Panel 3. Role of the Media – Building Cultural Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism

POLICY BRIEF ON THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA:
BUILDING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM
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INTRODUCTION

Following the attacks on the Christchurch mosques of Al Noor and Linwood that killed 51 people on the 15 March 2019, the Royal Commission Enquiry (RCE), found that "no specific Government agency was at fault" (DPMC, 2020). The RCE report also did not reflect community submissions on the role of the media in contributing to an overall inaccurate, negative and damaging view of Muslims and Islam. At the community engagement national huis throughout the country, community groups registered their concerns and disappointment over the failure of the RCE to address these evidence-based issues (DPMC, 2021). In particular, FIANZ had put together an evidence-based report in support of claims to show negligence on the part of the security and intelligence service and the consistent and prolonged misrepresentations in the media (FIANZ, 2020).

He Whenua Taurikura Hui provides both media and community groups the opportunity to address media's role in society and what it can do to build cultural understanding and counter violent extremism. As a corporate social citizen and truth-teller, the media has a responsibility to present information fairly and accurately, calling on those in power to account when evidence in support of claims against minority groups are absent. This brief outlines responses to two (Questions 1 and 3) of the four questions raised for the media panel at the hui.

The questions are:
Question 1: *How do you view the role and responsibilities of media when discussing and covering issues relating to terrorism and violent extremism?*
Question 2: *Media signed a pledge related to their content for the trial of the March 15 terrorist – how did this work from your perspective and what might could it mean for future coverage of this nature?*
Question 3: *How can communities and government agencies work effectively with media to help ensure that content is fair, balanced and accurate?*
Question 4: *How does the Aotearoa/New Zealand media environment compare with overseas when it comes to covering matters of this nature – and what can we learn from that?*

Recommendations include training of media practitioners and journalists on reporting minority groups including Islam and Muslims and the pertinent aspects of intercultural communication such as their role as cultural intermediary and the critical voice for normalised bias. Government departments are advised to train their personnel in intercultural awareness and issues affecting diversity groups. Community leaders are advised to serve as government liaison and media contacts and to form stronger social ties with interfaith community members through outreach and social-cohesion programmes.

QUESTION 1
How do you view the role and responsibilities of media when discussing and covering issues relating to terrorism and violent extremism?

Media studies have shown that Islamophobia is rife in media narratives that are responsible for 'othering' Muslims and Islam as socially destructive elements of society. (Eid, 2014; Kabir, 2016; Rahman & Emadi, 2018). Islam is exclusively linked to terrorism in Western media, whereas a study on 'homegrown terror' in the United States from 2008 to 2016 found that "far right plots and attacks outnumber Islamist incidents by 2 to 1" (Neiwert, Ankrom, Kaplan & Pham, 2017). Even the term "Islamist" that is used to described terror acts by someone who identify as Muslim is negative othering and offensive to the majority of Muslims who do not associate such acts with their religion. Bias is evident in media labelling when people who identify themselves by some other religion would never be described in the media as a terrorist by faith.

Western media used here refer to media that are owned by groups with historically Greek and Roman influences that have "socially divisive and culturally prejudiced outlooks". (Rahman & Emadi, 2018). Such media liberally use terms like 'Islamic fundamentalism', 'Islamic extremism' and 'Islamic radicalism' to frame violent actions by Muslims compared to cautious descriptions such as 'hate crime', rather than 'domestic terrorism', when reporting the violent actions by non-Muslims (Ruiz-Grossman, 2017).

Violent attacks on innocent Muslims in recent years are not random or sudden unexplained phenomenon. Negative media framing has set the scene for this. The murderous actions of the Christchurch terrorist were echoed by a 20-year-old in Ontario Canada who ran down a Muslim family killing four of them (Austen, 2021). These inhuman acts stem from seeds of hatred planted by media over time about the Muslim community to the masses, causing public fear and an aversion to things stereotypically characterised as Islamic and Muslim. In New Zealand, women in hijab have complained of being attacked and verbally abused to the Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand (IWCNZ). Despite meetings with four separate government departments by the IWCNZ calling on the government to monitor alt-right groups several years before the Christchurch tragedy, there was no follow-up action (Rahman, 2020).

A study on media representations of Islam and Muslims between 2014 and 2016 showed largely, biased, condescending, and inaccurate representation of stories about Islam and Muslims (Rahman & Emadi, 2018). A short news article on 'Jihadi bride' fears over Kiwi women (Otago Daily Times, 2016) is alarming with unverified and vague information. The director of the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) had confirmed that there was "less than a dozen jihadi brides who had travelled to Iraq and Syria from New Zealand" and described them as "a pattern of people who seem kind of disengaged in some way with productive life" and that "there were a range of age and a range of backgrounds— quite a diversity of people actually" but would not comment on whether these brides had returned saying "SIS did not know about every single person". The article demonised Islam with an image of an unidentified man brandishing a sword and carrying an ISIS flag. There was no follow-up to this story, but damage has been done.

In another story titled "Fears of terror in our own backyard" (Sunday Star-Times, 2014) about rivalry within a community, the visual is framed to cause suspicion of a Muslim

neighbour. It showed a typical Muslim man in white robes and turban standing next to a child in a bicycle on a neighbourhood street with upper case captions "FIREBRAND OR A MAN OF PEACE?"

Yet another story titled "Imams sent to New Zealand to foil radicals" (The New Zealand Herald, 2016), contained contents that are misleading. The tone is alarming and highly suspicious of Muslims. Words such as "Cairo-educated imams … 'take control' of New Zealand mosques … to reduce radicalisation and counter jihadism" and "Egypt government…'take control' of New Zealand" suggest that there is a cultural power struggle. The story used an "international expert" who questioned the motive of the Egyptian embassy and accused the government of "cosying up to a dictatorship" for a prospective trade deal. Clearly, the voice given to Muslims in this article was undermined and depicted as controlling and manipulative. The visual used was also alienating as it showed the back of an imam facing a mosaic wall which was characteristic of paintings of the blue mosque in the Orientalist tradition from the late 1800s. This picture had nothing to do with the actual story but was lifted from the Istock photo website.

All three news stories used the term "jihad" and "jihadi" to mean violent actions which contradict their "original positive Islamic definition which is a struggle towards self-improvement and goodness" (Rahman & Emadi, 2018). Evidenced by the framed and recurring use of negative Islam-related words, the exclusive negative treatment of Muslims in media narratives, the disengaged government departments and politicians in responding to life-threatening issues faced by Muslims, the media and government agencies have "blood on their hands". The Muslim community was disappointed that the issues involving government and the media were not acknowledged in the RCE because non-recognition of the problems would mean overlooking what needs to change at the macro and structural levels of society.

After the Christchurch mosques' massacres, New Zealand society responded positively to Muslim communities with outpourings of grief, shock and *aroha* which the media echoed by capturing public sentiments and focusing on stories about the victims, public reactions and government actions, rather than the terrorist. The Media came together to sign a pledge, heading an unprecedented move that became the hallmark of New Zealand media's authenticity and readiness to engage with stakeholders and depict a humane, fair and accurate presentation of news. However, recent studies on news stories (Rahman, 2020) showed that more can be done. The Muslim women's voice is absent in stories told about them and there is inherent cultural bias in news stories, evidenced by the journalist's unawareness and ignorance (Rahman, 2020).

What can the media do to report fairly?
1. Keep to their pledge.
2. Engage the Muslim communities who are diverse. Develop contact points with leaders in the Muslim communities and listen with empathy, not apathy.
3. Train/re-train journalists and corporate communications staff in intercultural knowledge vis-à-vis their intercultural role and need-to-know matters about Islam and the Muslims in New Zealand.
4. Serve as the critical voice against normalised bias (this skill is enhanced with training).

QUESTION 3
How can communities and government agencies work effectively with media to help ensure that content is fair, balanced and accurate?

Much of the government's role has been covered in Question 1 on media reports.
In terms of the collaborative efforts of government and communities, the NZ Police is now doing a commendable job engaging community groups and providing purpose-fit information in regular monthly meetings to senior community members and youth leaders.

The Office of Ethnic Communities have also engaged community leaders to formulate an action plan that can be used to address community issues and needs. There are noteworthy initiatives that should be monitored and measured through consistent engagement of community groups.

Community leaders should serve as government liaison and media contacts and to form Better understanding of community issues. Muslim communities should also foster stronger ties with interfaith community members through outreach and social-cohesion programmes.

All personnel of government agencies should also be trained in intercultural awareness and their roles as cultural intermediaries and diversity ambassadors to fully understand the issues of diversity groups and minorities in the country. Knowledge is power and New Zealand is poised to lead the world as a model of the socially inclusive and harmonious society.

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Khairiah is the Assistant Editor of the Pacific Journalism Review and has written on media representations of Islam and Muslims, culture and identity, crisis and intercultural miscommunication, and the Islamic perspectives of dialogue and persuasion. Her research on media representations of Islam and Muslims in New Zealand was cited in RNZ (Radio New Zealand), the spinoff.co.nz and The Pacific Media Watch. Her current research looks at Tenets of Islamic Communication.

Khairiah was involved in reporting to the Royal Commission Enquiry on the Christchurch Mosque Massacres and is actively serving her community as government liaison, for NZ Police and the New Ministry for Ethnic Communities.

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