Community media intervention

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CHAPTER 9
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There is ample research identifying the many 'problems' in media representations of Australian Muslims and Islam in the Australian media. Increasingly, media researchers and government bodies advocate training and funding for communities subjected to media racism to 'speak up' and 'talk back' in the news media. Indeed, the skilling up and empowerment of Muslim communities has emerged as the preferred strategy for change in the reporting of Islam in the Australian media. This chapter focuses on 'community media interventions', or the many ways in which people working with Muslim communities in Australia have spoken back to the news media and worked for improved media coverage. The discussion of media interventions reveals both the many achievements and the considerable difficulties experienced by Australian Muslims working for 'solutions' and change. The chapter outlines a diverse range of strategies employed—from utilising complaints procedures to creative 'culture jamming' approaches. Examples include media-skills training, the development of media advocacy networks, education and developing networks with media professionals and journalism students, the development of alternative media and the organisation of media events. Drawing on interviews and participant observation in media interventions as well as the writings of experienced media
commentators, I argue that news reporting of Australian Muslims is best understood as a ‘command performance’ in which Australian Muslims are constantly urged to speak up, to explain and to reassure but not to set the news agenda nor to pose questions. While Muslim community media interventions have contributed to empowerment for participants and improved reporting in mainstream media, the closer engagement with Australian journalism has also highlighted the difficulty of telling different stories and setting the news agenda rather than responding to stereotypes or the perceived prejudices of a ‘mainstream’ audience.

Responding to media racism

Media research has found a consistent pattern of stereotyping and racialised reporting of Muslim Australians, especially evident in news framing of the gang rapes in western Sydney reported in 2001 as a ‘new race crime’, debates around ‘border protection’ in response to the arrival by boat of asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan and the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US and Australia’s subsequent involvement in the ‘war on terror’. Mainstream media representations positioned Muslims and asylum seekers as ‘The New Others’ and constructed Arab and Muslim Australians as ‘the pre-eminent folk-devils of our time’. The ‘racialised frame’ that dominated media and public debate represented Muslim Australians as threatening, uncivilised and violent and explained complex social and political events as caused by Muslim culture.

While this research convincingly documents the prevalence of racialised reporting of Australian Muslims in 2001 and the years following, there has been far less analysis of the ways in which Muslim communities have responded. This chapter focusses on community media interventions, or the projects and strategies developed by communities subjected to racialised media framing in order to challenge and improve news reporting of their communities and issues associated with them. Media racism creates a heavy workload for community organisations and community representatives, who are called upon to defend their communities by responding to intense scrutiny and media demands. Many Australian Muslims have become ‘semiotic guerillas’, challenging media representations and producing alternative storylines in their daily lives and interactions. In this chapter, I focus on those activities that have, in a wide variety of ways, addressed the mainstream media with the aim of shifting representations and improving reporting.

Muslim community media interventions

This section outlines some of the many community media interventions developed since 2001 by people and organisations working with Muslim communities in Australia. Indicative examples of specific projects and activities are provided, but this is by no means a complete representation of the many individuals and organisations who have worked in diverse ways to respond to racialised reporting of Muslims in Australia.

Media monitoring and complaints

Many organisations and individuals representing Muslim communities in Australia have undertaken media-monitoring activities, usually monitoring mainstream news media and talkback radio to identify examples for complaint (racial vilification or irresponsible reporting) or reward (fair, balanced or positive coverage). The Melbourne-based Australian Muslim Public Affairs Committee (AM PAC) conducted media monitoring for several years after being established in 2001 to ‘promote a positive media image for Australian Muslims and to provide an advocacy service for Muslims encountering negative community attitudes’. The AMPAC website published commentary and responses to media reporting, and information gathered by the organisation was picked up by media professionals, including ABC TV’s Media Watch in the development of a report that exposed conservative columnist Janet Albrechtsen for misrepresenting the views of a Danish researcher on Muslims in the West. In Sydney, Keysar Trad, formerly with the Lebanese Muslim Association and more recently spokesperson for the Islamic Friendship Society, has taken dozens of complaints to the Australian Press Council, to talkback radio outlets such as 2UE and to newspapers. Very few of these complaints have been upheld.

The Forum on Australia’s Islamic Relations (FAIR), describes as one of its primary roles the maintenance of ‘an effective monitoring service to enable us to reduce inaccurate and unethical reporting of Islam’. Like most media-monitoring projects, FAIR is heavily reliant on unpaid labour and is constantly seeking to attract volunteers for the task. In 2003, FAIR took a complaint to The Australian
newspaper and then to the Australian Press Council (APC) over the headline, 'Islamic terror kills peace in Jerusalem and Baghdad'. At the APC the complaint was heard jointly with another, which was upheld, and both were printed in *The Australian*. According to FAIR:

This was a moral victory mainly because of the publicity that we gained and the admission that *The Australian* newspaper had been neglectful and unfair in their choice of words for the headlines.11

Racial vilification procedures and formal complaints can be important mechanisms for voicing community concerns and ensuring a minimum level of accountability in the reporting of Australian Muslims. Unfortunately, adjudications are often complex, and there are few serious consequences to act as a deterrent.12 However, media monitoring can provide important resources for other strategies of media intervention, as regular, close attention to mainstream news reporting enables media monitors to identify news values and agendas, to understand the diversity of media outlets and formats and to develop media-savvy responses. As well as the organised media-monitoring efforts described here, informal processes of observing and analysing media occur in many community organisations, community media, and on discussion boards such as on websites like *Muslim Village*.13

**Media-skills training**

Many organisations have adopted strategies for developing media skills, including funded projects run by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria (IWWCV), FAIR and the United Muslim Women's Association of NSW (UMWA). My own research began when I volunteered as one of the facilitators of a media-skills workshop for young women members of the UMWA organised by the University of Technology Sydney's Shopfront community engagement programme, within two months of the September 11 attacks in the US in 2001. Over the following years, UMWA members have taken part in workshops on writing for the print media, responding to newspaper reporting and developing media-management skills. They have visited radio studios and participated in mock interviews, practising techniques for adversarial interviews, and developed skills in investigative journalism and talkback radio through all-day workshops.14

The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria organised a series of media-skills workshops, facilitated by a former professional journalist. For IWWCV director Joumana el Matrah, the greatest achievement of the skills training was in demystifying the workings of the mainstream news media:

Part of their distress and anger and frustration evolved from [the fact] that they didn't actually know, in and of themselves, how to approach the media. So, very basic things like writing a letter, ringing up, when you don't like a story, writing an opinion piece, speaking to journalists ... so they didn't know how to agitate when they didn't like anything. So we wanted to give them some tools, and from there they could actually decide what they did and how they did it, and in fact if they did anything at all.15

**Media advocacy**

Media advocacy is a term developed in public health and refers to a combination of media-intervention activities that aim to develop a proactive media strategy in order to influence public perceptions and debate. Having developed an interest in dealing more proactively with the news media, UMWA organisers through the *Step Up!* programme began in 2005 to adopt strategies of media advocacy—monitoring the media to identify journalists producing fair and balanced reporting, developing news agendas, promoting alternative or untold stories and developing ongoing professional relationships with journalists. As with many such initiatives, the ability to generate and sustain the levels of volunteer participation required was the biggest challenge.

Loosely modelled on the comparatively well-funded Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), FAIR is perhaps the most consistent attempt by an Islamic organisation in Australia at developing and sustaining media advocacy strategies. In contrast to more established community organisations dealing with settlement services, community development and religious education, FAIR was established specifically to focus on media and public relations. In addition to the media monitoring, media complaints and skills
training activities described above, FAIR has also been involved in a wide range of activities including regular press releases, interfaith dialogues, seminars to educate professional journalists and university students of journalism, hosting visiting scholars and the production of a newspaper, *Australia FAIR*, which was shifted to an online news-zine available through the FAIR website.

Over the years, the director of FAIR, Kuranda Seffyey Seyit, has developed effective professional relationships with a wide range of journalists and has become a respected news source. FAIR is often approached for background, contacts and comment by journalists from local, national and international media. FAIR's work has also expanded to include collaborations with researchers and consultations with peak bodies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW. These networks have become increasingly public through the organisation of events such as the Race Religion and Rhetoric Conference in 2005, which featured prominent researchers, politicians and academics as speakers and discussants. The FAIR Media Awards 2007 were celebrated at a sold-out dinner attended by high-profile journalists and policymakers. With an emphasis on acknowledging professional and balanced reporting and developing constructive relationships rather than complaints, media professionals from commercial media and the public broadcasters were presented with awards including those for balanced reporting and foreign affairs coverage.

**Training journalists, building relationships**

The Muslim Women's National Network of Australia (MWNNA), FAIR and the IWWCV are among the organisations that have developed projects in order to educate journalists and journalism students, and to ‘build bridges’ or develop better relationships between Muslim communities and media professionals. FAIR describes its role:

> It is also our responsibility to educate the media about the subtle meanings of Islam and related topics. And with the hope to change the hearts and minds of the media, at present there have been some positive changes in several journalists that have been dealing with FAIR over past two years.16

The MWNNA developed a media-intervention strategy focused on educating journalism students and building networks with professional journalists, aiming for long-term change in the news media by working with students who had not yet been socialised into the mainstream newsroom. The project coordinator developed training modules and online resources that were delivered in seminars at a number of universities throughout Australia. An extensive contact list was developed to encourage budding journalists to expand their range of sources in Muslim communities. Students were also invited to participate in activities such as a visit to an Arabian horse stud and to attend an Ifar during Ramadan.27

The IWWCV also ran a number of seminars for university journalism students. As with other organisations, the difficulty in having the seminar included as a compulsory module in the curriculum rather than an optional elective emerged as a vital concern. Joumanah el Matrah, IWWCV director, had some reservations about the effectiveness of targeting journalism students:

> It's a useful strategy, but once you get out in the real world, people become mostly self-interested and career-driven and want to get a job and that sort of stuff. No, I don't think that's actually the way to go. I think it's the easiest way to go, basically, but I think it will have less impact. I think the way to go is to actually aim for the journalists that are operating, and to aim for them really hard.

In addition to media-skills training for Muslim women and the university workshops, the IWWCV produced a media guide that has been distributed to professional journalists and journalism training organisations. The comprehensive manual, *Media Guide: Islam and Muslims in Australia*, contains sections on the basics of faith (general beliefs and practices), application of faith (sources of diversity and debate including sharia), Islam and women and Muslims in Australia. These topics were chosen on the basis of media monitoring and a series of consultation interviews with professional journalists. As such, the manual addresses the most controversial issues in public debate rather than those issues that may be of most immediate concern to the Muslim communities with which the IWWCV works.
That was how the topics were chosen, basically, and then we went through a year of articles here in Victoria, and picked out the most controversial issues. So you see in that manual, for example, there's stuff about early marriage, and there's stuff about polygamy and there's stuff about honour killings. And it's not that these issues are particularly prominent for Muslims but, again, it's that journalists are quite preoccupied with them. So that's why we chose those articles. That's why we chose those topics.\textsuperscript{16}

The manual provides extensive information on newsworthy topics, and also a comprehensive list of contacts for media comment and further information. In compiling this list the IWWCV sought to counter homogenising representations of Islam by highlighting the diversity of opinions and expertise within Australian Muslim communities. They also classified some of the experts listed as 'traditional' or 'conservative'. While stressing the complexity of such labelling, the authors explained:

\begin{quote}
We have endeavoured to represent as accurately as possible the diversity of views within the Islamic world. Our choice of contacts for further information in each chapter reflects this diversity. However, as the Council is an institution working to further the rights of Muslim women, we have clearly specified which individuals and organisations we consider to be more 'traditional' or 'conservative', particularly in relation to women's rights. While none of these individuals or organisations promote harm, their views are sometimes used to undermine perceptions as to the designated status of women in Islam and therefore Muslim societies ... We have excluded from our list the radically conservative because it is our view that their interpretation of Islam contravenes both the ethical standards of the vast majority of Australian Muslims and the spirit of Islam itself.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Comedy}

One response to the difficulties of working with mainstream media is to develop projects that work outside the conventions of news. These projects respond to news media reporting but do not seek news publication outcomes, appropriating familiar media images to different ends and aiming to address wider publics rather than news professionals or institutions.

One such project, \textit{Radio ArtStart}, was developed by the Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association in Sydney for young Australian Muslims to tell their stories and to develop skills that might see them take up careers in radio. The project involved scriptwriting workshops and radio production based at a community radio station. The young people developed a series of radio plays that were performed and broadcast through the radio station. The radio plays were primarily humorous, deploying irony to satirise talkback radio and mainstream news media. Young Australian Muslims played parts including talkback hosts, callers, journalists and interviewees in a series of mock reports and radio dialogues. The tone was playful and themes ranged from addressing stereotypes about Muslims to chatting about football, barbecues and school. The radio plays explored issues of identity and belonging that are of particular concern to young people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds\textsuperscript{18} and showcased the hybrid lives and popular culture of young people who feel targeted and constrained by rigid labels such as 'Muslim', 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern'. While participants gave highly positive evaluations of the project, none are known to have fulfilled the project's wider and more long-term aim of encouraging young Australian Muslims to explore careers in media.

The comedy sketch and panel TV show \textit{Salam Café}, on the other hand, has achieved significant visibility in mainstream media. Originally aired on community television in Melbourne in 2008, the programme was picked up for national broadcast by the multicultural public broadcaster, SBS. The show featured young, media-savvy Australian Muslims as the regular panellists, discussing issues in the news and their daily experiences. The programme received positive reviews:

\begin{quote}
Clearly intended to influence perceptions of young Muslims in the current global climate, this series wants to show that being a Muslim can be as much about going to the footy as to the mosque and that Muslims have no trouble laughing at themselves and the way they are...
\end{quote}
misrepresented ... Non-Muslims, of course, could never make these jokes but it’s refreshing to see Muslim comics and community leaders taking ownership of the prejudice they feel to make it funny and entertaining.21

The programme was a significant opportunity for young Australian Muslims to set the media agenda, chatting about everyday concerns such as popular culture and mobile phones, as well as addressing controversial issues that more commonly feature in mainstream media representations of Islam.

Media production
The stars of Salam Café are certainly not the only Australian Muslims to become involved in media production aimed at diversifying the voices and issues associated with Islam in the Australian media. Several participants in UMWA media workshops have since become experienced news sources, and many others have been involved in media production through the production of a magazine, Reflections (available online), short films and community radio broadcasts. Reflections is aimed at the 12-18 age group and seeks to educate both the Muslim and non-Muslim members of our community about the beliefs and practices as well as the misconceptions of the Islamic religion. The magazine will also focus on the importance of culture and identity.22

The magazine includes diverse content such as features on Islamic traditions, poetry and a fashion spread. Reflections editor Fatima Mawas has produced short films on the Cronulla riots and on the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006, seen through the eyes of a soccer fanatic disappointed that the Lebanese national team was forced to cancel its Australian tour.

Several Australian Muslims have also become regular media commentators and opinion writers. Waleed Aly writes on Australian Rules football for The Age, as well as contributing regular opinion pieces to newspapers and online news sites, and is a regular panelist on Salam Café. Tanveer Ahmed, Joumanah El Matrah, Amir Butler and Kuranda Seyit have all written opinion pieces published in a range of outlets. As well as commenting on current events and controversies, these opinion writers often produce ‘media on media’, or commentary that analyses and responds to mainstream media reporting and public debate.

This is particularly the case for Shakira Hussein, who writes regularly for Online Opinion, New Matilda and broadsheet newspapers. Hussein also edits a multi-faith website, Shalom Pax Salam, and has appeared on several television and radio current affairs programmes. Like many successful media commentators, Hussein often deploys ironic humour to great effect. For instance, a 2006 contribution to Shalom Pax Salam by Alia Imtoual and Shakira Hussein, ‘The Muslims, the editors, the photographers and the headscarves: A true Australian fairytale’, describes several instances of media professionals insisting on photos of hijab-wearing women, even hijab-wearing computers, to illustrate reporting on Islam:

In this sad little fairytale, our heroines learn that Australian newspaper editors are as committed to the idea of Muslim female modesty as any mullah on the face of the earth ...23

Achievements
Media interventions deployed by individuals and by organisations working with Muslim communities in Australia have produced many significant achievements. The important shifts in media representations of Muslims in mainstream media in Australia are in no small part due to the determination, creativity and savvy advocacy evident in many media intervention strategies. Compared to media representations during the media panic around ‘ethnic gang rapes’ in Sydney and the early days of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001, mainstream media towards the close of the decade offers a far greater diversity of representations of Muslims in Australia and, to a lesser extent, around the world. News reporting, features and talks regularly include a far wider selection of sources and opinions representing Muslim Australians. Indeed, many Australian Muslims have become established media sources—some due to notoriety, others due to a reputation for reliable, media-savvy and well-informed commentary.

Media-intervention activities have achieved increased visibility for Muslims in Australian generally, as well as for Muslim community organisations and high-profile spokespeople and commentators. Organisations and individuals have also forged professional working
relationships with media outlets and with individual journalists. Media-intervention activities have resonated with journalists and media institutions working for change, including an interest in reporting 'the story behind the story' and 'educational' information on Muslim communities and significant events such as Ramadan. The news cycle also ensures that there are increasing opportunities for background, context, more complex features and alternative angles as a news story develops. The result has been an expanded media agenda and shifting representations of Muslim Australians and Muslim communities. Given the considerable changes and improvements in news media reporting since 2001, it is important to acknowledge the agency, activism and considerable contributions of Australian Muslims to that shift.

‘A command performance’
Despite the many significant achievements of Muslim media interventions since 2001, considerable dilemmas remain for those working for change and improvement in the reporting of Islam and Muslims in Australia during the ‘war on terror’. Experienced Muslim media commentators have written about these challenges—often in ‘media on media’, such as online opinion sites—and it is worth engaging with these arguments at some length. This section explores two dilemmas that have been commonly identified: the difficulty of shifting the use of ‘jihad’ in mainstream news reporting, and the ‘double bind and double responsibility’ facing Muslim women in dealing with journalism.

Shifting the use of ‘jihad’
The difficulties of shifting entrenched news agendas and representations are perhaps most clearly illustrated in various responses to the use of the term ‘jihad’ in news reporting of terrorism. High-profile media commentator Waleed Aly contends:

It seems to me that few concepts generate so much heat and so little light as jihad. Few ideas are central to such intense debate, and few words are surrounded by so much senselessness ... Central to this confusion is the stubborn tendency to equate jihad with holy war ... What we have, then, when we render ‘jihad’ as ‘holy war’, is not in fact a translation at all. We are instead interpreting an Islamic concept and passing it off as translation.25

Based on a reading of Islamic doctrinal history, Aly argues that dominant Muslim conceptions of jihad ‘have little in common with the mediaeval Christian doctrine of holy war’ and would in fact be more accurately translated as ‘just war’.26 For Aly:

It may seem like a small point, but this has profound consequences for our public conversation. It has become almost impossible for a Muslim in the public sphere even to utter the dreaded j-word without generating some degree of public hysteria. The confusion surrounding jihad has taken root so stubbornly in our discourse that jihad has become, of itself, something to be condemned and resisted in much the same way as holy war has been.27

The IWWCV media manual also contains a detailed discussion of the uses and misuses of the term ‘jihad’ in news reporting.28 Joumanah El Matrah explains:

It's kind of inventing new terms and inventing realities that are in no way based on the actual realm of experience of standard Muslims, and yet when people write about jihad, or speak about jihad, they write and speak as if they're speaking about mainstream Muslim consciousness, and most Muslims knew nothing about jihad before the recent period.29

In response, the manual seeks to educate journalists about the complex meanings of ‘jihad’ and to discourage the use of ‘jihad’ as implying ‘holy war’:

We were concerned about ... the extent to which journalists seem convinced that jihad is a theory within mainstream Islam, and that it is central to how Muslims understand themselves ... So what we were trying to do is not to say that it’s not important, but to try and get journalists to understand—it actually is an intensely complex
issue, and we're trying to shift journalists from using jihad as a kind of holy war meaning, which a lot of journalists either imply or write—as if jihad is a holy war. Islam has no theory of holy war.30

Nevertheless, the use of 'jihad' as shorthand term in news reporting has been extremely difficult to shift. This was perhaps most evident in the reporting of a forum organised by the UMWA's Step Up! programme. In August 2005 the UMWA organised a conference called Jihad: Terrorism or a Muslim's Highest Aspiration? The conference aimed to challenge dominant media discourses about jihad and terrorism and to empower members of the Muslim community to speak back to media about these issues. The name of the conference was deliberately provocative. The strategy was that journalists would ask why the organisers had chosen the title and that UMWA would have an opportunity to challenge the media's use of the word jihad.

The word jihad is misused; that was the whole point of us having the forum. The media like to equate jihad with holy war, terrorism and extremism. To us jihad means a struggle and that can be a struggle on numerous levels. The way the media uses it is completely incorrect.31

Attendance exceeded the organisers' expectations: about 250 people, including media representatives from a range of media organisations. The organisers went to considerable lengths to ensure accurate reporting—speakers were required to read written scripts, and transcripts were distributed to journalists and posted on the website. Young women from UMWA with hand-held cameras rolling asked journalists what they expected to get out of the evening. Speakers addressed a range of topics, from misconceptions about jihad to Islamic law and the radicalisation of Muslim youth. All three spoke of the media's role in demonising and isolating Australian Muslims.

Despite a strong media presence at the conference, it received little coverage. An article in The Australian newspaper was headlined 'Get out of ghettos, young Muslims told'. The report focused on one speaker's statement that young Muslims are in danger of being alienated, but ignored the speaker's analysis of the causes of this alienation, including perceived Western foreign policy double standards, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric as well as the lack of Muslim representation in media and government. The experience of the UMWA in organising the conference illustrates the difficulty of intervening in the media not only to tell new stories, but to challenge the language in which those stories are told.

**Dilemmas for Muslim women**

Due to the prevalence in 'the West' of stereotypes positioning Islam as exceptionally 'oppressive' or 'misogynistic', Muslim women in Australia face a number of dilemmas in dealing with the mainstream media. One of these dilemmas is the obsessive attention the Australian media give to the hijab:

In the West, and Australia in particular, a significant amount of Muslim women's time 'on air' has been used to either explain the hijab or to advocate women's right to wear it. There are many consequences of this, but two urgent issues are that Muslim women increasingly appear incapable of addressing any other issue and that in restricting ourselves to this topic, an opportunity has been created for Muslim men to monopolise and defend Islam.32

The focus on the hijab is a key feature of public discourse during the 'war on terror'. Christina Ho has shown that this public discourse is characterised by intense scrutiny of gender relations in Muslim communities, alongside a 'hijacking of women's rights' whereby conservative politicians have used concern over the perceived 'oppression' of Muslim women to fuel fear and prejudice directed at Muslims in Australia.33 Shakira Hussein writes that in this context, Muslim women face both a 'double bind' and a 'double responsibility'.34 Alia Imtousal argues that Muslim women are impelled to speak so that it becomes a wearsome obligation, and speakers are compelled to respond to stereotypes of oppression with yet more stereotypes.35 Racialised news reporting that positions Muslim women as 'oppressed' and Muslim men as essentially violent and misogynist, thus creates an intractable dilemma:
Trapped between dog-whistle media and politicians on the one side, and misogyny from elements in their own community on the other, Muslim women are aware that speaking out against either source of oppression risks providing ammunition to the other ... They are far from alone in this dilemma. Women from all marginalised communities are familiar with the truism that when they speak out against sexism, their voices will be opportunistically appropriated for the purposes of racism. This is a harsh reality; it is also, of course, an excuse for some men to indulges in bad behaviour while denouncing any woman (or man) who speaks out as a traitor to her community.36

The intense scrutiny of Muslim communities, coupled with the “hijacking of women’s rights”52 means that a ‘self-critical space’ in which to evaluate and critique issues within Muslim communities is lost, as many Muslims in Australia, particularly community leaders, feel as if the community is under attack, and people fall almost unconsciously into the line of defending Muslims and defending Islam.53

This shrinking of the space for public debate and the stereotype of Muslim women as ‘oppressed’ and in need of ‘saving’ also means that many of the significant contributions of Muslim women remain invisible:

In general, of course, women living in the West do enjoy greater personal autonomy than do those living in most Muslim societies. But of course, not all Muslim women suffer significant oppression, and not all Western women are free of it. Western women confronting issues such as inequality in the workforce or domestic violence may benefit from the experience and expertise of Muslim women. Muslim women activists have acquired hard won skills in community health, education, social work and advocacy, often performed in highly adverse circumstances. It would be arrogant to think that Muslim women have no support to offer their Western sisters.39

Given the dilemmas as well as the achievements of Muslim community media interventions since 2001, I analyse media opportunities for Australian Muslims as akin to a ‘command performance’. The mainstream media during the ‘war on terror’ offers many opportunities for Australian Muslims to speak and be heard in a variety of roles—but the stage is set and the script is already determined. The news interest in Muslim women, for example, has provided some opportunities for a diversity of women’s voices and stories to appear, but primarily on the terms determined by standard news values. Prevailing news agendas reflect the perceived interests and prejudices of a non-Muslim audience rather than the issues of most importance or relevance to Australian Muslims themselves. Muslims and particularly Muslim women in Australia are able to speak in the news media primarily in response to the agendas and misconceptions of the ‘mainstream’.

Joumanah El Matrah describes the news agenda and the issues addressed by the IWWCV as ‘oceans apart’:

They’re an ocean apart, and I see no sign that they’ll actually ever meet. If we had developed this [manual] for us, we would be talking about power, representation ... we would have spent probably a third of it on issues for Muslims in Australia at the moment. Lack of access to government, lack of access to media outlets, lack of access to resources, some issues around education levels employment levels, the right of women to wear the hijab and walk along the street ... that’s what we would have written.56

El Matrah describes the IWWCV’s working relationships with journalists as ‘very much on their grounds’:

It means that journalists have not actually had to reflect on their practice, and the enormous power that they enjoy. That journalists have not had to question their view of reality. They don’t have to question the way in which they research a story ... So we have had to explain jihad in a way that’s been useful to them, as opposed to a way that’s been useful to us ... it was all based around the way in which
journalists understand the world. It was based on what they wanted, and they were not to be shaken from their views.41

In the MWNNA project aimed at educating journalism students, feedback on early versions of the seminars included complaints that the training presented only the 'positives' of Islam and some students felt they were being proselytised. During the two years of the project, the seminars were reworked to address the questions that students wanted to ask—typically on controversial topics such as the hijab and Islam and terrorism. The seminars became framed in a way to assist journalism students in working through these difficult issues.

Despite the considerable successes in skilling and empowering young Muslim women to become both news sources and community media producers, UMWA organisers and participants remain frustrated at the difficulty of achieving wider shifts in news framing and news agendas. While community media advocacy work has contributed to the diversification of voices representing Australian Muslims within the mainstream news media, many of those news sources continue to find it difficult to challenge story agendas rather than merely responding to journalists’ pre-determined questions and storylines. Analysing news reporting in 2001—02, the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board found that:

When heard in the media, the voices of Arab and Muslim community leaders were perceived as less credible sources in shaping media stories, and were called on to defend their communities rather than to identify the agenda for addressing the impact of the criminalisation of their communities.42

Representatives of 'ethnic communities' appear in news and current affairs reporting primarily in response to issues and agendas set by media professionals or institutional sources,43 and are routinely framed as representing 'special interests'.44 Indeed, learning media skills and conventional news values can be seen as a process whereby racialised communities learn the many ways in which their perspectives and priorities simply do not count as newsworthy.45

Drawing on the findings of the Kerner Commission into civil rights issues in the USA during the 1960s, Wilson and Gutierrez contend that news 'was virtually always defined as being events of consequence to the majority population audience, which meant Whites',46 and that in contemporary news reporting it remains the case that non-Whites appear in the news only to the extent that issues are considered to be of consequence to Whites. For Wilson and Gutierrez, this is not only an important issue of accuracy and equity, but it also sends a powerful social psychological message:

By their professional judgments, the gatekeepers of news reveal how consequential they regard non-Whites in American society by determining the ways in which they are interpreted to the general audience.47

The community media interventions discussed here largely bear out these findings. In response to racialised news reporting and heightened media scrutiny of Muslims in Australia since 2001, many individuals and organisations working with Muslim communities in Australia have developed a wide range of strategies for change and improvement in media representations. Only a small proportion of these activities are represented in this chapter. Media-intervention strategies have achieved significant and long-lasting results, from empowerment and capacity building for participants, to the education of journalists and the inclusion of a far greater range of voices and stories in the mainstream news media. There is much to celebrate. Nevertheless, community media interventions in and of themselves are not able to shift fundamental news conventions. News values and the professional norm of editorial independence are deeply entrenched and fiercely guarded. Mainstream mass media are highly unlikely to consider Australian Muslims as their primary target audience and the commercial pressures facing most media institutions provide little incentive for innovative reporting on complex issues. There are relatively few journalists in mainstream newsrooms who identify as Muslim, and those who do may be unwilling to be confined to covering 'Islamic' issues. News professionals are notoriously sceptical of the value of 'good news stories' and highly suspicious of activities that may seem to be motivated by
'public relations'. These challenges cannot be addressed by the communities targeted by racialised reporting alone. Overcoming the dilemma of the 'command performance'—in which Muslim Australians appear in the news primarily in response to the concerns and news agendas of what is assumed to be a non-Muslim audience—is a challenge for journalism institutions and for those of us who are addressed, however unwillingly, as the 'mainstream' audience.

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**Notes**

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3. Ibid.
8. ABC TV, *Compass*, 'Encounters with Islam'.
9. ABC TV, *Media Watch*, 'Janet Albrechtsen's view'.
11. Ibid.
15. El Matrah, interview with Tanja Dreher.
17. See Dreher and Simmons, 'Australian Muslim women’s media interventions'.
18. El Matrah, interview with Tanja Dreher.
20. See Butcher and Thomas (eds), *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia*.
21. Duthie, 'Review of Salam Cafe'.
22. UMWA Online, *Reflections Magazine of the United Muslim Women Association of NSW*.
23. Hussein, 'Double bind and double responsibility'.
24. Imtiaz and Hussein, 'The Muslims, the editors, the photographers and the headscarves'.
27. Ibid., p. 173.
29. El Matrah, interview with Tanja Dreher.
30. Ibid.
31. UMWA Online, *Reflections Magazine of the United Muslim Women Association of NSW*.
32. El Matrah, 'Stolen voices of Muslim women'.
33. Ho, 'Muslim women's new defenders', pp. 290–8.
34. Hussein, 'Double bind and double responsibility'.
36. Hussein, 'When liberation isn't'.
37. Ho, 'Muslim women's new defenders', pp. 290–8.
38. El Matrah, 'Muslim women in Australia'.
39. Hussein, 'When liberation isn’t'.
40. El Matrah, interview with Tanja Dreher.
41. Ibid.
42. Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales, *Race for the Headlines*, p. 78.
43. Van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*.
45. See Dreher and Simmons, 'Australian Muslim women's media interventions'.
46. Wilson and Gutierrez, *Race, Multiculturalism and the Media*. 
47. Ibid., p. 151.