppression and a terrorist threat (<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/F3D32A24-F56E-4530-BB8A-4A58449D4E4D.htm>).
- ◆ Australian Muslim Youth Summit (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1522608.htm>).
- ◆ December 12 – Cronulla riots (<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1529417.htm>).

## 2006

### February

- ◆ Danish cartoons spark violent extremist reaction and backlash against Muslims (<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/breakfast/stories/2006/1573570.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1568919.htm>; <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1568881.htm>).
- ◆ Depression reportedly on the rise in Muslim communities.
- ◆ Survey finds pupils see Muslims as terrorists (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/most-pupils-see-muslims-as-terrorists/2006/02/05/1139074108609.html>).
- ◆ Media criticised for racist coverage of Muslims (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/portrayal-of-muslims-tainted-by-racism/2006/03/17/1142582526996.html>; <http://smh.com.au/news/national/ignorance-rules-our-knowledge-of-islam/2006/03/19/1142703218007.html>).

### March

- ◆ Nike develops sports clothing for women based on traditional Islamic dress (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4838480.stm>).
- ◆ Michelle Leslie returns to swimsuit modeling, sparking another debate about her “fake Muslim faith” (<http://abc.net.au/news/arts/theshallowend/200603/s1600695.htm>).
- ◆ Islamic Womens’ Welfare Council of Victoria launches *Media guide: Islam and Muslims in Australia* to aid balanced reporting of issues affecting the Muslim community (<http://www.theage.com.au/news/National/Media-guide-for-covering-Muslim-issues/2006/03/17/1142098653764.html>).

### April

- ◆ Dutch politician calls for unemployment benefits to be withdrawn from women wearing burqas. This followed a burqa-clad woman’s claim that she had to rely on benefits as she couldn’t get employment because of her clothing (<http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,412355,00.html>).

### May

- ◆ Turkish judge shot dead by Muslim lawyer chanting slogans in protest against his decision to block the promotion of a hijab-wearing teacher (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-2185444,00.html>).

- ◆ 25,000 people march in Ankara in defence of secularism in response to shooting murder of judge coinciding with his funeral at the Ankara mosque (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/turkey/story/0,,1778448,00.html>).

## June

- ◆ Abu Bakir Bashir – alleged mastermind of the first Bali bombing – released four months early from jail, to the disappointment of Australian Government.
- ◆ Michelle Leslie tells *60 Minutes* she started wearing the burqa to avoid rape in jail.
- ◆ Leslie’s confidante tells the *SMH* she lied about her conversion to Islam (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/bribes-lies-and-theburqa/2006/06/16/1149964746439.html?page=fullpage>).
- ◆ Probe launched into Leslie’s publicity deals (<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2006/s1655565.htm>).

## July

- ◆ Federal Government plans to evacuate Australians from Lebanon. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer specifically identifies most of them as “Lebanese-Australians”. “I mean, there are ... there may be somewhere in the vicinity of 25,000 Australians in Lebanon, though a very big percentage of those people would be dual nationals, they’d also be Lebanese citizens.” (<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2006/s1687995.htm>).

## August

- ◆ Airline terror plot foiled – Islamic extremists implicated.
- ◆ *Foreign Correspondent* reports that unveiled women are being threatened with death in Baghdad. “The situation for women is getting worse daily. Many of the armed militias that are in the street now have announced that any woman not wearing hijab will be killed ... if she is wearing makeup she will be killed.” (<http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2006/s1706729.htm>).
- ◆ *Daily Telegraph* reports simultaneous attacks on Muslims and Jews as the Israeli assault on Hezbollah continues in Lebanon. The *Telegraph* was particularly appalled by attacks on Jewish students at the University of Sydney: “In one of the most shocking cases of violence, Jewish students at Sydney University, who identify their faith with religious skullcaps, have been attacked.” NSW Premier Morris Iemma called for a report on racial violence to be prepared for the Police Minister, while chastising “foreigners”: “Ancient hatreds and rivalries from other lands do not belong in Australia. Australia is a welcoming and generous society. There is no place for people who think they can bring foreign arguments (here) ...” (<http://www.news.com.au/sundaytelegraph/story/0,,20208907-5001021,00.html>).

- ◆ Muslim beauty queen uproar. This, in part, is how the Melbourne *Herald Sun* reported a story about a teen beauty pageant entrant who happened to be Muslim and whose decision to enter the competition had attracted both support and criticism from the Muslim community: “Miss Ahmet, a Muslim of Turkish heritage, said she was not going in the competition to make a religious statement. ‘I don’t believe religion should make a difference in the competition,’ she said. Miss Teen Australia Victorian manager Carley Downward said Muslims who criticised Miss Ahmet should ‘get a life’. She said Miss Ahmet was a nice girl who had a good chance in the competition.” (<http://www.news.com.au/sundayheraldsun/story/0,,20265449-661,00.html>).

### Definitions of key terms

- ◆ Hijab – a headscarf covering at least the hair. (IWWC, 2005, p. 41) Hijab is the Arabic word for barrier and in Islamic scholarship, it usually adopts the wider meaning of dressing in a way that covers the hair, arms, and feet. Many Islamic scholars interpret the Qur’an as requiring women of faith to wear the hijab as a sign of modesty (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab>, accessed August 19, 2006).
- ◆ Chador – a long scarf which completely covers a woman’s hair and body (IWWC, 2005, p. 41). A chador is a full-length semi-circle of fabric open down the front and traditionally worn in Iran. When total coverage became compulsory after the 1979 [Iranian Revolution](#), the chador began to be worn over a headscarf and a long overcoat ([jilbab](#)). Although traditionally white or patterned, black is now the universal colour of the chador (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chador>, accessed August 19, 2006).
- ◆ Nikaab/Niqab – a veil that also covers all or part of the face (IWWC, 2005, p 41). It is popular in the Middle East but can also be found in North Africa, South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The niqab originated with the need for protection in the harsh desert conditions of Arabia. Its primary use by modern Muslim women is modesty: to keep non-mahram men (those who are not one’s father, brother, husband or other intimate relation) from seeing a Muslim woman’s face. However, most Islamic scholars believe that wearing the niqab is not required of Muslim women (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niqab>, accessed August 19, 2006).
- ◆ Burqa – An all-encompassing robe that covers the head, face and body down to the ankle. (IWWC, 2005). Similar to a [niqab](#), the burqa covers the wearer’s entire face except for a small region about the [eyes](#). A full burqa or Afghan burqa is a [garment](#) that conceals the entire body. The full burqa includes a “net curtain”, which also hides the wearer’s eyes. During the [Taliban’s reign](#) in [Afghanistan](#), women were required to wear a full burqa – usually blue in colour (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burqa>, accessed August 19, 2006).
- ◆ Jilbab – In contemporary usage this refers to a long, flowing, baggy over-garment worn by some [Muslim](#) women who believe it fulfills the [Islamic](#) demands for modesty. The modern jilbāb covers the entire body, except for hands, feet, face, and

head. The head is then covered by a scarf or hijab. While some Islamic scholars argue this garment is identical to the one referenced in the Qur'an in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, others believe it is the product of an Islamic revival embracing fundamentalism that originated in Egypt in the 1970s (Encyclopedia of Islam cited at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jilb%C4%81b#Controversy>, accessed August 19, 2006).



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