

# **Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism**

**reporting arabic and muslim people  
in sydney newspapers**

**Peter Manning**

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*(Mike Seccombe, Sydney Morning Herald, 5.11.2001: 6)*

This paper uses the same sheep farmer’s image to talk of “dog whistle” journalism, in relation to the news coverage in two Sydney newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In this context the expression refers to the layers of meanings that come with the words, phrases, sentences and context of the reports produced by journalists in these two newspapers.

# **‘Dog whistle politics’ and Journalism:**

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in Sydney Newspapers**

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**AUSTRALIAN  
CENTRE FOR  
INDEPENDENT  
JOURNALISM**



## **Preface**

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One of the great thinkers of our time died late in 2003. Edward Said, a Palestinian American literary scholar, was one of those Renaissance intellectuals whose interests and work spread across many disciplines: literature, philology, politics, history, music, philosophy and Semitic studies. His most famous contribution was the controversial, though seminal, *Orientalism*, published in 1978. In it, he was concerned to expose the roots of Western (and particularly British and French) thinking about "the Orient" and to delineate the ways in which it lives on in our public institutions, policy, speech and media. The Arab and the Muslim, says Said, appear to have long been ogres to a Christian and post-Christian West. In *Culture and Imperialism*, in the 1980s, Said took his notions further, trying to determine exactly how it was that cultural forms (such as journalism) related to the imperialist enterprises of Britain, France and, since World War 2, the USA.

Where does that leave Australians? Are we outposts of empire or have we shed the skin of prejudice, paternalism and hypocrisy that marks so much of imperialist thinking? Or, have we developed our very own Antipodean form of the race virus?

At one level, Peter Manning's study does not appear to fly in the same theoretical universe as these questions. But at another level, it is a crucial contribution. Peter has been a distinguished journalist and editorial manager for 30 or more years. Trained by Fairfax, he's worked for Packer and Stokes, written for Murdoch, spent many years at the ABC in radio, television and online, and run his own suburban newspaper. He knows Australian journalists' language, culture and ethics. His paper, by concentrating so intensively on journalists' "texts" (or articles), and the language chosen, makes a unique statement about ethnicity and media in Australia.

Peter's conclusion is that, if you take two years of output of Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald* and examine the references to the notions of being Arabic and/or Muslim, you will see we have imported central notions of "orientalism" and given them a special Australian spin. In so doing, we deny the humanity, identity and, more importantly, the narrative of a whole race and a whole religion.

Chris Nash  
Director, Australian Centre For Independent Journalism  
December, 2003

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## Introduction

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Just prior to the 2001 federal election Canberra political correspondent Mike Secombe wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* TV Guide:

“Media images were manipulated by the Government to make asylum seekers seem a threat, rather than a tragedy. It was a classic example of what they call ‘dog whistle’ politics, where a subliminal message, not literally apparent in the words used, is heard by sections of the community.” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, TV Guide, 5.11.01: 6)

This paper uses the same sheep farmer’s image to talk of “dog whistle” journalism, in relation to the news coverage in two Sydney newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In this context the expression refers to the layers of meanings that come with the words, phrases, sentences and context of the reports produced by journalists in these two newspapers. Such an analysis cannot be done “out of culture”. Australian use of the English language is not the same as American, or South African or Indian. It has messages of its own. This paper will attempt to unwrap some of these meanings from the representations of Arabic and Muslim people in both major Sydney newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*) and the *Daily Telegraph* (*DT*), including their Sunday editions the *Sun-Herald* (*SH*) and *Sunday Telegraph* (*ST*), over a two year period including the twelve months before and after September 11, 2001. These dates have been chosen because they cover a number of peak events such as the Palestinian intifada, the controversial gang rape trials in Sydney’s south-western suburbs, an increase in arrivals of asylum seekers, September 11 itself, the 2001 federal election, the war in Afghanistan and debate about Iraq. The period also illustrates how the global impact of September 11 increased coverage of Arabic and Muslim affairs. It also provides a basis of comparison with other studies from earlier years (ADB NSW 2003; Collins et al 2000; Jakubowicz et al 1994).

Both newspapers have a long and proud record within their genre in Sydney, Australia’s biggest city. The *Daily Telegraph* has been owned by two of Australia’s top media families in its 124 year history - the Packer and now Murdoch families - and sees itself as the tabloid, tell-it-like-it-is, ‘voice of the people’. Said Campbell Reid, the editor of the paper during this period:

“It is not the role of the media in an open and free society, to suppress horror that is going on in our society because it might offend.” (Transcript, *The Media Report*, ABC Radio National, 6.09.01)

The *Sydney Morning Herald*, first published in 1841, sees itself as the quality broadsheet modelled on the London *Times*. In *Company of Herald*s, the history commissioned for its 150th birthday, it spoke proudly of its record:

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“ ‘While we are bound to respect Government and its measures’ said the first issue of the *Sydney Herald*, ‘we are entitled to be independent in thought and speech... we shall neither fear nor refuse to state our sentiments.’ In that sense, and in the sense that it strove to report events accurately and honestly... the *Herald* followed its own advice faithfully for 150 years. There were few newspapers in the world that could say as much.” (Souter, 1981:588)

Sydney has been chosen for this analysis because Australia’s Arabic community lives mostly in Sydney. The last census reported that 142,000 Arabic speakers live in Sydney and that in the Sydney district of Canterbury-Bankstown, 15 percent speak Arabic at home. In addition, there are many hundreds of thousands more who were either born in Arabic-speaking countries or identify as Arab Australians and do not speak English as their first language. Seventy percent of Australia’s Arabic speakers live in Sydney. The biggest group of Arabic speakers are the Lebanese and two thirds of Australian Lebanese live in Sydney. (*SMH*, 22.06.02: 23).

This paper is concerned with analysing the texts of news reports as they finally appeared in both newspapers and in laying bare the often latent meanings they carry. To the extent that it is possible to disconnect them, it is not concerned with the production process, nor with the effects of particular articles or series of articles on various audiences, especially Arabic and/or Muslim. I have not interviewed the journalists, sub-editors, editors and others involved in the production of the texts, nor talked with members of various reading publics. However, where various interventions have resulted in omissions that might have changed the text representations, I have referred to these (especially on the question of Israel/Palestine). This is especially so if the inclusions or omissions were points of public contest at the time. Some of this work has been published in the latest issue of *Media International Australia, incorporating Culture and Policy* (No.109, November 2003). However, this monograph goes much further.

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## Methodology

Two quite distinct approaches have been taken to the articles analysed in the two newspapers. The first, using QSR NU\*DIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data\* Indexing Searching and Theorizing) qualitative data analysis software, determines correlations based on the data entered. This is reported in Section A. The second, in Section B, is a literary analysis of selected articles based on themes established in Section A. It takes as its database the 12,000 or more articles read from the two year period.

Both sections are reliant on a worldwide newspaper database system, LexisNexis. This database was used to extract all articles in this two-year period from both newspapers relating to the concepts Arab and/or Muslim. The concepts were defined by a series of keywords. The keywords cover the major countries which either are in the Middle East and have predominant Arab populations or are not in the Middle East but have predominant Muslim populations, as well as events and people over the two-year period which were likely to have featured in the news pages of the newspapers and may have had Arab and/or Muslim connotations, references or connections (e.g. “boat people”, “Lebanese”, “gangs”).

In addition, only the news, features, editorial, letters, opinion, arts and television pages of both newspapers were searched, thereby excluding separate sections such as Business, Sport, Motoring and others (though sometimes business or sports figures, such as Ford Chief Executive Jac Nasser or Bulldogs football player Hazem el-Masri, appeared in front-end “news” pages, in which case they were included). It did mean, however, including such supplements as those on September 11, both in 2001 and in 2002, and, each Saturday, whole sections such as News Review in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Importantly, Section A relies on only a sample of each week’s newspapers, whereas Section B relies on all articles from all seven days coming up on LexisNexis following entry of the keywords. The Section A sample does not include the Sunday editions of both newspapers but does include every Saturday edition plus one other edition, randomly chosen, from the weekday editions. It therefore relies on two issues of each newspaper per week over two years.

The keywords entered are the basis of the study. Variations on spelling (e.g. Lebanon/Lebanese) were also entered. Those entered were:

Middle East, Arab, Muslim, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, Yemen, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Turkey, Afghanistan, Hazaris, Pakistan, Arab Israelis, Oriental, boat people, asylum seekers, illegals, refugees, gang, rape, Lakemba, Osama bin Laden, terror, intifada, axis of evil, burka, veil, mullahs, sheik, Hussein, Gaddafi,

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Arafat, Sharon, Peres, Barak, King al-Faisal, Saudi Royal Family, Assad, Mubarek, Sheikh Taj el-Din Al Hilaly, oil, PLO, Islam, Strike Force Sayda, Baghdad, Damascus, Mecca, Cairo.

In addition, in the course of the Section A analysis, many judgments were made to include or exclude certain sections, reports or words. These were made partly in response to keeping faith with the aims of the study and partly in response to checking the outcomes manually with the original texts. A list of all such judgments was kept and, for the sake of transparency and verifiability, they are listed here.

First, book reviews are included in the *Daily Telegraph* samples since the newspaper tends to include them in features and does not have a separate section such as the *Saturday Spectrum* in the *SMH*.

Second, some general decisions were made in the course of discovery: (a) not to include articles on Israel unless the articles also included reference to Arab and/or Muslim concepts (as defined in keywords); (b) to use the longer version where articles were duplicated; (c) not to include mentions of the word oriental without mentions of the word Arab/Muslim (as defined); (d) not to keep references to Islamabad without references to Arab/Moslem; (e) to keep all references to Afghanistan; (f) to keep references to Tunisia only where Arab/Muslim references were included; (g) to keep all references to “sheik”; (h) not to keep references to “war on terror” unless the article mentioned Arab/Muslim; (i) to keep all mentions of Libya.

Third, more specific judgments were made in the following: (1) not to keep articles referring to “Iran-Contra”; (2) to keep all features referring to “Egyptian bath towels”, “rugs from Afghanistan” and “Iranian glassware”; (3) to keep all references to Sydney Islamic schools in articles about their Higher School Certificate results; (4) not to keep sections referred to as “advertorials”; (5) to keep “Shopping Guide To...” features; (6) to keep *DT* Review section with reference to Computer Games set in Egypt; (7) to keep *DT* Auto features listed as Features with reference to sales in the Middle East; (8) to keep book reviews with Arab/Muslim references; (9) not to keep movie reviews with references to Arab/Muslim; (10) to keep *DT* “In Brief” Section; (11) to keep features on travel; (12) to keep references to *Lawrence of Arabia*; (13) to keep features on employment using words “ability to speak fluent Arabic an advantage”; (14) to include *DT* “Biog” features; (15) to include cartoons with their short descriptor and any text that may appear; (16) to keep *DT*’s “The Quiz”; (17) to keep references to “Middle Eastern Dance Centre”; (18) to keep references to “Arab music”; (19) to keep references to Arabic numerals/Arabic extension; (20) to keep references to television programs about the region or Islam or with a country in its title e.g. *Iran: The Golden Crescent*; (21) to keep *DT* column

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“Exchange” (reference to music for Sheik of Araby; (22) to keep *DT* column “Voteline”; (23) not to keep references to Sydney sports team Lebanon Cedars; and (24) not to include references to “Arabian Sea”.

Fourth, and importantly, though not unexpectedly, it became clear that for both the *DT* and the *SMH* there was not always a clear distinction between the LexisNexis use of the term “local” for local news and the term “international” for international news in sections deemed News and Features. As a result, a manual review was undertaken and each article was read to determine its ‘true’ place within such categories as “news”, “features” or “opinion” and, within “news”, whether it was “local” or “international”. Research assistants Michelle Feuerlicht and Lawrence Conway undertook this arduous task (in addition to overall data entry and analysis). In general, if articles were written by foreign correspondents, they were listed as “international” news. And if they were written by local reporters but clearly on international subjects (e.g. September 11) they were also listed as “international” news. Some articles clearly had an overlap (e.g. the imprisonment of Australian David Hicks at Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay) and were classified on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, some terms are used within the body of this paper which correspond to entries made in QSR NU\*DIST in terms of a selected listing of keywords. These terms are:

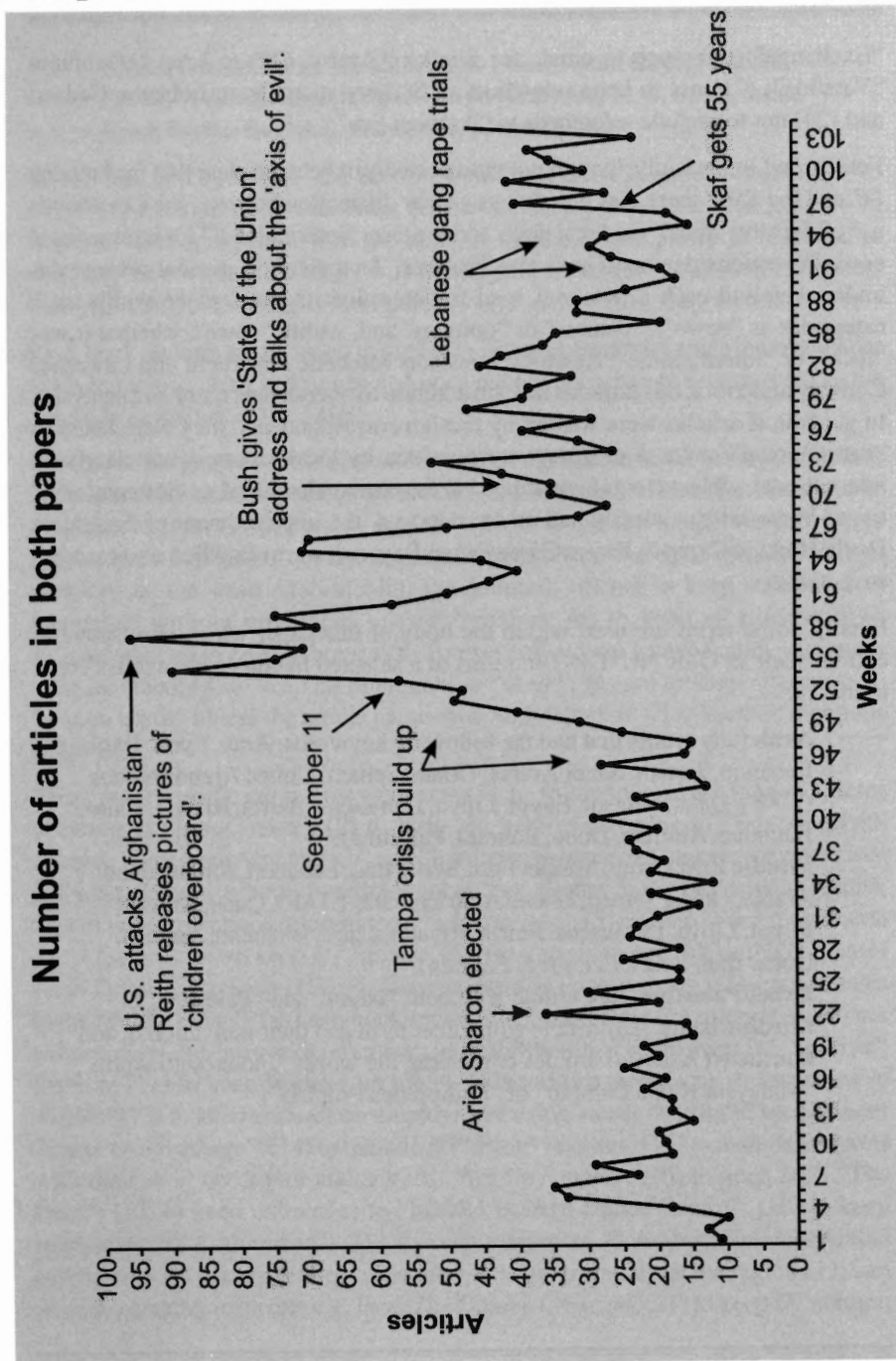
**Arab** (any article that had the following keywords: Arab, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Damascus, Beirut, Riyadh, Cairo, Baghdad, Amman, Doha, Bahrain, Palestine);

**Middle East** (Arab, Middle East, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Damascus, Beirut, Riyadh, Cairo, Baghdad, Amman, Doha, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Bahrain);

**Israel/Palestine** (any article with both “Israel” and “Palestine”);

**Muslim/Islam** (any article with either term and their derivations); and  
**Southeast Asia** (all articles containing the words “Indonesia/Jakarta”, “Malaysia/Kuala Lumpur” or “Philippines/Filipino”).

**Graph A**



**Section A: Qualitative Data Analysis**

Where, when and how do the references to Arabic people and/or people of Muslim faith appear in these two high-circulation daily newspapers in Australia's largest city? What is the distribution of such references over the period, from where do they emanate, in which sections of the newspapers do they occur and with what attached connotations and imagery? Of the more than 400 editions sampled (200 from each newspaper), what portrait do we get?

**A.1 What is the distribution of articles (mentioning Arab/Muslim keywords) across the two years?**

(See Graph A on facing page)

The graph shows a sharp rise at the beginning, almost certainly a reflection of the start of the Palestinian intifada, peaks again in the week of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's election and takes off in Week 47 of our period (30.7.01-5.8.01), with the allegation by the Sunday mass-circulation *Sun-Herald* that "70 women have been lured and pack-raped" (headline, 29.7.01) in the southwest Sydney area by Middle Eastern men. Four weeks later, the Norwegian container ship Tampa picks up asylum seekers from the high seas (first reported 28.8.01) and is refused permission to drop them off on Australian territory. Then, September 11 breaks as a news story. Still, the number of (Arab/Muslim) reports continues to rise on all three of these issues - pack rapes, refugees and September 11 - until it reaches a peak with the release by the Defence Minister, Peter Reith, of a statement that refugees allegedly threw their children overboard and news of the US attack on Afghanistan (with Australian forces in the coalition). The mountain of coverage including Arab/Muslim references finishes with the Australian federal election on November 10, 2001 (graph, Week 61). Various peaks through 2002 relate to reports of increased violence in Israel/Palestine (especially events in Jenin), fires at the Woomera detention centre, US President George Bush's "Axis of Evil" address and his prosecution of the war in Iraq and the trials of several young Lebanese Australian men for gang rape.

That remarkable "mountain" from week 47 to week 61 represents some 15 weeks of intense and sustained concentration of images of Arabic and/or Moslem people. Virtually the entire Sydney spring - a year after the Sydney Olympics - was spent with both morning newspaper providing daily news involving Arabs and Muslims.

**A.2 What proportion of the articles come from each of the two newspapers?**

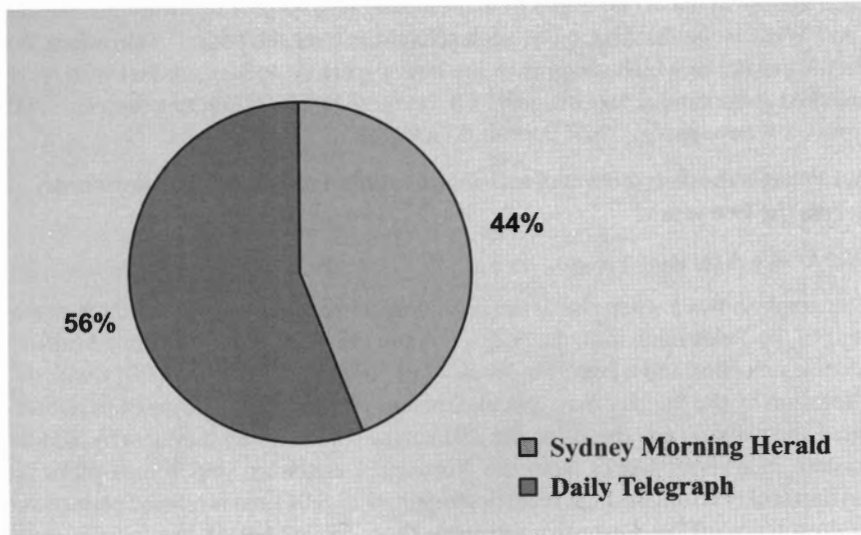


Figure 1: Separation of sample articles by paper

**A.3 Of all articles, what proportion comes from each of the sections: local news, international news, features, opinion, editorials, letters?**

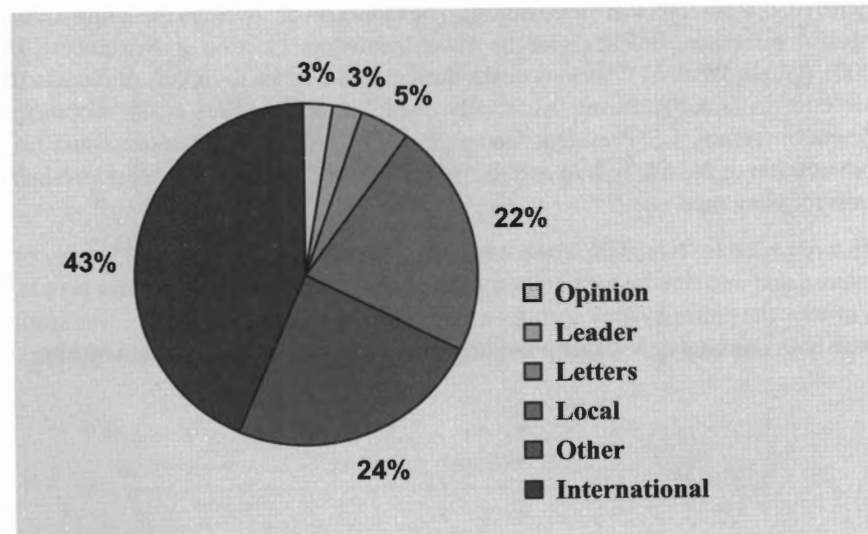
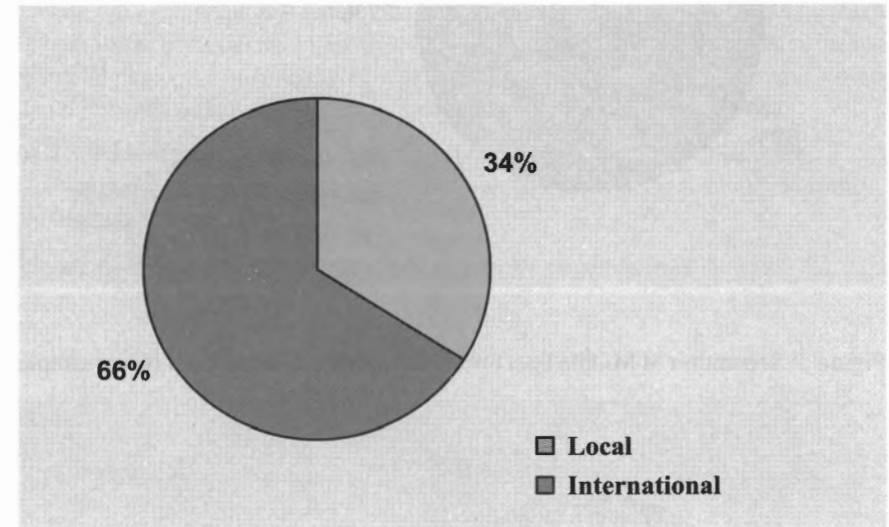


Figure 2: Separation of all articles into sections

The significance of news images of Arabic and Muslim people becomes apparent in this chart. News is the “front of the book” and the most current. The front page news is supposed to hold the readers interest most immediately. Thus the chart highlights the prime positioning the portrayal of Arabic/Muslim affairs received over the period.

**A.4 Of News articles, what proportion comes from local news and international news?**

Figure 3: News articles separated by Local and International



The overwhelming percentage of portrayals coming from overseas may seem to be a reflection of the significance of September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, it is surprising in the light of the mass coverage given other issues over the period: in particular, refugees and the Sydney rape trials. However, as the next graph shows, the surprise news event that emerges over the period is the significance given to the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation of their territory.

**A.5 Of international news articles, what proportion reference the Middle East, Southeast Asia or other?**

**A.6 Of articles on the Middle East, how many reference Israel/Palestine and how many Iraq, Iran and other countries of the region?**

Figure 4: Separation of Southeast Asia articles within the International News sample.

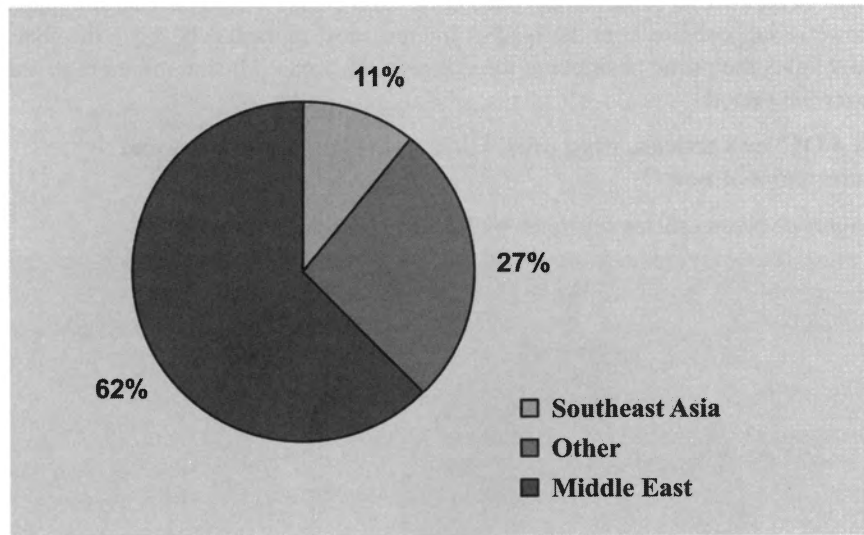
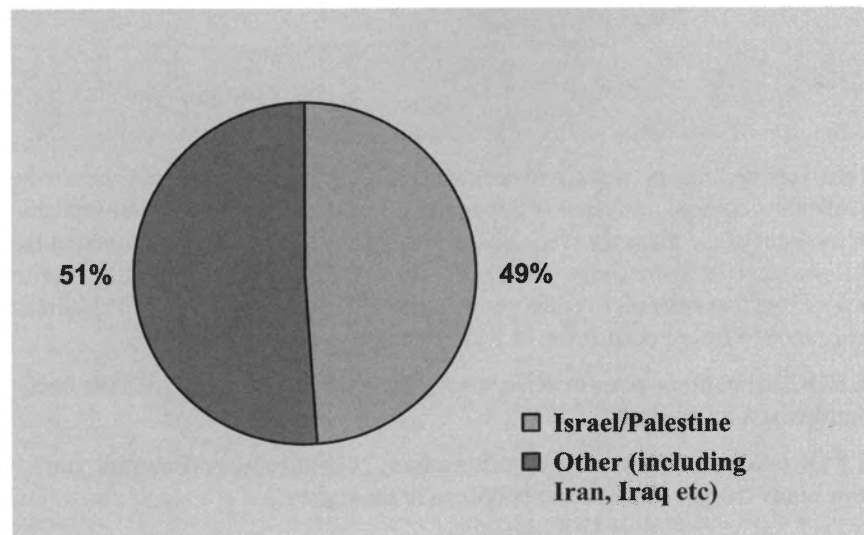


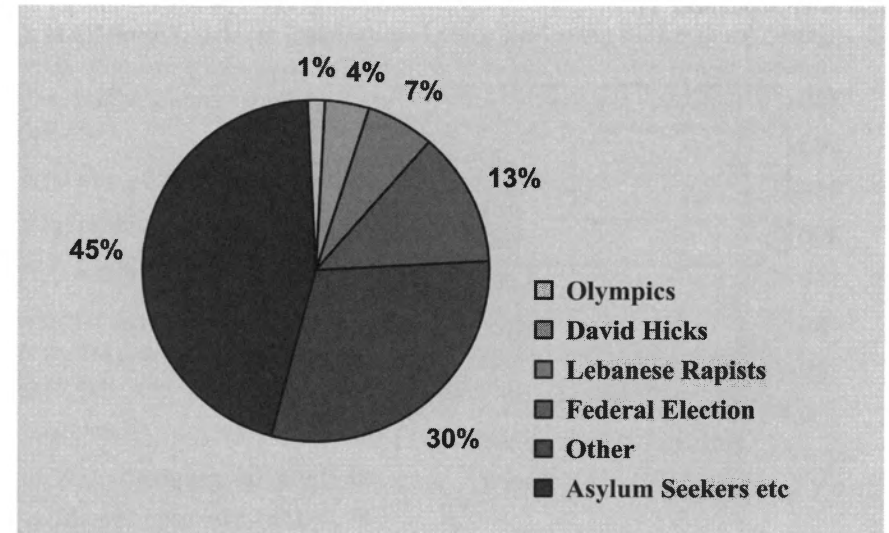
Figure 5: Separation of Middle East articles within the International News sample



This represents a surprising level of coverage over the period of events in Israel concerned with the Palestinian intifada. The first question (A.5) underlines that, despite the entry of Arab (and derivative keywords) and Muslim (and some derivatives) as defining concepts, Australia’s Muslim neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia, have yet to dominate our foreign news priorities. This is also despite a period of (some would say dangerous) tumult following the fall of President Suharto. The second question (A.6), however, makes clear that despite, for instance, the build-up to the war in Iraq, the fact that Australia’s Prime Minister Howard was the first international leader to give in-principle commitment to support the pre-emptive attack, and the clear self-interest involved for Australians (armed engagement, wheat sales, etc), events in Israel received far higher priority in news coverage. Clearly, much of our imagery of what it means to be Arab and/or Muslim, comes from news coverage of the events in Israel and the occupied territories.

**A.7 Of local news articles, what proportion covered the Olympics, Lebanese gangs/gang rapes, federal elections, asylum seekers/Tampa/refugees, David Hicks?**

Figure 6: Separation of various issues in articles coded as local news



This makes clear that despite the concentration on the gang rapes over more than a year - from the “discovery” of the issue in late July, 2001 through to the second trials in late 2002 - the continuing debate over the “boat people” coming to Australia’s shores from Indonesia still remained the major focus.

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results confirm the overall impression registered in **A.10** viz. that Arabs are associated closely with violence and threat. In this instance, only one such keyword was used, without the others from the earlier question. Had the others been used, an almost universal association of the word "Palestinian" and words associated with violence and terror might have occurred.

**A.13 Of those articles mentioning "Osama bin Laden", what proportion of the time did the words "Arab", "Muslim", "Islam" or "Middle Eastern" occur?**

Number of articles that mention Osama bin Laden: 526.

Intersection of "bin Laden" with Arab/Muslim etc: 404.

Proportion: 77 percent.

Not surprisingly, Osama bin Laden is overwhelmingly identified as an Arab and a Muslim associated with violence in both newspapers.

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## Conclusions

This qualitative data survey suggests strongly that most of our portraits of Arabic and Muslim people come from foreign news reporting. Within that arena, most deal with the Middle East and of those, half focus on the Israel/Palestine problem. This is despite the impact of the events of September 11, 2001, and the associated effects (the war on Afghanistan, the preparations for war on Iraq, (with Australian forces participating in both). It is also despite the fact that Australia's nearest neighbour, Indonesia, is predominantly Muslim and affects our national interests more directly. (These results may have changed had the survey lasted another month and taken in the tragic bomb blasts in Bali.) To this extent, then, it suggests that our imagery of "the Arab" and "the Muslims" mimics that of continental Europe and, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, of the Americans. It suggests that in respect of this issue at least, we have developed - either independently or through cultural transmission - the "orientalist" notions outlined by Edward Said.(Said 1995, 1997)

This is further confirmed by the content of our imagery. Almost 60 percent of the time reports in the two newspapers associate Arab and Muslim people with violence and terror (**A.10**) and only 22 percent of the time see other cultural matters involving the two groups as being of interest. This is particularly true of the Palestinians, at the heart of our news coverage. Some 72 percent of the time their very name is mentioned alongside the word "violence". And as a backdrop during this time, the attack on the World Trade Centre reinforces the associations. Osama bin Laden is the pre-eminent Muslim Arab. The association of the word Muslim with "terror" rises sharply after that event.

Finally, of course, much of this discourse of fear came to be localised in the 4,000 or more people who came on leaky boats across the Timor Sea in each of the years 2000, 2001 and 2002, seeking asylum without visas. This survey shows that the asylum seekers were the major way in which local news in these two newspapers saw Arab, Middle Eastern or Muslim people. And in one out of three articles they, too, were associated with "terror", "terrorism" or "terrorists".

The Middle East comprises more than 400 million Arabs and/or people of Muslim belief. Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and other predominantly Muslim countries bring the total Muslim population to something approaching a billion. Data gathered through the NU\*DIST analysis seems to indicate that the portrayals exhibited in the two Sydney newspapers are so broad-brush as to represent a new kind of racism. If such sweeping generalisations were made of Jews, black Americans, black Australians or Asians, they would be condemned out of hand as absurd.

## Section B: Layers of Meaning - Textual Analysis

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More than 12,000 “texts” (or articles) over the two years were produced through the LexisNexis search following the keywords. These were read with a view to (a) teasing out some of the themes established by the NU\*DIST analysis; (b) exposing some of the layers of meaning in the standard ways of reporting events such as gang rape or the Palestinian intifada; (c) briefly comparing these layers with some of the central elements of Said’s “orientalist” hypothesis; and (d) illustrating how journalists become involved in key decisions about transmission of meaning. The texts referred to below do not pretend to be representative samples of the whole. Nevertheless, they have been chosen because they serve to enlighten one, or many, or all of the purposes listed above.

One of the surprises of the qualitative analysis was the centrality of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in forming the images of Arab/Muslim in both newspapers. The conflict starts the first peaks in the concentration of images when the second intifada begins in late September, 2000.

A byline search as part of the NU\*DIST analysis, (but more importantly, a manual reading), shows that while the *DT*’s coverage is comprehensive and consistent over the two year period, its reporting comes from many different sources: stringers, News Limited correspondents from around the world and freelancers. (During this period, only the publicly-owned national broadcaster, the ABC, maintained a full-time Middle East bureau, stationed in Israel.) The *SMH*, however, overwhelmingly relies on stringer Ross Dunn for its coverage. My analysis shows that, in the *SMH* coverage, 68 percent of the articles are written by Dunn, the next most prolific reporter (at six percent) being Paul McGeough, a former *SMH* editor who flew in as a “fireman” during crises. As a result, this section analyses Dunn’s work in detail.

Dunn is a reporter working in one of the most professionally difficult locations in the world. The UN-sanctioned partition of Palestine into Israel and Palestine has been contested ever since 1948 (and particularly since the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands on the West Bank and Gaza strip in 1967) and is subject to high levels of daily violence. Not only is life physically dangerous, but every word a journalist writes is carefully watched for bias and nuance in a public relations war by both sides in the conflict. Vigorous lobbying and critique occurs both within Israel and from the reporter’s home base (AAC 2000; AIJAC 2002).

For this reason we might reasonably assume that correspondents in Israel are making deliberate choices about words and language. In the context of this study, the choices are not just about accuracy, but about portrayal, imagery and representation. Robert Fisk, the distinguished Middle East correspondent of the London *Independent* newspaper, refers in *Pity the Nation* (Fisk 2001: 438) to the BBC’s

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confused use of the word “terrorists” in the 1980s: the Palestinians and the IRA were terrorists, but the ANC, using the same methods, were freedom fighters. Dr Ibrahim Hilal, editor-in-chief of the Arab *Al-Jazeera* news network, said:

“Western networks, they never say ‘occupied territories’ in Palestine, they just say territories’ or ‘Palestinian people’. They never mention the real reason of resistance or the real reason of violence.” (ABC RN 12.09.02: *Media Report*)

The choice of particular adjectives and nouns can turn the reader’s sympathies one way or another. If there is no real ‘reason’ for the violence - it is ‘mindless’, ‘typical’ of Arab/Moslem people - then its senselessness is shocking, horrifying and disgusting. If there is a reason or reasons, the media field involving Arabs and Muslims becomes more complex. History, context and culture come into play as necessary components of understanding.

Language is therefore the first indicator of meanings. In what follows, I look at three key cases of contested terminology, before turning to a more detailed examination of Ross Dunn’s coverage.

### “Occupied territories” v. “Territories” v. “Disputed Territories” “Illegal settlements” v. “Settlements” v. “Outposts”

The United Nations routinely refers to the lands occupied by Israel since 1967 - forming that part of the former Palestine which was reserved for Palestinians at the Partition of 1948 - as “occupied Palestinian territories”(UN Report ES-10/10). This is in recognition of the many resolutions passed in the last 30 years condemning that occupation. For example, Resolution 465 (March 1980):

“Determines that all measures taken by Israel to change the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure or status of the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem, or any part thereof, have no legal validity.”

Despite the clarity of this resolution, there is a contest over the language used to refer to the situation in the media. Dore Gold, an Israeli spokesman and publisher of the *Jerusalem Issue Brief* of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, argues that since the boundaries of the areas are in question, they should be referred to as “disputed territories.” (Gold: 2.09.01). Palestinians, following UN usage, always refer to them as “the occupied territories”.

Tim Palmer, the ABC’s Middle East correspondent during the two years covered by this study, referred to the areas as “occupied territories” (ABC Radio, 6.05.02). The London *Economist* referred routinely to the “occupied territories” (15.06.02:

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44 and 10.08.02: 39), as did Robert Fisk in the *Independent* and Suzanne Goldenberg in the *Guardian*. On the other hand, US television networks have routinely chosen not to use the term “occupied territories” (LRB 14.12.00). Ross Dunn’s colleague at the *SMH*, Paul McGeough, referred to “the occupied territories”, both in his reports (*SMH* 16.04.02) and in his later book *Manhattan to Baghdad* (2003: Ch 13). But Dunn uniformly used the term “territories”, avoiding the adjective “occupied”.

The question of references to settlements in occupied Palestine follows on logically from the illegality of the occupation. If the settlements by Israeli citizens are on Palestinian land, they are illegal, which is why the United Nations Secretary-General refers to them as “illegal settlements”. Again, the only other full-time Australian reporter during these years - the ABC’s Palmer - used the same term. However, a NU\*DIST search finds that the term was rarely used in the two Sydney newspapers (only 1.9 percent of references).

The identical impression is gained from reading the many hundreds of articles on the Israel/Palestine conflict in both newspapers over the two year period: the violence takes place on “territory” in the context of “settlements”. (Indeed, the term “settlers” in Australian parlance, evokes brave pioneers who “open up” untoiled or unoccupied land, a notion perilously close to the “terra nullius” of earlier Australian law). The words chosen reduce the nature of the conflict to a level playing field, without the context of history or law. The effect of this usage is to remove the rationale for the already-established notion of Palestinian violence. It also leaves open the possibility of other explanations for their violence: such as, for example, their inhumanity, their cruelty, their irrationality.

Before examining some of Dunn’s reports in more depth, mention should be made of two other word choices.

#### “Killings” v. “Assassinations”

This word clash concerns Israel’s policy since late 2000, instituted under the previous Prime Minister Ehud Barak, of assassinating Palestinian leaders (*SMH*, 4.02.02: 7). These deaths are sometimes referred to by the Government as “targeted killings” (*SMH*, 28.08.01: 12), since they often are the result of missiles fired from groups of helicopters. Other euphemisms are sometimes adopted for what Paul McGeough, the *SMH*’s leading foreign correspondent and occasional reporter in Palestine, plainly calls “assassinations”. He writes:

“The Israelis have exacted a heavy toll on the Palestinian leadership since beginning a program of systematic assassinations late in 2000. Dozens have died in what the Israelis call ‘pre-emptive self-defence’

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and what Amnesty International calls ‘extra-judicial execution’.”(ibid: 165)

Again, the ABC reported these events as “assassinations” (*ABC News Online*: 1.11.01) as did Suzanne Goldenberg, the *Guardian*’s Jerusalem correspondent. (*Guardian Online*: 1.08.02)

Unlike Palmer and McGeough, *SMH* reporter Ross Dunn’s clear preference is the word “killing”(see below). This leaves the Israeli policy represented as being in **the same realm** as individual killings carried out by snipers, soldiers, settlers and **others** and, of course, those perpetrated by Palestinians against Israelis, including **civilians**.

#### “Terrorist”

Finally, there is the heavily contested word “terrorist”. In the 1970s the term became associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, through that group’s kidnappings and assassinations, especially at the Munich Olympics. But according to Bruce Moore, editor of the Australian Oxford Dictionary, a semantic change took place. He says that during the US elections in 1980, Ronald Reagan “played the terrorism card” in the context of the Iran hostage crisis, denouncing “terrorism” as a “scourge of civilization”:

“Terrorism represented a fundamental challenge to the authority of the State. But only some States could be so challenged by terrorism...”(ABC RN, 1.03.03: *Lingua Franca*).

Moore goes on to quote a new book on war language edited by two US academics, Collins & Glover (titled *Collateral Language: A User’s Guide to America’s New War*):

“Under the dominant definition, ‘terrorism’ could only be directed against particular kinds of States, namely Western or pro-Western States... the damning label of ‘terrorism’ was applied only to violence that came from the Left or, less frequently and in the European context, from the far Right.”

Robert Fisk wrote of the word’s usage in *Pity the Nation*:

“ ‘Terrorism’ no longer means terrorism. It is not a definition; it is a political contrivance. ‘Terrorists’ are those who use violence against the side that is using the word... To adopt the word means that we have taken a side in the Middle East, not between right and wrong, good and evil, David and Goliath, but with one set of combatants

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against another. For journalists in the Middle East, the use of the word 'terrorism' is akin to carrying a gun." (ibid: 441).

Fisk, a multi award winning Middle East correspondent of more than 25 years standing, advises against using the word. Deciding who is the terrorist when missiles are raining down on civilians from Israeli helicopters or F-16 fighters, or when Palestinian bombs are exploding in Israeli restaurants, presents reporters with dilemmas. Are both sides terrorists? Or neither? Or one side only?

Ross Dunn decided the Palestinians were the terrorists and used the word to describe them so. In terms of Said's analysis (Said, 1997: xxix), that choice aligns Dunn, and his *SMH* reports, with the US and Israeli position, and shifts the blame for the violence to one side alone.

Since September 11, this positioning has been intensified. In the propaganda wars, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon has sought to align his rhetoric with that of a wounded America, attempting to equate President Arafat with Osama bin Laden and the Israeli struggle as a national fight against 'terrorism' similar to that of the US. Less than a month after the American tragedy, Dunn quotes Prime Minister Sharon referring to Arafat as "Israel's Osama bin Laden" (Dunn also adds that liberal Israeli journals doubt the tactic will work on the US (*SMH*, 6.10.01: 21). He also quotes Sharon invoking the Holocaust and warning that the fight against "terrorism" should not see the West repeat "the same grievous mistake you made in 1938" (ibid: 19). The NU\*DIST analysis shows that, after September 11, 2001, in all articles on the Israel/Palestine conflict, there is a tripling of the number of times that the word "terror" is used in articles using the word "Sharon". The political usage of the word, and the contested nature of it, become a heightened reality.

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## The Sydney Morning Herald and the Palestine / Israel Conflict

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As argued above, language choice determines meaning and imagery. Thus a Ross Dunn front page article in the *SMH*, six months into the intifada (29.03.01) begins:

"Israel was preparing for a new wave of terrorist bombings last night after the Islamic group Hamas claimed responsibility for a suicide attack that killed two Israeli teenagers and warned that at least seven more bombers were ready to strike."

Lower down in the article a different cast is put on a similar death:

"A day earlier, Israeli soldiers shot dead an 11-year-old Palestinian boy during an exchange of fire south of the West Bank city of Hebron, according to a Palestinian hospital official."

Here, the death occurs "in an exchange of fire" (accidental? understandable?) and is only said to have occurred according to Palestinians (who are biased). Finally, a sentence near the end of the article lays the blame:

"The terror campaign appears aimed at drawing the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Sharon, into launching counter-strikes that might accelerate the violence."

So if the violence accelerates, it was caused by Palestinians.

In another article, 15 months later, Dunn writes:

"Israel has hailed the killing of a 'master bomb-maker' from the militant Islamic group, Hamas, as a significant breakthrough in its military campaign against Palestinian terrorism." (2.07.02: 8)

Nothing would seem more just in this construction of events. However, despite the "killing" being another in a long series of Government-instructed assassinations of Palestinians leaders (not just bomb-makers), it was said to have occurred, once again, in "an exchange of gunfire" and was not deliberate. "Terrorism" is accepted as a defining term for Palestinian resistance, whereas a "military campaign" has legitimacy. And, as usual, the religious orientation of the "terrorists" - Islam - is noted.

"Exchange of fire" and "crossfire" as terms also seem to become contested fields. Dunn:

"A leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades is reported to have been killed in an exchange of gunfire with Israeli troops." (5.03.02: 9)

This was clearly not just another "killing", but an assassination of the leader of Arafat's Al-Aqsa faction for the West Bank region of Jenin. It was no accident.

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Nor was the little boy caught in “the crossfire of history”, as the *SMH* front page headline put it, when he was shot by Israeli soldiers on October 1, 2000. Dunn reports it thus:

“A French television crew captured the last desperate minutes of Rami’s life last Saturday on the street near Netzarim, a Jewish settlement near the Gaza strip. Jamal tried to shield his son. He waves to show his presence to Israeli soldiers and shouts to them to hold their fire. In vain. Gunfire sprays their inadequate shelter...  
“An ambulance driver who tried to rescue Rami was also killed in the crossfire, along with a Palestinian policeman.” (2.10.00)

Was this “crossfire”, as a letter writer to the *SMH* from the Australian Arabic Council asked the next day, or was it “slaughter”? Dunn’s phraseology reduces the enormity of the crime, despite the emotive introduction. Both “exchange of fire” and “crossfire” give an impression of military equality between opposing forces - hardly true given the mighty military power of the Israeli Defence Force. The choice of words in the report also suggests accidental, collateral injury, yet these are occupying forces operating in civilian areas - in this case, within illegal settlements on Palestinian land - and such deaths are inevitable. As Dunn’s colleague, McGeough, observed elsewhere at the time, Sharon’s attempts at “targeted assassinations”, ferocious as they were, quickly lost their “surgical accuracy” (ibid:175).

Dunn has no such problems when it comes to Israeli deaths. In a report on January 17, 2002, he leads:

“The Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears headed for an upsurge in attacks after the murder of two Jewish civilians...  
“Mr Sharon also criticised Mr Arafat for failing to stop the murder of the two Israeli civilians...”

And at the conclusion of the article:

“The Palestinian Authority denounced the murders, which followed the killing of an Israeli soldier.”

Dunn’s commitment to his description of the occupied territories as simply “the territories” (for example, *SMH*: 30.10.02; 31.10.00; 2.11.00; 15.02.01; 21.04.01; 19.05.01; 14.06.01; 17.06.01; 11.12.01; 20.02.02 and 20.06.02) distorts his reporting of the events. His choice of words, effectively denying the fact of occupation and the consequent illegality of the settlements, infects his view of the reasonability of the actions being taken. It puts him at the mercy of the public relations machines of the Israelis and Palestinians. And once again, it’s an unequal

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battle. On the one hand journalists being shot at as they enter the West Bank or Gaza, the closure of the Palestinians’ administrative centre (including press relations) Orient House by Sharon last year, and curfews on Palestinians moving out of their myriad ‘cantons’. On the other, the might of the Israeli press machine. It’s easy to guess who wins in Dunn’s copy. (Khatib, ABC RN: 18.04.02; Hass, *Ha’artez*: 11.10.00).

Finally, as seen in the examples below, Dunn sometimes lapses into a kind of confused journalism, and when he does, it is to the benefit of the Israeli government position.

\* In the middle of an article on the front page of the *SMH* of April 2, 2002, Dunn reports a “military commander” alleging that Palestinian bombings were on the way. Yet in the opening paragraph of the story, he states:

“Israeli forces are locked in a race against time to score a decisive military victory over armed Palestinian groups, with warnings that 100 more suicide bombers are set to strike.”

With that representation of allegation as fact in the lead, it is understandable that the front page headline becomes even more certain:

“Scores of suicide bombers set to strike as Israel tightens grip.”

No Palestinian viewpoint is presented, which is commonly the case in Dunn’s reports. Seeking the views of Israeli spokespeople, particularly from the Defence Ministry, is clearly his top priority.

\* In the middle of Prime Minister Sharon’s Operation Defensive Shield attack against the West Bank, Dunn exclaims: “Now, it is the Palestinians who feel the terror.” (6.04.02) This is, presumably, because up until that moment they had been the dispensers of terrorism and, despite the actions of Israeli helicopter gunships, tanks and armed bulldozers and the incessant firing of live ammunition into their camps, they did not feel “terror”.

\* A week later, as the Israeli PM visits the devastated areas on the West Bank, Dunn describes Sharon (stood down as Defence Minister in the wake of the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut) as “widely regarded as one of Israel’s greatest military strategists” and his aim as “a new political horizon, a place where the Israeli-Arab conflict might finally come to an end” (13.04.02). Paul McGeough, reporting on the Israeli assault on the Jenin refugee camp, quotes the UN Special Envoy, Terje Roed-Larsen, touring the site: “This is a sad and disgraceful chapter in the history of Israel... (it is) horrific and beyond belief... Israel has lost all moral ground in this conflict.” The respected US

group, Human Rights Watch, found a case for Israel to answer on war crimes charges. In the *SMH* of April 16, McGeough debated whether the 50 or more Palestinian deaths constituted a “massacre” in the sense of a policy of civilian deaths. Ross Dunn answered the question in a single sentence in his front page report two weeks later as Israel refused to allow a UN fact-finding team in to look at the camps:

“A growing number of international journalists and visitors say their own investigations support Israeli claims that there was no massacre.” (2.05.02)

By contrast, there is no equivalent to the Herald stringer Ross Dunn in the substantial coverage of the Israeli-Palestine conflict in News Limited’s *Daily Telegraph*. The paper did not have access to a bureau, as the ABC did, nor its own stringer. Instead it used many different reporters, agencies and stringers.

The effect was more diverse coverage.

Take the beginning of the intifada in September, 2000. On September 19, Wafa Amr, a full-time *Reuters* journalist, reports an Arafat statement in full, then adds the contextual line: “The statement marked the 18th anniversary of the Sabra and Chatila massacres, when hundreds of Palestinian refugees were killed by Lebanese Christian militiamen in the two Beirut refugee camps which were surrounded at the time by Israeli troops.” On October 2, Hugh Delliios from the *Chicago Tribune*’s Jerusalem office, carried in the *DT*, concentrates on the killing of young Palestinian children. Even the reportage of Knight Ridder Middle East correspondent Nomi Morris, much-criticised by Palestinian media watchers in the US (*Palestine Media Watch* online 19.03.01), reverses much of the pattern displayed by the *SMH*’s Dunn. Her October 3 piece on the death of 12-year-old Mohammed Al-Dura spends the first two-thirds of the article representing the Palestinian version of events, followed by Israeli denials. Ron Kampeas, an *Associated Press* reporter who later became Washington bureau chief of the Jewish world news service *JTA*, appears on October 4 reporting violent clashes between both sides.

It is of interest, too, that Delliios’ copy in the *DT* (e.g. 9.10.00, 20.10.00) uses the term “Palestinian territories” to describe the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. This contrasts with Dunn’s use of “the territories” in the *SMH*.

In mid-October, *Agence France Press* newswire journalists Charly Wegman (10.10.00), Hisham Abdallah, a Palestinian whose father had been shot by the Israelis a few months earlier (13.10.00) and Tanya Willmer (15.10.00) were used by the *DT* as the intifada unfolded. In a “countdown to catastrophe” timeline, Willmer made no bones about how the intifada began: “Hardline Israeli Opposition leader Ariel Sharon visits Jerusalem shrine holy to Jews and Moslems, sparking a Palestinian riot.” On October 30, the *DT* was using *Reuters*’ Palestinian reporter Nidal Al-Mughrabi on the killing of young Palestinians.

There is a wide range of journalistic practice, histories and expertise on display in the coverage of these events in the *Daily Telegraph*. While none of it is Australian, and most of it is American, much of it calls on the expertise of Arab journalists (extremely useful in the occupied territories) and comes from a variety of viewpoints.

A further example of the contrast between the diversity of views in the two

newspapers was the coverage of the assassination in late July, 2002, of a Palestinian Hamas leader, hit by 450kg missiles dropped on him by F-16 jets in a crowded Gaza City residential area, also killing 10 children and five other civilians. (*DT*, 24.07.02: 36). The event and its aftermath was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* by two different stringers on July 24 and July 26, followed by a heavily anti-Israeli Australian opinion piece the next day (Wilson: 17) and then a heavily pro-Israeli opinion piece three days later (Akerman: 16).

The end result of this diversity of coverage in the *DT* does not change the overall pattern of word usage (see earlier NU\*DIST results) available to Sydney readers, but it does provide for a wider range of viewpoints across the spectrum in one newspaper. Unfortunately, there is too little of this diversity to change the overall patterns.

The Israeli/Palestine conflict forms much of the imagery of what it means to be Arab or Muslim in both of the Australian newspapers examined here. A major proportion of that coverage during this period came from the *SMH*'s Ross Dunn. Dunn's portrayal of Palestinians largely comes without history or context. In a difficult round, he has chosen to avoid the fact of the occupation of Palestinian lands and the consequences that flow from it. Inevitably, the choice he makes in terms of language distorts the lens he is using to send his reports home. Palestinians become terrorists, Israelis, rightful defenders, and injured civilians, unfortunates caught in the crossfire. It is a propaganda line the Israeli, US and Australian governments might want to hear, but it is not necessarily what two "independent" Sydney newspapers should be reflecting. In the end, it lends itself to the demonisation of Palestinians as violent Arabs and effectively gives Islam the role of accomplice to Hamas and its suicide bombings.

The reporting of the gang rapes of two different sets of young women in southwestern Sydney in 2000 occupied much of the two years examined in this study. However, it appeared in two surges. The first takes in a two-page report in the Sunday *Sun-Herald* of July 29, 2001 under the banner headline "70 women lured and pack-raped" and the coverage in both News Limited and Fairfax dailies regularly for a month involving one case. The second surge involves the trials a year later of the young men involved in a second case. The horror of the ordeal outlined in the trial earned a 55 year sentence for one of the men. The first "peak" of coverage overlapped with a massive increase in the coverage of asylum seekers heading towards Australia's northwest coastline. And while most of the gang rape headlines in the Fairfax stable came from its Sunday *Sun Herald*, in News Limited the ball was picked up by the tabloid daily, the *DT*.

The August 2001 coverage also followed earlier peaks of coverage about the problem of "Lebanese gangs" in Sydney's south-west, and the controversial description of them as such by NSW Premier, Bob Carr, on the *SMH* front page (Collins et al: 55-6). The gang rape reporting lay dormant for eight months after its first report in the *SH* on October 15, 2000, tucked away on page 34 ("Woman raped by two gangs in a day"). In that report no ethnicity was identified.

The notion of naming one community (Lebanese Australians), one religion (Muslim) and one region (Canterbury-Bankstown) in pursuit of "gangs" had been the subject of debate ever since the then NSW Police Commissioner, Peter Ryan, and the Premier, Bob Carr, had done so back in 1998 (Collins et al: ch. 1 and 2). The debate itself provided good media copy. As Lebanese or Muslim community leaders objected to what they saw as "media stereotyping", a new round of editorials would take up the cudgels from where Ryan and Carr had left off. It was in the media's interest to do so. If the "crime gangs" were ethnically based, as Ryan had said, Carr and the media (*SMH* editorial, 13.07.01) argued, they should be publicly identified as such. This was not just important for operational reasons (to identify criminals through such terms as "of Middle Eastern appearance"), but so the Lebanese Moslem community could take control of their youth and the people of Sydney become aware of the problem.

The alternative argument got little airing: that small groups of unemployed youths do not constitute "gangs", that the crime in the area was as much about unemployment, low income and low prospects as much as ethnicity, that "Middle Eastern appearance" was a useless term for recognition (might a Jewish person, also of Semitic descent, be identified?), that "communities" are not usually asked to control their youth and that Sydney needed to know about more than just one region of crime when statistics pointed elsewhere as well. But in the newspapers of 2001, this case was drowned out.

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The stage was set - crime and violence, Muslims and Arabs - and licence given for the “discovery” in the *SH* of a story from eight months earlier - gang rapes - but this time with the added themes of gender, ethnicity and blame to the fore.

The sub-heads to the article by the *SH*'s police reporter (headlined “70 women lured and pack-raped”) were “Brutal sex assaults linked to race gangs”, “Terror in the suburbs” (above three photos) and “A father’s story”. The article says:

“Police examining more than 20 brutal sexual attacks... have uncovered a frightening new crime associated with race... at least another 50 similar incidents have been reported in the Bankstown area... All of those suspected of perpetrating the acts come from the same cultural and religious backgrounds. Now police are concerned the acts may become culturally institutionalised... They are all of Middle Eastern extraction... Their alleged victims have all been Caucasian, aged between 13 and 18. The attacks are continuing.”

Detailed descriptions of the gang rapes follow. Finally, a reminder is added:

“The concerns come in the wake of controversy over Police Commissioner Peter Ryan’s claim that crime is falling and previous remarks he made about ethnic gangs, which led to accusations of US-style racial profiling.”

This article set the tone for many subsequent articles, particularly in the *DT*. The key elements of the message were clear.

- The crime is, according to police, a race crime;
- It is endemic in Bankstown (with Sydney’s highest proportion of Muslim Arabs);
- Not just Arab background is relevant in the descriptions, but religion (they are Muslim) as well;
- It may become a habit in this community (of Muslim Lebanese men) in Bankstown;
- The attackers victimise what police call Caucasian (i.e. white European) women;
- This is the same phenomenon that Ryan spoke of with “ethnic” gangs (therefore ‘them’, not ‘us’, namely, Anglo-Celtic majority); and
- the attacks will continue.

In the subsequent weeks, the figure of 70 raped women emblazoned in the original

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headline became reduced to less than 20 and finally, less than 15. Four young men, born and educated in Australia to Lebanese-born parents, whose court trials for gang rape had concluded, were found guilty by Justice Megan Latham and held for sentencing.

However, during this period, the focus on Canterbury-Bankstown’s Muslim Lebanese grew ever sharper. A week after the *SH*'s two-page spread on pages four and five, a *DT* “Special Investigation” hit back with a four-page spread starting on page one under the banner headline “GANGLAND: The crisis Sydney’s community leaders are too timid to confront”. Provocatively, the front page first paragraph, in bold, began:

“These images show a gang of four teenage criminals at work. Of Middle Eastern extraction, they are believed to be behind a string of major office building break-ins over the past year.”

Some of the Lebanese gangs were tricky.

“Many Lebanese-Australians have been identified by police as being part of a criminal group that does not have a name or hierarchical structure.”

The last “news” article on page five blasted “senior ethnic leaders” for preventing collection of statistics on links between ethnicity and crime. And the Editorial backed up the paper’s bold stance:

“Revealed today is the growing influence wielded by ethnic-based gangs in our city... They are turning Sydney... into a place in which fear has also found a home. There are suburbs in which the streets are not safe and young Caucasian women are at risk of rape...”

Three days later a young woman sexually assaulted in the suburbs of Enmore, 20 kilometres from Bankstown, became the subject of another *DT* front page report, leading quickly back to the Bankstown problem:

“Police said they were ‘keeping an open mind’ on possible links between Tuesday’s attack and similar incidents in which teenage girls and women have been targeted by Middle Eastern men for being Caucasian.” (*DT*, 9.08.01)

By the next day, the *DT* declared the whole of Sydney’s southwest (more than 1.5 million people) to be in danger:

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“Police have issued a series of warnings to women as sexual predators turn areas of southwestern Sydney into virtual no-go zones.”(10.08.01: 5)

The paper quoted statistics showing “pack rapes of Caucasian teenagers” by “groups of Middle Eastern men” was on the rise. A week later, a *SH* discussion of letters in response to its coverage declared south-western Sydney:

“a neighbourhood under siege, divided between ‘skips’ (Australians of Caucasian appearance) and ‘lebs’ (Australians of Middle Eastern appearance).” (*SH*, 19.08.01: 15)

The voices advising restraint in this increasingly tight focus on one Arabic community found little space or sympathy in either the *SMH* or the *DT* or their Sunday cousins. In July the Bankstown police chief, Superintendent Peter Parsons, seeming to disagree with his boss, told a feature writer in the *SMH* that “proportionately, I would say that Arabic-speaking people don’t commit any more crime than people of an Anglo-Saxon background” (*SMH*, 20.07.01: 12), but was not quoted on this subject in the media again. The Mufti of the Islamic faith in Australia, Sheik Taj El Din Al Hilaly, on August 20, questioned whether the rapes were a result of being Lebanese, or being Muslim, pointing out that the men involved were born and educated in Australia and clearly didn’t follow Islamic principles. His remarks were reported the next day in the *DT* and condemned on the features page with an opinion piece that said:

“...by blaming Australia he is effectively washing his hands of the problem. Sheik Hilaly and other Lebanese leaders must show responsibility, acknowledge the problem and attempt to resolve it, instead of burying their heads in the sand. Blaming Australia as the Sheik has done only worsens the situation.” (*DT*, 21.08.01: 16)

The editorial was meant to sheet the blame home to the Lebanese community for the rapes and the *DT* would have none of “Australia” (presumably an entity separate to the Lebanese) sharing it.

Finally, and more seriously, the head of the NSW Bureau of Crime and Statistics, Dr Don Weatherburn, put his head up on August 22 in a press release:

“The factual evidence on Bankstown provides no support whatsoever either for the claim that sexual violence in that area is more prevalent than anywhere else in the State or for the claim that the incidence of sexual assault is rising in Bankstown... The accompanying table also shows the recorded rate of sexual assault where more than one

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offender was involved for different areas of NSW. As can be seen from the fourth column of the table, the recorded rate of sexual assault involving multiple offenders is not as high in Bankstown as it is in several other areas of the State.” (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics: Press Release)

Implicitly, given the attitude of the Police Commissioner, the Premier and the two newspapers to ‘naming and shaming’ communities that might have gang rapists in them, this NSW public servant was asking why one community was being singled out for special treatment. It was a good question - and goes to the heart of this paper.

But it was also a question that went unheeded. The *DT* continued its news reporting of the gang rapes in Bankstown, but widened its coverage to features. An education writer for the paper called on the “Muslim community” to take some responsibility for

“a religion that teaches its women to cover their arms and legs and hair or be seen as immodest or even immoral when the members of that religion live in a society, Australia, where to display arms, legs and hair is normal behaviour... A connection must be made between a religious attitude towards the demeanour of women and the taunts of slut and worse made to the Australian victims by their attackers...” (*DT*, 22.08.01: 25)

The article is revealing. Whatever Sydney’s “Muslim community” might be, the writer is clearly asking it to drop (“take responsibility”) its differences to the “normal” of the dominant culture. The underlying meaning is that difference is not possible in this Australia. Further, the newspaper takes it upon itself to be the arbiter of “normal”. And finally, despite the denials of Sheik Hilaly two days earlier, the writer claims a causal connection between being Muslim and the humiliation and violence inflicted on the victims by the rapists. The Muslims are to blame as a “community”.

On August 24, the father of one of the victims objected in public to the process whereby racist taunts used by some of the rapists during the ordeal were eliminated from the court pleadings during the process of the prosecution. Despite Judge Latham stating the rapes were not racially motivated, the victim’s family now stated that they believed that they were. In humiliating the women, the rapists had used racist terms and abused them for their ethnicity, they said. Their revelations found front page treatment (*DT*, 24.08.01).

A year later, during the coverage of the second gang rape case, the *DT* was again to the fore. After a fortnight of court reports, the *DT* published the photos and

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names of two of the rapists on its front page. “We name the gutless rapists,” the white-on-red banner read, “Faces of evil” in huge typeface sitting above the photos of two 20-year-old men. (13.07.02). An editorial the same day patted itself on the back for exposing the rapists.

The next day *SH* columnist Miranda Devine returned to the theme of community responsibility and community punishment. The “temporary discomfort” the Lebanese Muslim community is feeling, she said, (18 months of intense media profiling):

“may be necessary so that the powerful social tool of shame is applied to the families and communities that nurtured the rapists.”  
(*SH*, 14.07.02: 15)

Four days later, the *DT* returned, picking up on the idea of communities “nurturing” rapists and again justifying its naming-and-shaming approach:

“While the sins of the men... should not be held against the Lebanese Muslim community, it is important that their true nature be understood. In this manner, the community and families can work together to prevent a recurrence of such appalling offences. All must come to understand there is no tolerance of such behaviour - or the attitudes that nurtured it - in our society.” (*DT*, 17.07.02: Editorial).

Much has been written about rape, about “orientalism” and the fear of the lascivious Arab or Turk (Said, 1995: 62), and about Australian fears of ‘the other’ (Rutherford, 2000; Walker, 1999). In the two-year period under examination here, all three come together. Rebecca Stone writes:

“Western visions of the Middle East coalesced around certain key elements - the harem fantasy of dancing girls, the brave and romantic sheik of the desert and other images melded from East and West. Of all features used to represent culture, gender identity is perhaps the strongest.” (Stone, 1998: 247)

The coverage of the rape trials and the connections it makes to Lebanese gangs recalls earlier eras of reporting of Chinese, Aboriginal and Irish gangs and attacks on “our” women. Michael Humphrey, in analysing reporting of another killing, this time of an Arab young woman by her father, speaks of how media reporting of the event as an ethnic “honour killing” manages to “exoticise the Other” (Hage, 2002: 219). The reporting of the gang rapes repeats the exercise, but over a two year period.

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The overwhelming concentration on Lebanese Muslims and the intensity of the coverage makes clear a set of assumptions that are mandated by both newspapers: rape is typical of men of Middle Eastern extraction; it’s the fault not just of the rapists but of the Muslim community that nurtures them; “our” white girls are in danger; “we” have reason to fear them (Middle Eastern Muslims); and “they” (Middle Eastern Muslims) should accept the guilt and shame.

## Asylum Seekers

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In retrospect it may appear as though the question of asylum seekers began on August 28, 2001, with the international incident on the high seas off Australia's northwest coast involving the Norwegian freighter, the Tampa, its load of Afghan asylum seekers and the denial of its entry to Australian harbours. However, the issue of "boat people" arriving on Australian shores had been bubbling along in both the newspapers under review here throughout 2001 under the administration of Minister Phillip Ruddock and his Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (hereon DIMA).

In January of that year the *SMH* turned government allegation into fact in a headline across an article at the top of page three. The first paragraph of the story said:

"Multinational people smugglers are preying on a fresh crop of well-off refugees, including Palestinians, Syrians and Iranians for the refugee trade to Australia, the Immigration Minister warned yesterday." (*SMH*, 4.01.01).

Yet the headline went further: "People smugglers exploit Middle East's well-off". The message is not one of sympathy for the refugees. The Government had done all in its power to keep "illegal" refugees out. These were not the world's deserving poor. They were rich and from the Middle East. And, to boot, Palestinians. The "dog whistle" was at work.

In June and July both the *SH* and the *DT* returned to the notion of the undeserving refugees. The *SH* focused on the life of relative luxury those "unavoidably detained" in detention camps experienced. Their accommodation was "former miner's lodging upgraded with air conditioning, libraries, classrooms, Maytag washing machines, TVs and computers." The columnist, Miranda Devine, went on:

"Many of those in detention have paid \$10,000 to people smugglers... You could argue the resourcefulness of these queue-jumpers makes them more valuable migrants. But our compassion is better directed to those who wait their turn patiently... (Sir Ronald) Wilson should know nothing evaporates compassion faster than the feeling you're being tricked, by exaggeration and lies, into compassion." (*SH*, 10.06.01: 15)

The *DT* also found the refugees tricky, abusing "our" freedoms. Under the page three heading, "Religious freedom - 23 tunnel out of detention centre", the report began:

"Inside the demountable building used as a makeshift mosque, 23 men praised Allah. It was winter quiet - around 12.30 am yesterday morning - and the guards at Villawood detention centre heard nothing

but the chants of the devoted detainees. But inside the mosque the chants served another purpose - they were masking the sound of 23 men making an escape worthy of any movie plot." (*DT*, 20.07.01: 3)

By August, the *ST* had turned Ruddock's earlier "fresh crop" of refugees into a "wave". Its page three headline, "(Christmas) Island braces for biggest refugee wave", was followed by a first paragraph that alleged the wave was "the biggest boatload of refugees ever to hit Australian shores." The sense of threat was palpable.

By the time the Tampa picked up its load of 438 boat people on August 27, the cast of the portrayal of the news event was a foregone conclusion. For the next two months it would provide plentiful copy to both newspapers as the question of "illegal" refugees became a central election issue and, following September 11, so would its possible link with "terrorism".

The *DT*'s first report on the Tampa being turned away from Australian shores was on the morning of Tuesday, August 28 on its front page. Under the headline "Exiled at Sea", the first paragraph set the tone:

"Drifting 22km off Christmas Island and with food and supplies running low, Captain Arne Rinnan was last night trying to maintain order on his besieged ship after being turned away by Australia and warned off by Indonesia."

The second paragraph added to the sense of threat from the boat people:

"Hundreds of the boat people began a hunger strike, the firm that operates the ship said last night."

And the threat is ratcheted upwards again in paragraph three:

" 'They say they don't have anything to lose and say they will continue until a solution is found', Per Ronnevig, spokesman for the Norwegian shipping company Wilhelmsen said."

And further down in the article:

"Asked if was afraid of violence, he (Capt. Rinnan) said: 'Not at the moment, but we were and we will be if they are turned away. They are starting to get frustrated.' ...The captain said he and the crew had done the best they could for the boat people, but the situation was uncomfortable." (*DT*, 28.08.01: 1-2)

The afternoon edition of the paper increased the sense of threat still further by changing the front page headline to "Nothing to Lose".

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There was, indeed, a threat to good order on the Tampa, as David Marr and Marian Wilkinson's *Dark Victory* (2003: 21) makes clear from the ship's log. But once again, the threats conveyed in the *DT* have no history or context. They seem simply to describe what these refugees, fortunate to have been plucked from the sea, were like. In short, ungrateful. But as Marr and Wilkinson point out, the ship's captain also sympathised with the people in his care, as he told a press conference later in Singapore:

"First when we picked them up they were people in distress and obviously there were people running out of Afghanistan. These were not Taliban. They told us that. These were people running away from the Taliban Government... They are human beings as the rest of us, and unfortunately these people are from Afghanistan." (ibid: 21-2)

None of Captain Rinnan's sympathy or explanation made it in to the *DT* report, though his thoughts on threat did. It is possible he wasn't asked, but his interpretation of the events was there to be had. In any case, Sydney readers were left with an impression of threatening and ungrateful (undeserving?) refugees.

The notion that a collection of 438 men, women and children from Afghanistan were a threat to Australia and that Australia was being stood over by them quickly provided a political opportunity for the government. Having made the decision to deny the Tampa entry (ibid: 25), Prime Minister Howard was quick to use the idea of refugees standing over Australia:

"Mr Howard said Australia could not surrender its right to protect its borders. 'We cannot have a situation where people can come to this country when they choose,' he said last night." (*DT*, 29.08.01: 4)

And again, the headline on the article spoke of a "flood":

"Flood of refugees headed to Australia - the Tampa Stand-off".

Said the first paragraph:

"The tide of boat people is rising dramatically, with the Federal Government predicting another 2000 are on the way."

The message continued: waves of boat people were threatening Australia.

Both newspapers' columns were filled for the next two months with an outpouring of fear about the refugee "onslaught". According to the *SMH*, the letters editor had never seen more letters to the Editor on any other issue. (8.09.01: 37). Commercial radio commentator and Herald columnist Mike Carlton wrote that he had received an overwhelming number of calls on the Tampa crisis that expressed a hatred of

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Islam (*SMH*, 1.09.01:32). ABC radio commentator Richard Glover wrote in his column that his callers were saying that Muslims were "by nature inclined to be violent" (*SMH*, 1.09.01: 46). An *SMH* Editorial referred to the "constant waves of illegal arrivals" (12.09.01). Letters spoke of refugees as "Muslim invaders" (*SMH*, 30.08.01), "criminals and parasites" (*SMH*, 13.10.01), "scum" and "demonic" (*SMH*, 20.12.01). *SMH* columnist Paddy McGuinness suggested that refugees may indeed be terrorists (13.09.01: 24) and that Islam seemed to have encouraged a "culture of violence".

But three themes ran through the outpouring: illegality, terrorism and disgust. The sense of the refugees 'breaking in' to Australia was expressed many times by the use of the word "illegal" or "illegals" (*DT*, 4/11/00: 8, *DT*, 30.07.01: 26; *DT*, 23.07.01: 9; *SMH*, 7.09.01: 6; *SMH*, 7.02.02: 6; *SH*, 26.05.02: 4).

The same link was made with "terrorism", a concept familiar from those other Middle Easterners, the Palestinians. The NU\*DIST analysis described earlier shows that in 37 percent of articles from both newspapers, the word "terror" is mentioned in relation to the words "refugee", "asylum seeker", or "boat people". Note that this is not a link from government statements, (as with the explicit linkage made by Defence Minister Reith after September 11), but a link made between the concepts in all articles in both newspapers.

Finally, there is disgust. The two most important instances come within days of each other in mid-October, 2001. The first was led by the Prime Minister's assertion (since proven wrong) that children were thrown overboard by refugees allegedly attempting to stand over an Australian naval vessel, the HMAS Adelaide, and thereby get rescued. Howard told Sydney's highest-rating radio presenter, Alan Jones, on 2UE:

"I don't want in this country people who are prepared, if those reports are true, to throw their own children overboard." (Marr, 2003: 189-90).

It was a political claim that gained great currency. However, the reporting of events aboard the other ship involved in the incident, HMAS Manoora, was journalists' work. The Manoora had picked up 229 Iraqi asylum seekers from the waters off Ashmore Reef. It also had on board the asylum seekers from the Tampa. Unloading of the refugees on Nauruan soil ("the Pacific solution") took a month due to Federal Court proceedings. It was against the will of the Iraqis. As the Iraqis resisted, the *DT* ran the story on its front page:

"Sailors serving aboard HMAS Manoora have told how they were bitten, attacked with homemade weapons and repeatedly threatened

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by the boat people they rescued. In an exclusive interview with the *DT*, these sailors detail how the boat people:

- threw a young child to the ground, breaking her arm...;
- trashed their accommodation, ripping apart metal bed frames and rungs off ladders to use as weapons;
- bit and scratched soldiers and constantly goaded them;
- staged a two-day hunger strike as part of a campaign to make sailors feel sorry for them; and
- refused to use toilet paper or clean bathrooms and threw excrement at guards.

Sailors also revealed SAS troops conducted covert surveillance of a man believed to be a ‘sleeper’ agent with connections to Osama bin Laden.” (*DT*, 13.10.01: 1)

The article has identical themes to the original Tampa story, but with the added theme of terrorism. Once again, the events are also reported without history or context. Marr and Wilkinson, writing 18 months later in *Dark Victory*, reveal how the Iraqis, when originally taken on board the *Manoora*, “had been tricked into thinking refugee processing would begin once they climbed on board” (Marr: 160). They were not told later they were being taken to Nauru, not Australia (ibid:161). But, more importantly, Marr and Wilkinson report the alleged riot reported by the *DT* thus:

“Lurid accounts of the riot would appear in the Press during the election campaign... (Admiral) Smith said an investigation of these stories revealed no evidence of a child’s arm being broken and only minor damage to bunks and bathrooms.” (ibid:169)

The *DT* article gives a comprehensively negative picture of the refugees. They are violent, threatening, ungrateful, inhuman (breaking their children’s bones), disgusting and likely terrorists. The Editorial of the day drew the obvious conclusions:

“Criticism that Australia lacks compassion... should not foster guilt over our revulsion at those who care so little for their own children. These are not the acts of desperate people seeking sanctuary, they are willful acts of cruelty where children are used as foils.” (13.10.01: 24)

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The portrayal of these Middle Eastern people as barely human - irrationally cruel parents - intersected perfectly with a Government campaign attempting to dehumanise asylum seekers. The *SMH* Defence Correspondent, Craig Skehan, told ABC TV’s *Media Watch* program:

“We were hearing from Defence PR that they were not to take humanising photographs” (ABC TV, 22.04.02: *Media Watch*)

and the allegation was confirmed before a Senate Select Committee by Defence PR:

“Brian Humphreys: ...we got some guidance on ensuring there were no personalising or humanising images.  
Senator Faulkner: You’re kidding me?  
Humphreys: No.” (ibid.)

Asylum seekers have been represented in both Sydney newspapers as threats to Australia. This is so both in a personal sense - as people, they are threatening and intimidating - and in a generic sense. They are typified as coming from “the Middle East” (and therefore Muslim) and are seen as alternately, tricky, rich (despite claims to the contrary), ungrateful and undeserving. In the most extreme cases they are disgusting and barely human (throwing their children overboard or breaking their bones). The ordinary reader is drawn to the natural conclusion that they don’t deserve our compassion or sympathy and should be sent away. Such a conclusion allows “us” to close the door on “them” both because they don’t deserve entry and because they represent a threat in uncertain times.

The dominant recurring images of September 11, 2001, may well be primarily television images. But both the Sydney newspapers responded with vigour to the tragedy and with an increasing attempt to find an Australian “angle”. The first report in the *SMH* on September 12 gave Palestinians a special mention. The front page speculated in paragraph four:

“One report said the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine claimed responsibility for the attacks, but an official later denied this.”

And Ross Dunn reported on page three of the same edition that while the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, condemned the attacks, Hamas militants celebrated and other Palestinians “were happy over the dramatic events”:

“In the West Bank city of Nablus, Mrs Nawal Abdel Fatah, 48, threw sweets in the air, saying she was celebrating because America was the head of the snake. ‘America always stands by Israel in its war against us’.” (*SMH* 12.09.01: 1-3)

As usual, the seeming inhuman ghoulishness of this response on the very day of thousands dying seemed incomprehensible, though letter writers in both newspapers gave a more historical and considered response. (For a different, more complex response from a Palestinian writer, see Raja Shehadeh’s piece in “What we think of America” in *Granta*, Spring 2002: 71).

In one sense, the event was so shockingly real it made life before it unreal. But this was not so. The Middle Eastern men who hijacked the planes and flew them into the American targets became the ultimate fulfilment of the already-existing worst fantasies of what it meant to be Arabic and Muslim. Osama bin Laden was already top of the US wanted list. A “fundamentalist” Muslim, he became the West’s, and especially the US’s, ultimate nightmare. But the event was also real in another sense, which mirrors the process investigated in this paper. Slavoj Zizek, the Slovenian cultural theorist, defined the event as getting closer to the spectres at the bottom of our consciousness: “the Real”. Six months later, he asked:

“Is not (fundamentalist terror’s) goal to awaken us, Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our ideological universe?”  
(Zizek: 9)

He goes on to compare making sense of life after September 11 for the US as something like the moment in the movie “*Matrix*” where, having revealed the true workings of the “real” world in a shattered Chicago to Keanu Reeves, the resistance leader says ironically: “Welcome to the desert of the real”. The US was being

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invited to step out of its bubble of ideology and face “the Real” head-on. (ibid:15).

Both Sydney newspapers gave the September 11 events extensive coverage, both in news and analysis, but foreign coverage gave way to local. Whereas the sub-text of the Lebanese rape portrayals barely concealed the question of the rapists’ un-Australianness (and that of their communities), and the Iraqi refugees were clearly not one of “us” from the start, a major theme of post-September 11 became loyalty. Following President Bush’s line that “you are either with us or against us” in the fight against terrorism, loyalty to Australia became a major theme in increasing numbers of reports. And first to be questioned was the Muslim Arab community.

The “dog whistle” went into action when Prime Minister Howard confirmed from the US on September 20 there was a “terrorist threat from bin Laden cells in Australia” (*SMH*: 1), a claim the newspaper took no further. A week later the *SH* took up the theme. The paper’s police reporter, John Kidman, followed an ASIO raid on homes in Sydney’s southwest:

“...a mother of two claimed she was held face down at gunpoint and asked about a terror group linked to Osama bin Laden... operatives from ASIO executed warrants on at least five houses in the city’s Arabic belt this week, seizing passports, financial records and other documents... Others scrutinised are thought to belong to particular Islamic congregations described by mainstream Muslim clerics as ‘isolationist’.” (*SH*, 30/9/01: 4).

But it was the *DT* which was to set the tone in localising the notion of a dangerous un-Australian group in a Sydney community. A month after the events in the US, its front page headline declared “TERROR AUSTRALIS: bin Laden in our suburbs”.

The page one article by police reporter Charles Miranda began:

“As many as 100 members of four international terrorist groups linked to Osama bin Laden have been identified living in Sydney, raising funds for the holy war against the US... All the groups have been named overseas as being behind numerous terrorist attacks and the murder of hundreds of people. A special investigation by the *Daily Telegraph* has also found: certain extremist members of the Lakemba-based Islamic Youth Movement have been listed as being of national security interest; more than a dozen men from Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia currently living in Australia and applying for refugee status, have been identified as having connection or membership with the radical Al-gama Islamiya, Al-Maqdesi, Al-Dawa and Al-Nahda

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groups... Of the up to 100 identified terrorist group sympathisers living in Sydney and Victoria, most are either born in Australia or have full citizenship.”(DT, 12.10.01:1,4)

The article in Sydney’s highest circulation daily newspaper “said” many things: people as terrifying as Osama bin Laden are amongst “us”; “they” are funding murderers; Lakemba (heartland of the Muslim Arabic community) is their local base; a dozen local Arabs are in weird, radical “foreign” Islamic groups; the wider group of 100 support “terror” and are therefore against the US and Australia. In short, we have saboteurs and traitors amongst us - and they’re Muslim Arabs posing as Australians.

In case readers missed the idea, it took a column from Miranda Devine five days later about champion Muslim Australian boxer Anthony Mundine’s views (that the US had brought September 11 upon itself) to widen the net and make the point of loyalty clear. Declaring there was “no justification to be had, no moral-equivalent argument to be entertained, no grievance to be listened to, when it comes to the cold-blooded murder of 6,000 people”, Devine lambasted “left-leaning” commentators like Phillip Adams, Bob Ellis, John Pilger, Susan Sontag and Edward Said, who pointed to previous US excesses (invasions, violence, terrorism) in a litany of countries. Said Devine:

“There is plenty more... hectares of bile spewed forth on newsprint every day by these handmaidens of Osama bin Laden.” (SMH, 25.10.01: 14)

This was “traitorous talk”, she declared, in case some had still not understood. At least some living in the Canterbury-Bankstown region of Sydney might have taken heart that it was not only them under suspicion for disloyalty to the nation. They wouldn’t have taken heart for long. By November 11, Devine was writing that Middle Eastern Muslims in Sydney had to put up with their stigmas and suffering because their kind had committed the crimes on September 11. “That is the way of our new world,” she wrote, “it is necessary.” (SMH 11.11.01: 28)

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## Muslim Arabs: General References

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This paper has not relied in its textual analysis section on a representative sample of articles. It does argue that the images in the texts it has examined conform to certain patterns. However, this is not to say that there have not been some articles that have argued against some of the thinking previously outlined. Gerard Henderson in the *SMH* argued that asylum seekers should not be seen as terrorists (*SMH* 18.9.01: 12) and Mark Day in the *DT*, the day after the first reporting of the Tampa, argued Australia should be big-hearted enough to accept the boat load of asylum seekers (*DT* 29.08.01: 16).

But it is also true that many other references, not connected to the themes above (Israel/Palestine, etc), also spiced the articles during this period. One recurring theme worried about what the Arab Australian community was doing demographically: were they all marrying each other, or marrying other Australians? (*SMH*, 10.10.00: 7) And were they all sticking together in ghettos, creating “two Australias”? (*SMH* p.1, p.3).

Another theme focused on the backwardness of Islamic culture. A notion with a long “orientalist” heritage, it figured strongly in a popular book selling during this period by the British orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis (2002: 29, 42, 61, 70, 81, 90, 177). It was also promoted twice in Sydney’s newspapers. The first mention came from Sydney’s conservative think-tank, the Centre for Independent Studies, in a speech by US futurist Francis Fukuyama, reflected in a front page interview in the *SMH* in which Fukuyama states that Islam opposes modernisation and keeps blending religion and politics (presumably, unlike the “modern” West). (*SMH*, 3.08.02: 1). It came up again in a speech by visiting US conservative Daniel Pipes, reflected in two articles, one by Miranda Devine (*SMH* 8.08.02: 13) and a second, a month later, by Gerard Henderson (*SMH* 10.09.02: 11). Henderson had dealt with the same idea earlier (*SMH* 22.01.02: 10).

A third theme that emerges concerns Indonesia. There’s a phrase that correspondent Lindsay Murdoch used throughout his period as the *SMH*’s correspondent - “the world’s biggest/largest Muslim country/nation” (e.g. *SMH* 28.09.01: 9) And it continued to inhabit almost every *SMH* report about the country (e.g. 20.09.01:5; 9.10.01: 7; 16.10.01: 12; Editorial 5.11.01; 23.01.02: 9; 11.03.02: 9; from New York correspondent *SMH* 22.03.02: 1; and Editorial 18.06.02).

There’s an element of fear underlying the reference. One wonders whether Indian newspapers refer constantly to China as “the world’s largest Confucian nation” or Indonesian newspapers to the US as “one of the world’s largest Christian nations”.

## Conclusion

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Combining both the NU\*DIST sample analysis and the textual analysis of Sydney's morning newspapers over this two year period reveals a remarkably consistent view of Arab people and people of Muslim belief. This is despite coverage of a range of differing events, both local and international, before and after the events on September 11, 2001. The sample analysis suggest that most images of Arabic or Muslim people come from international news, rather than local. Within the band of international news, most images come from the Middle East (rather than the Islamic region to our north) and, within the Middle East most of the images come from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Within the band of local news, most images by far of Arab people and people of Muslim belief came from coverage of the asylum seekers heading to Australia's northern borders.

In his classic analysis of Western notions of Arabs and of Islam in *Orientalism*, Edward Said laid out a set of 19th Century images of "the Orient" - "its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness" (Said, 1995: 205). In *Covering Islam* he focused on contemporary, largely US images of Islam, particularly its "irrationality" and fondness for "terror" (Said, 1997: xxix, lxxv). This paper suggests the two Australian newspapers examined here fit well within the tradition. Yet, in theoretical terms, there is more to discover. Australian journalism is not just a transmission belt for European or US ideas. A clue to progressing the way we have picked up the essential core of orientalism comes in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). He distinguishes British and French imperialism by the length of its dominance and the massive organisation of its power down to the details of everyday life. (Said, 1994: 267)

"At the most visible level there was the physical transformation of the imperial realm, whether through what Alfred Crosby calls 'ecological imperialism', the reshaping of the physical environment, or administrative, architectural and institutional feats such as the building of colonial cities (Algiers, Delhi, Saigon); at home, the emergence of new imperial elites, cultures and subcultures... new styles of art, including travel photography, exotic and Orientalist painting, poetry, fiction and music, monumental sculpture and journalism (as memorably characterized by Maupassant's 'Bel-Ami')." (Said 1994: 131)

Imperialism is, above all, a cultural ascendancy, an occupation of the identity space, the ability to define the realities of the colonised.

This study suggests that Sydney journalism, in foreign and domestic reporting, has picked up the imperial inheritance with full force. Yet there is an ambiguity still to be explored. Australia too, was a colonised space. It was an outpost of

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empire in one sense and subjugated to the empire in another. The Irish in Australian history recognised the contradiction early - for obvious reasons. The Aboriginal movement in the 20th Century made the full force of imperialism in our culture painfully obvious. Now another group, having experienced British and French imperialism - the Arabic population of Sydney, especially the Palestinians - are moving to object to the dominant narratives. This monograph suggests the representations of Arabic and Muslim people in our major print media are so distorted as to give good grounds for major challenge.

The close textual reading, sometimes assisted by the statistical analysis, elicits some clear patterns of portrayal. Arabs and Muslims (and the terms appear coterminous in the articles) and Palestinians in particular, are seen as violent to the point of terrorism. Israel, the US and Australia - "us" - are seen under attack from such people and they are seen as both an external and internal threat. "Their" violence is portrayed as without reason, humanity or compassion for its victims. Arab young men, in particular, are seen as especially threatening, wanting "our" Caucasian women and not policed sufficiently by their own communities, who lack either values (respect for women) or interest (accepting responsibility) for these men. The men, women and children seeking to come here "illegally" from the Muslim Middle East are portrayed as tricky, ungrateful, undeserving (possibly well-off), often disgusting and barely human.

It is a portrait of deep and sustained fear. It is also a portrait of an Australian orientalism that has been successfully transplanted and developed on Antipodean shores.

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**Notes**

**Notes**

# **Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism:**

**reporting arabic and muslim  
people in sydney newspapers**

**by Peter Manning**

The 'Dog whistle' is a sheep-farmer's image, conveying the concept of a subliminal message, not literally apparent but heard by some sections of a community.

This study examines the representations of Arabic and Muslim people in two major Sydney newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph, over a two year period including the twelve months before and after September 11, 2001.

Covering such peak events such as the Palestinian intifada, the controversial gang rape trials in Sydney's south-western suburbs, an increase in arrivals of asylum seekers, September 11 itself, the 2001 Federal Election, the war in Afghanistan and debate about Iraq, this report examines how the global impact of September 11 increased coverage of Arabic and Muslim affairs.

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