Blogging the other: Representations of the Australian Islamic Diaspora

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Blogging the Other:
Representations of the
Australian Islamic Diaspora

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Abstract

Recent events have seen an increased focus on Islam and Muslims throughout the world. In Western nations, this focus has often turned into fear and the demonisation of an 'other' that is regularly misunderstood and misrepresented, further exacerbating tensions between the West and Islam. International terrorist activities, such as the London bombings of July 7, 2005 have seen an increase in fear of Muslims and of potential terrorism on our shores, ensuring Muslim issues have become a major focus in Australian news. Taking 7/7 as an example, this paper supplements recent studies in exploring how Australian news media position Muslims as an 'other' to mainstream Australian society, and how this has become synthesised with the political agenda of the current government. As an addition to discourse analysis of major Australian newspapers, and in lieu of misrepresentation and underrepresentation by such media, the study investigates the new media form of internet networks and blogging. The analysis of Islamic blog sites highlights the potential for a counter-culture to maintain a voice outside of the mainstream, as well as the possibility of reviving an eroded public sphere.
1.0 Introduction

The study explores the mainstream Australian press in parallel to the usage of blogs and internet forums following recent incidents in the media concerning Islam, specifically the London bombings of July 7, 2005. This issue relates to other recent events such as 9/11, the perceived terrorist threat and the Iraq war as reported extensively by conventional Australian and international media. Debates that have ensued in the media as a result have focused on Muslim integration, Australian values and fundamentalism in the Islamic community, creating a feeling of mistrust and anxiety between white/Christian Australia and the Muslim community in this country. Moreover, the reporting of these events, and the ensuing divide between Muslims and non-Muslims created as a result of this moral panic, has had the effect of allowing legislation to pass through parliament that not only marginalises Muslim Australia, but also reduces the civil liberties of all Australians whilst placing unprecedented powers in the hands of government. Previous to 9/11 no specific legislation existed pertaining to terrorism, but since the attacks the Federal government has enacted 29 terrorism laws (William, 2006).

After the London bombings of 2005, the Australian government passed the Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005 which further enhanced the power of the government to detain people on the basis of suspicion alone. As explained by Pugliese (2006, ¶ 14), this new law has expectations to be used in conjunction with racial stereotyping of alleged perpetrators, as in the public avocation by Michael Roach, former ASIO Assistant Director, that "the public" deploy their mobile phone cameras in order to photograph figures "of Middle Eastern appearance acting suspiciously" (Pugliese, 2006, ¶ 14). Whilst there is nothing in the laws themselves that directly relate to Muslim in
Australia, it is in the interpretation of the laws and the ever-present indictment of Muslims as terrorists that can lead to a section of the Australian community being vilified. Whilst many ‘white’ Australians with European backgrounds may have witnessed the passing of such laws without much thought as to personal impact, for Muslim Australia “the losses of civil liberties, including freedom from arbitrary detention, the right to privacy, due process and freedom of association are very real” (Chong, 2006, ¶ 5).

Lawson (2005, p. 10) suggests that public and political discourse following the London bombings has demonstrated a possible knee-jerk reaction by Australia in following Britain in its post 7/7 responses. The “London bombings added the possibility of an Australian ‘home grown’ terrorism event creating its own variation of introspection, fear, scapegoats and political responses” (Lawson, 2005, p. 6). The scapegoats that Lawson is referring to are Muslim Australians who, through government responses, terrorism laws, and security profiling, are now able to be legally discriminated against. These laws have been passed for the most part unchallenged due to the climate of fear, perpetuated through mass media channels, constructing “the war on terror as a global battle between the ‘West and the rest... (This in turn) enables and facilitates the affective response to political fear – a reaffirmation of identity and membership of a collective” (Aly & Balnaves, 2005).

The research focuses on how the mainstream press in Australia helps produce the Islam/West polemic, and how internet networks and fora can serve as a counter-culture to this ideology. In addition, such technology can help to shape and maintain the idea of community as well as individuals’ sense of identity. Of particular interest is how these fora maintain an Islamic diaspora and assist debates and discussions about issues pertaining to Muslim culture, specifically from outside (non-Muslim) criticism. Blogs and internet fora provide a “participatory nature of writing, response and counter-argument”, allowing for “ongoing debate, critical refinement and thinking-in-process” (Gregg, 2006, p. 154). The research looks specifically at the views expressed in the
mainstream media in parallel to those expressed on blog sites, uncovering media bias and a widespread misunderstanding of Muslim Australia relating to the framing of Islamic culture and the perceived terrorist threat.

Three newspapers are analysed; The Australian, The Sunday Telegraph and The Sunday Times, and are analysed in relation to two Islamic internet networks/blog sites; AussieMuslims.com and MuslimVillage.net in the ten days after the London bombings of July 7, 2005. This event was chosen due to the extent of reporting in national, as well as global, media, and its associated impact on the Australian public which served to extenuate the Islam/West polemic. The study elucidates the alarm at the perceived Islamic terrorist threat and the subsequently demonising of Islamic communities due to the positioning of a homogenised media that favours the emotional dialectic of 'good/evil' and 'us/them'. In this study the potential of the internet as a democratising tool is examined, including the possibility of computer mediated networks to revive the public sphere as fora for people to debate social and political issues.

1.1 Theoretical framework

Critical discourse analysis provides the main framework for the study, providing a perspective on power disjunctures in the mainstream media and highlighting the historical viewpoint for this. This form of analysis “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 1998). It is important to note here that such analysis is subjective, as it is impossible to remove the self from interpretation, “because science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of, and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction” (van Dijk, 1998). By looking critically at how we interact, and the language and communicative forms we use, it is possible to illuminate our social and political landscape, enlightening “societies in the same way that psychoanalysis can be revealing of the self. Emancipation remains the interest which guides the critically oriented sciences”
Beilharz, 1995, p. 45). Here, emancipation is in the form of empowering all individuals in society with knowledge and ensuring representation in the spheres of discourse and political and social discussion.

Much of the contemporary theory regarding critical discourse analysis is derived from the leading scholars of the Frankfurt School, who were "committed to the principle of Marxism, championed in our own time by Jurgen Habermas, that theory ought to have a practical intention" (Beilharz, 1995, p. 39). Habermas' work, in reference to discourse theory and communicative practise, is used as a framework throughout this study to highlight power inequalities in mainstream media discourse. Not only will inequalities be identified, they will also be explained in regards to systems of power and control, analysing "the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance" (van Dijk, 1998). Throughout the study it will become clear that such structures are fervently kept in place by government and corporate elites to serve their own agendas and to protect their dominance and control of global and national affairs. This, in turn, has produced a "dialectic of enlightenment" that has been evident "in recent years where culture has turned into the opposite for many, serving to manipulate and not nurture them" (Kellner, 2005, p. 8). Corporate hegemony, according to Marxist theorists such as Althusser, relies on social relations maintained by ideological state apparatuses. "These consisted of the family, the judiciary, schools, the church, the political system, culture and the media (which) were supported by repressive state apparatuses: the military and the police. For Althusser, it was the ideological state apparatuses, previously untheorised by other Marxist thinkers, which played a key part in governing individuals in the interest of the ruling class" (Taylor & Willis, 1999, p. 31).

Such social relations in Australia are maintained by the ideological state apparatuses of the media, which has seen a shift from the multiculturalist notions of the late 1970's and 80's to the non-inclusionary nationalism that is seen today. This has been mostly
generated through the Howard government, which has seen heightened covert racism in politics by bringing “race issues to the forefront of federal politics... (and airing) legitimacy to the phenomenon of Hansonism in its crucial formative period” (Markus, 2001, p. 82). Through the language that the government and media use, and the associated imagery created “serve as reminders of who belongs – and who does not; thus the idea of a ‘true Aussie’ or ‘true Brit’ implies that there are ‘untrue’ Australians or Britons” (Clarence, 1999, p. 201). It is this category of ‘untrue’ Australians that Muslims now find themselves, even though many are Australian born. They have become categorised through an imagery “mimicking that of continental Europe and, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, of the Americans... we have developed – either independently or through cultural transmission – the ‘orientalist’ notions outlined by Edward Said” (Manning, 2005, p. 15).

1.2 Islamic community/communities in Australia

There has been a Muslim presence in Australia since the mid nineteenth century when Afghan camel drivers, due to their relative cheapness, were used as efficient transport providers in outback regions of the country. Their numbers remained relatively small in comparison to white and other ethnic groups of the Australian population, being only 0.05% in 1921 (ABS, 2006), but increased rapidly after the Second World War with a huge influx of Lebanese and Turkish migrants. More recently, and due in a large part to world crises, Australia has seen an increase in African Muslim populations, particularly from the Horn region of Africa, and Muslims from Bosnia and Eastern Europe. According to the 2001 census Muslims now make up 1.5% (ABS, 2006) of the Australian population. Although it is often the Middle Eastern populous who make up the largest numbers and have become the stereotype for Muslims in Australia, the community is quite disparate in nationality, with almost 10% of Australian Muslims being born in South East Asia, around 5% European, 2% African, and a total of 23% being born in an area other than the Middle East according to the 1991 census (ABS, 2006). Although Muslim Australians are a diverse group of people, with varying cultural traditions, “the tone of certain media reports implies that all Muslims are the
same” (Kabir, 2006, p. 313). This has the effect of homogenising a group of people into a simplistic categorisation.

The Muslim populous has consistently been seen as an ‘other’ to mainstream Australian society, either through the era of ‘White Australia Policy’ prior to World War II, or more recently in media imagery and commentary. Through the policies of ‘White Australia’ immigration, the government saw to preserve a predominantly Anglo centric society in Australia by prohibiting the immigration of non-whites, from non-European nations.

Its proponents, in using these policies until the 1970’s, saw it as the “best way of ensuring Australian ‘racial purity’ (and to reduce) the threat of cheap, coloured labour” (Clarence, 1999, p. 203) in order to protect ‘white’ jobs. However, due to the labour shortages post World War II, Australia slowly started to shift its policy from a total exclusion of non-white migrants to that of an integration policy regarding skilled migrants, who were expected to assimilate into the culture of white Australia (Clarence, 1999, pp 204-208). Significantly, the assimilation debate is still current in the media in its discussion of Islamic Australians. Kabir (2006) explains the historical development of Muslim marginalisation further:

Thus, whereas various factors – colour, language and national security – kept this religious group underprivileged during the ‘White Australia’ period, Islam was never a criterion of discrimination... In the contemporary period, Islam has become a criterion of discrimination for some Muslims because militant groups such as the al-Qaeda terrorist network have impacted on Western interests. The September 11, 2001 tragedy, the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, the Madrid bombing in 2004, the Beslan tragedy of 2004, the Australian Embassy bombing of 2004 and the 7 July 2005 London bombing have made Muslim extremists the ‘new enemy’ of the West. These tragedies have also impacted on the daily lives of moderate Muslims residing in the West. And when some mainstream Australians and politicians vilify Muslim Australians as ‘terrorists’, one can conclude that religion has become a criterion of discrimination in the multicultural period – a concept that was absent in the ‘White Australia’ period. (Kabir, 2006, p. 219)
Discrimination has grown in the last decade as Muslims are perceived as an external threat even though many Australian Muslims were born here. Even though the 1991 census reported that out of the entire Australian Muslim population, 35% are Australian born (ABS, 2006), it is evident that Muslim identity is perceived as being divergent from Australian identity, or at least what is widely endorsed as ‘Australian’. Since the 1970s, Australian governments have encouraged ‘multiculturalism’ as an Australian attribute, instrumental in constructing a new national identity that would benefit Australia politically, socially and economically. In the Hawke government of the late 1980s, Australian identity was sanctioned as a person’s commitment to Australia and nothing more, encapsulating “the federal government’s attempts to move ideas of national identity away from empirical constructs of cultural and ethnic homogeneity” (Clarence, 1999, p. 208).

Such attempts at inclusionary nationalism have prompted much backlash from conservative corners of Australia, opining that multicultural legislation was privileging ethnic minorities over other Australians. Conservatives argue that “the ‘little Aussie battler’ of Australian mythology...is in fact the disadvantaged group within Australian society” (Clarence, 1999, p. 218) and the ‘other’ has been identified as the prime cause of economic and social failure. In addition to this, Australian Muslims have also had to battle against xenophobia and discrimination brought about by Western fears of the Middle East. Kabir (2005, p. 154) explains that from 1979 to 1990:

Along with the gradual increase in the Muslim population, Australians were also becoming more conscious of the Muslim world generally through details of the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian Hostage crisis, and the rise to power of Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi, a sudden increase in Middle Eastern terrorism in the 1980’s and the Salman Rushdie affair.

The global moral panics, whereby “a society or mainstream group reacts to a change in the environment as if it ‘threatens life as we know it’” (Green, 2002, p. 14) are associated with the upsurge in controversy and conflict in the Arab and Muslim world. Poynting and Mason explain that since the Gulf war of 1991 “there was a strong
assumption that anyone identifying as or appearing to be Muslim or Arab was potentially disloyal and even dangerous until proven otherwise: an ‘enemy within’. In fact, no amount of declaration of commitment to Australia and its values would allay this suspicion” (Poynting & Mason, 2007, p. 12). This has contributed to the unease of acceptance and tolerance of this ethnic group by white Australia, limiting their acceptance and identity as Australians.

Throughout Western colonialism there has been a power construct sharply dividing that of the West, or Occident and the East, or Orient. Maintained through a power dialectic that positions the West as dominant over the Orient, the East has always been something that needed Western culture, leadership and dominance. Brown (1999) expresses that through media images, the Orient appears inferior due to its perceived barbarism:

Images of Muslim extremists who cut off the hands of suspected criminals, force women to wear opaque veils, and carry out acts of terrorism reinforce a neo-Orientalist perception that ‘we’ are intellectually more advanced than ‘them’, so ‘we’ have to make ‘their’ decisions (economic, political, and so on) for ‘them’. (Brown, 1999, p. 184)

Said (1981, p. xi) describes the Western media’s coverage of the Orient and Islam as simplistic, stating that “there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterised limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés”. What is central to the media’s descriptions and analysis of the Orient, particularly Islam, is the West’s fear of an ‘other’ that has not subjugated to Western dominance.

Due to the Arab region’s control over global oil resources and its refusal to capitulate to Western theology and notions of democracy and liberalism, “no other religion or cultural grouping can be said so assertively as it is now said of Islam to represent a threat to Western civilisation”, (Said, 1981, p. xii). It is both Islam’s size and its
potential for power that has provoked such hostility and fear in the West. In the wake of de-colonialisation and the recent antithetic upheavals in the Islamic world, the West is looking to reassert its power and global dominance. Chomsky (in Said, 1993, p. 343) concludes the:

Conflict will not subside, and new forms of domination will have to be devised to ensure that privileged segments of Western industrialised society maintain substantial control over global resources, human and material, and benefit disproportionately from this control.

The new forms of domination that we are now seeing are in the form of homogenised hostility towards Islam, enough to evoke wars and the occupation of territories. Such emotion is brought about by the fear and anxiety indoctrinated into Western thought and culture by governments and corporations through media channels; in essence the terror frame.

The terror frame positions Islam as barbaric, simplistic and hostile, and for this reason Islamic societies purportedly need the West to become civilised. Iconic vulgarities have become commonplace in the West’s depiction of Islam, from that noted by Brown above, to the recent increase in literature of Western writers deploring the perceived sexism, power disjunctures and lack of freedom in Islamic societies. To ensure ‘our’ feelings and emotions towards Islam, “a whole information and policy-making apparatus in the United States depends on these illusions and diffuses them widely” (Said, 1981, p. 31). Of course, this apparatus isn’t unique to the United States and can certainly be applied to any Western nation in the current global climate. The West as a whole is fearful of its dominance being undermined:

Hence the caricatures, the frightening mobs, the concentration on ‘Islamic’ punishment, and so on. All of this is presided over by the great power establishments – the oil companies, the mammoth corporations and multinationals, the defense and intelligence communities, the executive branch of the government. (Said, 1981, p. 32)

The absence of moderate Muslim voices in the media is characteristic of the positioning of Islam as a feared ‘other’ in Western society. It is the fanatical and fundamentalist voices that are coming to the fore, set up against the perceived Western voice of reason.
2.0: Muslim representation in News Limited media

The London bombings of July 7, 2005 were reported extensively in Australian media, making headlines in print news media and sparking debate and argument well into the aftermath of the event. *The Australian, The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Sunday Times* have been chosen as print media sources worthy of examination and analysis due to the fact that they are highly representative of mainstream Australian media reporting and readership. Although *The Australian* has a low daily readership, around 3% on an average day, it is Australia’s only national newspaper and has a unique position as one of Australia’s few broadsheets, being “recognised as being the nation’s foremost agenda-setting newspaper” (Stutchbury, 2007). *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Sunday Times* in comparison, have 30% and 54% readership in their respective states of New South Wales and Western Australia. *The Sunday Telegraph* was included in the analysis due to the high percentage of Muslims in New South Wales, about 2% of the NSW population as opposed to 1.5% nationally (ABS, 2006). Moreover, many of the Australian Islamic blog sites are authored from Sydney, so the newspaper is useful as a mainstream media contrast to the fora analysed in Chapter 3. *The Sunday Times* has been included due to its high readership percentage. Articles from the newspapers were looked at up to ten days after the event, covering front page news reports, general reports and editorial opinion.

There have been previous analyses regarding Muslim’s depiction in Australian print media, such as Peter Mannings’s 2003 examination of *Arabic and Muslim people in Sydney’s daily newspapers, before and after September 11*, and Akbarzadeh and Smith’s 2005 report on *The representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media (The Age and Herald Sun Newspapers)*, which have shown that negative stereotypes prevail in regards to
Muslims as "an antipodean development of a Western way of seeing the Orient" (Manning, 2003, p. 50). This has not been a recent development however, as a Susskind report (no date) regarding representations during the Gulf War of 1990-1991 shows that the three newspapers examined (The Age, Herald Sun and The Australian):

adopted a critical stance towards Australia’s Islamic community. The themes that the media used when reporting Islam such as terrorism, disloyalty and associating Australian Muslims together, portrayed Islam in a harsh and derogatory manner and lead to distorted perceptions of Muslims (Susskind, no date, p. 16).

This study extends upon these reports by looking at the recent event of the London 2005 bombings, and how the negative stereotypes illuminated in these past reports have extenuated into drawing a sharp polemic between Islamic and Western culture, as well as looking specifically at News Limited media across Australia, including a Western Australian publication.

Much of the writing in the reports and editorial comment of these news sources is highly emotive, prompting questions of the objectivity and balance in Australian news media. It can be argued that much of mainstream news reporting is made to be sensationalist in order to increase sales, but more insidiously, questions arise regarding agenda-setting and propaganda from news outlets that may wish to protect political alignments, as in the ideological state apparatuses outlined by Althusser. Questions arise regarding the state of the public sphere in Australia and the ability of the media to act as the fourth estate and watchdog of the government and corporate institutions.

2.1 The public sphere

The public sphere, as explained by Dahlgren “is a concept which in the context of today’s society points to the issues of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it, and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt” (1991, p. 1). Traditionally, in the earlier stages of modernity, the public sphere was
thought of as physical public spaces of interaction, whereby individuals could debate the issues of the day. As explained by Holmes (2000, p. 374), Habermas defines the public sphere as “a domain of uncoerced conversation directed exclusively toward pragmatic agreement”. This was coupled with the press acting as the fourth estate, or public advocate, keeping close watch on societal powers. In its purest sense, the fourth estate and the public sphere would work together in ensuring the upkeep of democracy throughout society.

As industrialism spurred on economic rationalism, the independent press soon became an idealised notion. As noted by Hirst and Patching (2005, p. 105), “industrial journalism saw the once radical and ‘free’ press become primarily commercial marketing and political process-management services for the ruling class”. The move away of the press from a public advocacy model, coupled with the reduction in public spaces as democratised forums, due in a large part to the television era of the last century, has led many to argue that the public sphere is the tool of only a few parties who have the financial capability to stake a claim in the information marketplace. As explained by Becker and Wehner (2001, pp. 70-71), the mass communication model of information dissemination has lead to a reduction in influence of the public sphere due to media producers and audiences being unequal partners in symbolic exchange, as well as there being only limited feedback capability within twentieth century, or traditionalist, media.

The dependence of media survival on economic forces has led to a homogenisation of messages in mass communication media and a reduction in alternative voices to the global hegemony. Becker and Wehner (2001, p. 71) explain that “mass media support the distribution of global economic, political and cultural standards, and provide a field of comparison for the relative national or regional variations”. In this way, global information is digested in a way that befits a national or regional standard. Although depictions of global events may vary due to the cultural consumption habits of a
particular region, the message is still homogenised by the absence of alternate positions and become a reflection of government policies, whereby the media depend on and accept information supplied by government ministers and officials (Poynting & Mason, 2007, p. 20).

2.2 Textual analysis of newspapers

The Sunday Telegraph and The Sunday Times were analysed on the two Sundays, the 10th and 17th July 2005, which are in the ten days after the London bombings of 2005. Due to the high readership of the Sunday editions of The Telegraph, it is inferred that the articles and editorial comment regarding the London bombings would have the greatest reach and the most impact of print media in the Sydney/New South Wales geographical location. As is typical with Sunday newspaper editions, the content of the paper is less hard-hitting than the daily newspapers, and includes more lifestyle and human interest articles than the daily editions. The reports looked at in the aftermath of the bombings reflect this, and although there are editorial pieces that are highly emotive and subjective, the overall tone of reporting is much less hard-hitting, accusatory and inflammatory than seen in The Australian.

The Sunday Times by comparison is Western Australia's only Sunday newspaper, and one of only two state-wide weekly print news bulletins. Because of this it has a particularly large readership and therefore has a high propensity for influence over the Western Australian public. Like The Sunday Telegraph, it positions itself as a lifestyle centred news provider, and so most news reported in its editions lacks the hard-hitting edge of critical reporting found in many daily editions and broadsheets. Accordingly, the articles regarding the London bombings are shorter, less critical and thorough than The Australian, but notably the paper includes editorial copy that is reflective of the emotionality seen in the two other publications studied.
2.21 The West vs Islam

What is clearly evident in the overview of the articles regarding the London bombings of July 2005 is the outrage and fear expressed by the print media, and an almost synonymous support and alignment with the UK and British citizenry. From the very first article announcing the event there were links to September 11 and terrorism; an alignment that was formed even before accurate figures as to casualties and the true scale of the incident were known. As far as *The Australian* was concerned, this was another attack on the West, its values and way of life, reminiscent of September 11, the Bali bombings and the attacks on Madrid: “They (Australian officials) concede the attack was almost definitely carried out by radical Islamists” (O’Neil & Chulov, 9 July, 2005). The perpetrators were already implicated: they had to be radicalised Muslims opposed to the West and its ideals. The attacks were an evil against the rationale and civilised ideology of the West from an enemy seen as barbaric an unreasonable. Much news space was given to Prime Minister John Howard’s thoughts as representative of Australian outrage and disgust of the event: “It’s a terrible attack on innocent people, but it has to be said again that free people must not yield to terrorism” (Lewis, 8 July, 2005). It was only in the aftermath of the attacks, when the facts started to emerge, that the perpetrators were revealed: British born, educated Muslims, from well-integrated families, hardly the crazed, psychopathic murderers that have become synonymous with Islamist iconography.

Much of the early reporting on the incident includes statements and speeches by Western leaders, in particular from Prime Minister John Howard. *The Sunday Telegraph’s* front page on the 10th July features an interview of Howard’s reaction to the bombings. Although it is written in a narrative style, in keeping with the style of the paper, the article does progress towards an emotive retrospection regarding the event and the potential threat posed to Australia. Interviewer Glenn Milne (10 July, 2005)
immediately aligns majority Australian support with the Prime Minister. When asked how he felt about the bombings, Howard replies, “Well, apprehensive, fearful”. Milne then takes great liberty in replying for the nation, when he writes “Put us all in that boat”. Great effort is made by Milne in positioning Howard as a stoic leader of Australia who the nation must turn to in such a time of uncertainty, threat and, according to Milne, imminent attack: “But the thing that strikes you most, sitting next to Howard, is the way he is grappling with what terrorist experts rate as an almost certain expectation of a strike some time in the future against Australia, here on our home shores”. Accordingly, there is also support for Howard’s refusal to capitulate to the demands and wants of the terrorists; notable support for Howard’s reluctance to withdraw troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. The ability of the current government to elicit support from journalists and much of the Australian public has been highlighted by Scott Poynting, explaining that “the government of Prime Minister John Howard, leader of the centre-right Liberal party, had stirred anti-Islamic sentiment to win votes” (Greenlees, 2006).

The published articles instantly position the attacks as the Islamism vs. the West. This is highly reminiscent of Said’s imperialist/orientalist doctrine of “Western and specifically American responses to an Islamic world perceived, since the early seventies, as being immensely relevant and antipathetically troubled” (Said, 1981, p. x). The West’s idea of itself as the predominant culture in its versions of democratic government and sectarian state-ship is permeated through the mainstream media. The Australian in one of its first articles about the bombings, Howard expresses his horror at blasts – Terrorists hit London, quotes Prime Minister John Howard as stating the attacks “will not alter the determination of free countries to do the right thing” (Lewis, 8 July, 2005). This is followed in the same article by Opposition Leader Kim Beazley: “This is an attack on our family...we condemn this evil attack on our people and our way of life” (Lewis, 8 July, 2005). The tone set from the outset is that the West is an innocent victim of attacks by an evil enemy, an enemy that does not understand the West’s civilised libertarian world and its steadfast ability “to do the right thing”. In the first
editorial comment in the paper, and even before British intelligence had identified the
perpetrators, foreign editor Greg Sheridan launches into what can only be called a
sensationalist tirade on Islamic nations. He condemns Afghanistan for allowing the
Taliban to reconsolidate, the Philippines for harbouring Al-Qa'ida terrorists, Pakistan
for enabling the Taliban resurgence in southern Afghanistan, and Iran for being an
Islamist state which has a "desire to spread its extreme version of Islam around the
world" (Sheridan, 9 July, 2005). With the bombers eventually identified as British-born
Muslims, this diatribe seems littered with hyperbole and blame at nations that,
excepting Pakistan, have been proven to have nothing to do with the organisation of
the 2005 bombings in London.

Sheridan continues the reinforcement of the good vs. evil dialectic in his second piece
on the incident, a mode of categorisation that remains consistent throughout the
majority of articles in The Australian, positioning Muslims in Europe and throughout
the world as the 'other', a scourge and a threat to 'our' Western way of life. As
explained by Stuart Hall (1997, p. 235), such use of binary oppositions has:

the great value of capturing the diversity of the world within their either/or
extremes, (but) they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of
establishing meaning... One pole of the binary... is usually the dominant
one, the one which includes the other within its field of operations.

Journalist Natasha Bita's report regarding European security strongly positions
Muslims as a threat, and although she mentions they are often "scapegoats for
terrorism", maintains the position throughout the article that European Muslims are a
threat to the continent, a threat to 'us' and "the free world" (Bita, The Australian, 9
July, 2005). Emma-Kate Symons (The Australian, 11 July, 2005) echoes this sentiment in
her report questioning the tolerance of the UK for its ethnic minorities, in effect
"sheltering radicals". She cites French sources who criticise the UK approach and
creating 'Londonistan' where Islamic radicals are allegedly sheltered by British
legislation and tolerance. Moderate and tolerant positions are frequently criticised
throughout reports in The Australian with only four articles in the days after the
bombings proposing divergent opinions to those fiercely critical of Islamists and Islamic states.

Although there are no direct attacks on moderate Muslims, or Muslims who aren’t seen as radicalised, much of the writing strongly postulates an us vs. them stance, positioning the West as a continual good-doer for the globe: “Muslims in huge numbers have been welcomed with open arms into multicultural societies in Europe, the US and Australia”. (MATP, 13 July, 2005) This strongly reverberates with Said’s notions of Western imperialism, “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said, 1978, p. 7), and that Islamic peoples should feel indebted to the West for allowing them the chance to be ‘civilised’. In fact, there are only three articles across all newspapers analysed that included a quote from a Muslim respondent, and of these, only one directly denounces the attacks.

2.22 Positioning Islam as incompatible

Piers Akerman of The Sunday Telegraph (10 July, 2005) looks to Islam’s incompatibility with modernity to explain the conflict, explaining that “The fanatics want to see the clock turned back...to a medieval past...in which shariah law with its stoning, beheadings, lopping of hands and unequal treatment of women would flourish”. That Islamic nation-states throughout the world have often struggled to reach the level of modernity of Westernised nation-states is undeniable, however it is short-sighted to assume that this is the root cause of terrorism. Whilst some factions of Islam would prefer to be ruled under theocracies, there is nothing to suggest that this would necessarily be incompatible with the global system. In addition, Akerman overlooks some of the more obvious explanations for Islamic terror, such as European colonialism, domination and interference in Arab, Persian and Asian nation-states to the detriment of these cultures (Saikal, 2003, pp. 129-144).
What is visible in Akerman's feature is some balance in his reporting, with reference made to Muslim casualties of terrorism as well as differentiating between fanatical and moderate Islam: "the vast majority of the world's Muslims not only do not support the fanatics in their midst but also comprise the bulk of the radicals' targets and victims" (10 July, 2005). However, what is most lacking, as is clearly evident in the other news sources analysed in this chapter, is the absence of moderate Muslim voices as representative of Islamic Australia. The only voice given to Australian Muslims in The Sunday Telegraph is by a group leader of Muslims who had recently had their homes raided by ASIO. He is quoted as saying "Let us practise our religion accordingly, not according to you...When we say democracy, it means we are making a partner with Allah in making laws. Allah does not need a partner. That's why we don't believe in democracy". Surely this isolated form of representation of an Australian Muslim can do nothing to reduce the speculation between Muslim and non-Muslim Australia, particularly in the absence of more balanced and moderate Muslim representation.

The perceived barbarism of Islamic culture and religion is amplified by placing it against Christianity as the 'civilised' religion of the West. Such sentiments are rife in Western culture, such as when Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi claimed in 2001 that "we should be confident of the superiority of our civilisation", because its guarantee of human and civil rights "does not exist in Islamic countries" (Hooper & Connolly, 2001). This is another dialectic that positions Islam in direct opposition to the West; polarised ideologies that are unable to integrate smoothly or peacefully, and intensifying ideas of domination of one over the other. The Australian further appropriates this idea in its reference to both religions in contrast and conflict. Using Matt Price's article regarding a memorial service for the bombings as an example, this polemic is clearly visible. He cites a poem read out by the British High Commissioner to Australia, written during the World War II blitz of London:

The bombs have shattered my churches, have torn my streets apart
But they have not bent my spirit and they shall not break my heart.
(14 July, 2005)
To include such a poem is certainly a move to elicit emotion in the reader, but in doing so further entrenches the divisions already clearly visible in other reports in *The Australian*. Although Price mentions as his last paragraph that there was Islamic representation present at the service and a reading from the Koran, there is no dominance given to this viewpoint; no quotes and no citations.

The language of fear of the ‘other’ is pervasive in the editorials and feature articles regarding the bombings, forming the basis of dialectic positioning between good/evil, Christianity/Islam and the ultimate us/them ideological framework. A feature by Angela Shanahan in *The Sunday Telegraph* points to the differences between Christianity and Islam to explain the conflict and incompatibility of cultures, making reference to Christianity’s hierarchical nature as to why our culture purportedly has more control over itself. In explaining that “The average Australian, despite their irreligious nature and general ignorance of religion, is far more steeped in the mindset of Christianity than they think they are” (Shanahan, 17 July, 2005), she is clearly marking a distinct boundary between ‘ordinary Australia’ and those who are outside the Euro-Christian demarcation. She even goes so far as to suggest that the global Islamic-centred troubles are a result of Islamic infighting and power struggles between the different branches of Islam, and that ‘we’, the West, are innocent bystanders: “So if you think this terror campaign is just about Iraq or Afghanistan, you’re wrong. It’s also about a civil war in Islam, and in a sense we are the collateral damage”. Such sentiments reflect ‘dog-whistle politics’, which involves “the sending of a particularly sharp message which calls clearly to those intended, and goes unheard by the rest of the population” (Poynting, Noble, Tabar, Collins, 2004, p. 153).

### 2.23 References to WWII

The language used sharply demarcates Australia as part of the West, in particular referring to Australia’s colonial and British history, as well as past alignments and
conflicts. World War II imagery and connotations are clearly visible through many of the reports, particularly those immediately after the bombings. There are several references throughout the first week of reporting labelling the attack as a “blitz” (O’Neil, Chulov, Sheridan, The Australian, 2005), an attack “that will be no more successful than was the London Blitz by the German Luftwaffe 60 years ago” according to Foreign Editor Greg Sheridan (9 July, 2005). In light of the us/Them dialectic mentioned above, it is unsurprising that axis/evil undertones are present, especially given the British imperialist thoughts of grandeur regarding its defense of the German assault in WWII. Britain often remembers the German assaults in a mythology of stoicism and discipline, as a “symbolic centre of national identity” (Dawson, 1994, p. 1), so it is unsurprising that such parallels are drawn in the wake of a perceived new ‘evil’. The British response to the attacks was seen as “Churchillian” and “sangfroid” (The Australian, 11 July, 2005) by journalist Emma-Kate Symons. She contrasts the British response with the Spanish population’s reaction to the Madrid train bombings which saw a new government elected, one that apparently capitulated to the wishes of the terrorists by withdrawing its national troops from Iraq. With such political alignments to be protected, as will be discussed in the next chapter, it is highly unlikely that writers from Murdoch’s news outlets would put much pressure on the conservative government in Australia, certainly nowhere near enough to challenge for a change in government such as happened in Spain.

Emotive language and a staunch alignment with the UK are also clearly visible in the editorial copy of The Sunday Times. Brett McCarthy’s (10 July, 2005) article entitled Global war on terror involves everyone is emotional in not only denouncing the bombers, but also as a call to arms in fervently recruiting the West’s citizenry to do their bit in stopping the terrorist scourge. McCarthy somewhat reflects The Australian foreign affairs editor Greg Sheridan in his use of language, calling the attacks “inevitable” and reminiscent of the “Nazi Blitz” in London’s reaction to the crisis in showing a “calm and resolute spirit”. Aligning Australia closely with the UK increases the perceived threat to Australia, and is notable in the inevitability of an attack on Australian shores.
postulated by McCarthy: “We have to accept that the world war against terror will go on for years. Everyone is involved”. Unlike Sheridan and several writers from The Sunday Telegraph, there is a concession from McCarthy that the West may be somewhat responsible for Islamic militancy. He suggests that “there is no doubt that Australia’s support for the US and Britain in the invasion of Iraq increased our chances of becoming a terrorist target”, and suggests that “World leaders should put more emphasis on reviewing their national policies towards the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere as part of a plan to attack the root causes of terrorism”. This position is rarely mentioned across the newspapers however.

In reference to WWII, readers are also lead to draw connections with the Iraq conflict and ‘The Coalition of the Willing’. Sheridan (The Australian, 9 July, 2005) states that “the war on terror is not Vietnam, it is World War II, a global struggle of many years’ duration against an implacable and powerful enemy, seized of a total ideology that brooks neither compromise nor amelioration, only defeat or victory”. He suggests that the Iraq war “is long and unavoidable” and maintains that “Australia’s commitment to the war on terror is working out through multiple international commitments”, stating that “it would be a catastrophic defeat for the West and a victory for the terrorists to leave now”. As per Western government’s reluctance to concede that the Iraq conflict has not made Western nations less safe, Sheridan and others refuse to link Iraq with the London bombings. It is not until a few days after the bombings through citation of reports from the UK’s Sunday Times that The Australian reveals some of the motivation for the attacks may be due to the presence of Western troops in Iraq. In one of the few articles criticising the West’s response to al-Qaida and its occupation of Islamic territories, Phillip Adams (12 July, 2005) links the London bombings directly with the coalition involvement in Iraq, but he is a lone editorial voice amongst the majority opinion that the West is an innocent. Such ideas are regularly shot down by other editors and writers, labelled as “a faux-realist mindset among intellectual sophisticates”, and are “apologists for evil who blame the victims every time terrorists attack” (MATP, 13 July, 2005).
2.24 The internal threat

Another constant in the language used by most writers in their reporting of the London bombings is the alleged attack on the free world by those who are opposed to it. It is not until the true identities of the bombers are revealed that this position seems somewhat nonsensical, and therefore mutates from a fear of an external threat based on nation and religion to one that implies an internal threat lead by an outside evil. It was not until four days after the bombings, and four days of conjecture regarding foreign terrorists, illegal immigrants and border security that the bombers were identified as British born. Reporting after this discovery then shifts from concern regarding foreign born Islamic radicals to the internal threat of home-grown terrorists and how Western nations are susceptible to attack from within. The Australian's citation of an article by UK publication The Times, makes reference to sleeper cell terrorists, who have “normal appearance and ability to avoid standing out in the crowd” (13 July, 2005). Subsequent articles mention the normalcy of the suspected youths who were later identified as having carried out the bombings. After these facts are clarified, suspicion shifts from abroad to home, onto “unknown home-grown hotheads seduced into suicide by Islamic radicals” (Chulov, 14 July, 2005). The fear rhetoric is unmistakable; not only are we to fear foreign Islamic nationals, we are also to fear those who may seem like us in any other way, with the only difference being Islam.

Disbelief that such an atrocity could have been masterminded by British citizens is clearly expressed. There seems a pervasive ideology that maintains that only an external force from those so different from ‘us’ Westerners could have been capable of designing an attack on the West. Although there were no definitive links nor evidence to point to Al-Qaida’s direct involvement with the London bombings, there was consistent speculation of an Al-Qaida mastermind who indoctrinated and supported the British born bombers. British Police Chief Sir Ian Blair is quoted by The Sunday...
Times in response to what intelligence the UK has about a suspected Al-Qaida operative’s involvement: “Nothing at the moment...links him directly. But what we expect to find at some stage is a direct Al-Qaida link” (17 July, 2005). Even with such an admission, Ben English (17 July, 2005) writes a whole article in speculation of possible Al-Qaida operatives and how they supposedly flew in and out of Britain in preparation of the July 7 attack. In an accompanying feature, English goes on to criticise Britain for its tolerance of foreign Islamic fire-brand clerics and the British Islamic community for distancing itself “from the bombers with mantras of condemnation and the repeated claim that the murderers were not true Muslims because Islam is a faith of peace”. Incorporating what can only be described as journalistic-license, English develops his condemnation of the UK to incorporate a critique of its immigration policy: “Again, fear of racism has stopped authorities taking a harder line on illegal immigrants and phoney asylum-seekers”. What this has to do with the London bombings that were committed by British born Muslims is unclear, unless fears of the ‘other’ in terms of home grown terrorists are applied.

The internal threat as brought to the fore by the London bombings served to remagnify the possibility of a greater danger to Australia: if the UK could breed home-grown terrorists, then certainly Australia could too. As noted in a Chulov (The Australian, 14 July, 2005) article, an Australian official argues that it is time for Australia to “adjust the tolerance threshold” and urges community vigilance in watching out for potential bombers. Of course, the problem inherently lies with how the wider community perceives what a ‘potential bomber’ looks like, which would almost certainly lead to issues of vilification of minority communities. This raises questions as to the racialisation of a religious group where, “in the ideology of racism, categorical confusions between 'race' (eg 'Middle Eastern Appearance'), ethnicity (eg Arab), nationality of origin or background (eg Lebanese), and religion (eg Muslim) are common, and distinction in practice between racism directed on 'racial', ethnic, or national grounds is not always possible or valid” (HREOC report, 2004, p. 4). Saniotis explains this further, noting that Muslims “are essentially racialised as bin Laden like
figures and international schemers: manipulative, inferior, exploitable, inimical, and conspirational" (Saniotis, 2006, ¶ 13).

Throughout Chulov's article regarding the 'new' security threat to Australia, Muslim youth are singled out as a potential threat to Australia, whereby he states that “there are a number of ways in which moderate Muslim youth may renounce non-violent worship and take up arms”. Unfortunately there is no retort or statement from the Muslim community in the report, thereby ensuring the commentary remains unbalanced and at times irresponsible in its insinuations and advice to the wider community. Such an example is where the Australian official is quoted asking for the community “to call us with anything they have, no matter how trivial it may seem. We would much rather laugh about it than read about it in the world’s newspapers” (The Australian, 14 July, 2005). It is highly doubtful that the Muslim community would be laughing every time one of its citizens is referred to the police or authorities for undefined dubious and potentially threatening behaviour. Perhaps the definition of such behaviour is to be left up to the wider non-Muslim community to define, as well as what constitutes a threatening Muslim.
3.0: Muslim representation via computer mediated technology

Two Australian Islamic blog sites were analysed; forums.muslimvillage.net and AussieMuslims.com. They are two of the longest running and largest forum sites in membership, having 4586 and 2368 members respectively as of April, 2007. Both sites are administered from the eastern states of Australia, with the member-base reflecting this. muslimvillage.net, the largest Islamic internet forum in Australia, is part of the IslamicSydney.com site, reflective of the Australian Muslim concentration in Sydney as opposed to the rest of Australia. As with the print news analysis, the sites were examined in the ten days after the London bombings of 7 July 2005, with only threads that concentrated solely on this event being analysed. In order to protect the identities of the bloggers, who may believe they were communicating within a discrete forum, the bloggers' identities have been changed. As fora for debate and representation outside that of mainstream Australian media, the sites can be seen to re-energise the Australian public sphere insofar as providing spaces for discussion. Prior to computer mediated interaction diasporas had to rely on singular or small group exchanges to upkeep a sense of culture using traditional media or face to face contact. In the last ten years internet communications have made such symbolic exchanges nearly instantaneous in a one to one or one to many format that alleviates the need for shared space and time.

3.1 The internet as a democratic tool

The explosion in communication technologies in the last decade has encouraged some observers to champion notions of a second coming or new age of the public sphere resulting in a re-democratisation of spaces of interaction. It is what Vincent Mosco describes as the three central myths of cyberspace and our time; “the end of history, the
end of geography, and the end of politics” (Mosco, 2004, p. 13). The very essence of the internet seems to coincide with such notions of grandeur, being a decentralised network of unlimited communicative capacity which appears to be very hard to censor or control. The relative cheapness of the experience, so that an individual need only a computer and an internet connection to have unlimited scope to produce websites, links and emails, means that most people in societies that support the technology can and do have access to the world wide web. In theory then, the internet has the ability to undercut the traditional mass media’s global hegemony through individuals and small groups seeking out non-corporatised portals and even by participating in journalism and editorial comment themselves. As explained by Becker and Wehner (2001, p. 67): “They can publish their points of view, ideas, and comments to a particular topic without being restricted by time and space, and without depending on greater organisational or professional support”. It is the possibility for two-way communication and feedback that makes the internet such a powerful apparatus in society and which has the potential to change the way citizens organise their viewpoints and add pressure to governments. As noted by Ferdinand (2000, p. 6), “if new technology could enable citizens to come together in some ‘virtual’ forum, then it might be possible to restore a more genuine, and more profound form of deliberative democracy”.

The blog (web-log), alongside internet networks, are a phenomenon that has increased the proficiency for citizens to communicate in such a way. Seen first in the late nineties, blogs have become commonplace as either web pages in their own right or as features to established websites. They are characterised by the content that the blog author/s is/are interested in, who generally writes from their perspective on an issue, inviting feedback from their readers. Reader comments are encouraged, generally sparking debate and one-to-many or many-to-many communication about the issue. For this reason, blogs have great potential to become public forum spaces, “specifically the democratization of political discourse” (Gill, 2004). The possibility of reinvention of the internet is explained by McChesney (1999, p. 175):
Even if the internet becomes primarily a commercial medium for electronic commerce, email and commercial news and entertainment fare, it will also be a haven for all sorts of interactive activities that never existed in the past. It can, at the very least, be an enormous and mostly uncensorable soapbox, open to a plethora of voices to speak, and be heard, worldwide at relatively minimal expense.

In addition to providing alternative spaces of communication on the internet, blogs and internet fora have the ability through hypertext links to provide access routes for users to other spaces of interest and other authors' perspectives. They can even, as explained by Gill (2004), play a significant part in the life of a news story or generate enough commentary on an issue for it to make headway in mainstream media.

In addition to promoting new ideas of democracy and societal action in the public sphere, new media also promote the growth of new communities as well as fostering the upkeep of traditional communities, such as diasporas, albeit in a non-traditional manner. The term diaspora is used to describe populations that are usually bound by culture and a traditional 'homeland' that have become deterritorialised or transnational; a populous "which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe" (Vertovec, 1999). Diasporic communities have conventionally kept in touch with their homeland via relatives or traditionalist media such as newspapers, as sparse as they may be to come by in the adopted locale. Also, ethnic communities have tended to group together in geographic areas, which strengthens their ability to negotiate their new nation-state as well as upholding a sense of community and identity with their primary culture (Bruhn, 2005 p. 53).

The age of the internet has seen new ways in which these communities interact, maintain linkages with their homeland and maintain a cultural identity. Instead of waiting for information in its traditional format, diasporas can now "exchange messages with individuals on the other side of the planet and access community information almost instantaneously" (Karim, 1998). Individuals of a diaspora are now
able to interact with people of their culture all over the world and engage with them in matters significant to their cultural community, as well as connecting with others in their 'host' community. The identity that emerges is “a hybrid of: past alliances, the re-establishment of relations through the forum, as well as the experiences of negotiating real life in the new country of settlement and interaction with other individuals/groups in that society” (Karim, 1998).

3.2 Analysis of Islamic internet sites

As a response to the criticism of Muslim Australia from the mainstream Australian media shown in Chapter 2, both muslimvillage.net and AussieMuslims.com provide a space for Muslims to not only voice their views, but also to reflect on the partisan treatment they receive in the nation’s mainstream press. This is reflective of notions of a revival of the public sphere in terms of providing fora for individuals to participate in active discussions relating to the nation, and in the absence of representation in the mainstream media, can be seen as a positive addition to the media-scape of Australia. By using the internet as a tool for representation outside that of the mainstream, Muslim Australia finds it has a voice that can be heard in response to the Western hegemonic discourse. It is important to note that a myriad of opinions and views make up this ‘voice’, and as such can be seen as resistant to the homogenisation by Western ideology. In this way, the Islamic sites act as arenas of resistance and can be identified as a counter-public to that of mainstream Australia. The idea of a counter-public can be explained as follows:

when public discourse is understood only as a “single, comprehensive, overarching public”, members of subordinated groups “have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives and strategies... (such groups) have found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics,... parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs”. (Fraser cited in Warner, 2002, p. 118)
What is immediately striking when looking at the forum posts is the speed at which information was disseminated in the wake of the bombings. Muslimvillage.net has its first post regarding the incident at 7.39pm AEST, less than two hours after the bombs were detonated in the four locales in London. Thus the Muslim diaspora was seeking “a certain immediacy of experience that strives to circumvent dominant codes in the attempt to access a wealth of global information quickly and directly, and then to appropriate and disseminate material further” (Kahn & Kellner, 2005 p. 218).

Accompanying a report-style article, the blog thread includes photographs and diagrams of a partially-exploded train and a map of London showing the times and locations of the blasts. Similarly, AussieMuslims.com has its first post at 8.36pm AEST, as a report-style piece, outlining the basic facts as known to authorities at the time. It is pertinent to note here that the initial posts on the websites and the initial reports in the newspapers examined in the previous chapter could be interchangeable, highlighting the ability of the internet to rival traditional media channels. There is no personal comment present in the immediate stages of information being relayed from global sources on the sites, and the initial posts are highly reminiscent of journalistic reporting. It is not until about five posts later on the sites that personal opinion and comment is visible.

3.21 Muslim fears after the blasts

There are three major responses in the blog threads after the initial information regarding the bombings has been disseminated; fear and worry that loved ones could have been caught up in the blasts, anxiety that Muslims will be blamed, and denial that Muslims were involved. It is important to make clear that these responses I have labelled as immediate are comments posted in the few hours after the bombs were detonated in London, so very little accurate information would have been available to anyone in the public sphere. For this reason, the fact that many of the bloggers immediately fear reprisals is highly representative of the political climate regarding Islam and terrorism. RA (muslimvillage.net) posts at 8.05 AEST “Get ready for a bumpy ride brothers and sisters, another ‘muslims are bayyyyd, everybody else is
Otaaaay’ hate wave coming thro”. RB (muslimvillage.net) responds: “The media is already sharpening their axes and Islam and Muslims are soon going to get sharp pain in the skull area”. There is clear cynicism regarding the mainstream media’s reports of terrorism and an al-Q’aida link, as shown in comment by BA (AussieMuslims.com):

An Islamist website has posted a statement – purportedly from al-Qaeda – claiming it was behind the attacks. Yet again al-Qaeda is to blame, in a matter of just hours the accusations have begun.

Such comments are interspersed with worry for family members and empathy for the victims: “May Allah swt (trans. Holy) keep the death toll low and aid those injured. If anyone has family there, May Allah swt keep them safe... I have an aunty there myself” (RC, muslimvillage.net). Although London is the British capital, it is home to a vast number of migrant communities, with approximately 8% of London being of the Islamic faith (Salaam website, 2007). It is not surprising then, that many of the early posts on the sites are in consideration for family and friends in London, particularly since two of the blasts were detonated in predominantly Muslim areas of London.

3.22 Heterogeneous voices

A major feature of the posts, particularly on muslimvillage.net, is the inclusion of press releases, articles and news links from sources not cited in the major Australian news media. The BBC for example, has a major news bulletin posted entitled Muslim leaders join condemnation which illustrates British Muslim anger and anxiety after the bombings, directly quoting Muslim Association of Britain president Ahmed Sheikh. More importantly, in view of Muslim Australia, press releases are included from such groups as the Australian Muslim Civil Rights Advocacy Network and The Islamic Council of Victoria unreservedly condemning the attacks and labelling the perpetrators “enemies of humanity and civilisation” (RD, muslimvillage.net). Both societies distance Islam from the attacks and use language very similar to the mainstream media, such as ‘evil’ and barbaric’ to describe the events. AMCRAN co-convenor Dr Waleed Kadous makes statements in accordance with many world leaders when he affirms:
Regardless of who committed these acts, we unequivocally and unambiguously condemn these attacks... Whoever is responsible for this is espousing an ideology that is criminal and repulsive. They are enemies of humanity.

All of the official press releases and quotes from international and national Muslim leaders included on the sites, which one can assume were intended to be included in Western as well as Islamic media, came from the position of ‘moderate’ Islam, one that seemed eager to appease Western anger and judgement and swiftly distance Islam from violent, extremist acts.

This does not mean that all posts on the sites are from such a moderate position however. There is an array of standpoints visible when reading through the threads, from those that are very moderate: “we have to make it clear that Muslims do not support such terrible acts of violence” (RE, muslimvillage.net), to those that are reluctant to sympathise with the West and the victims of the bombings: “When will we stop tripping over ourselves to apologise to the kuffar whilst they slaughter and rape our brothers and sisters?” (BB, AussieMuslims.com). There is also a range of emotionality in the blog responses, with some being reactive and argumentative to others’ postings: “after watching news reports of the London suspects, the first people I thought of were some of the people on these fora. So much time and so little to do. And so much hatred” (BC, AussieMuslims.com), to others who post analytical and insightful contemplations: “The incoherent chaos is not only terrorism’s legacy, but its purpose. It is not about killing: compared with poverty or even road accidents it claims few lives. Terrorism is a language. The symbolic message is the point, the panic and the fear of the aftermath is what matters” (BD, AussieMuslims.com).

With such a range of responses present, some posts deteriorate into infighting between bloggers, with site administrators having to intervene: “I know that you are aware that there’s other people who read this thread. But how does it feel to think about it that there’s a lot of sisters and teenager who are reading how the brothers are
communicating together.” (BE, AussieMuslims.com). Such emotionality is not uncommon in public arenas in the aftermath of atrocities and incidents of the nature of the London bombings, with similar, albeit oftentimes opposing responses being played out in Western-based public fora such as in the Letters to the Editor pages in mainstream newspapers (Mummery & Rodan, 2003).

3.23 Questions of faith

Whilst many of the bloggers express sentiments of sympathy, anxiety, anger and fear of reprisals, many of the bloggers express denial at Muslim involvement. Some criticise the West for jumping to conclusions before any forensic information or hard facts are known: “forensic tests need to be carried out before terrorism can be officially deemed responsible” (RF, muslimvillage.net), whilst others believe the bombings are a conspiracy by Western governments to further their ‘crusade’ against Islam, and give greater relevance to the war in Iraq and occupation of Islamic lands: “Before anyone allegedly ‘claimed responsibility’, these two (Bush & Blair) were already using the heartless attacks as justification for their so called ‘war on terror’. It seems too convenient” (RG, muslimvillage.net). The ‘conspiracy theory’ topic is one of the most hotly debated in the blogs, with some members out-rightly refusing to accept that Muslims were responsible and defiantly espousing victimisation by the West. Others are more accepting of Muslim involvement: “I apologise if many Muslims still have their heads in the sand and are still in doubt as to whether Muslims can actually commit such acts” (BF, AussieMuslims.com).

Often, when forum members are debating the issues relating to the London bombings, it is framed within the greater picture of Islamic doctrine and theological interpretations of the religion. Some bloggers argue that anybody who could commit such atrocities cannot be a true Muslim because “The targeting of innocent civilians, or in fact any sort of killing except in very specific circumstances during times of war, is haraam (forbidden) in Islam and a great disobedience” (RG, muslimvillage.net), whilst
others feel sympathetic to the bombers’ cause because of global atrocities being carried out against Muslims. They feel that Muslims have a right to defend Islam as supported by Quranic interpretation: “Face it, Islam covers all aspects of life, even killing, punishment and defence of the Deen!” (BG, AussieMuslims.com). Many wish to distance Islam from the bombings, with some expressing embarrassment that the perpetrators could be Muslim: “I think like me they are embarrassed as Muslims about what has happened because we are associated with these people” (RH, muslimvillage.net), with the justification that Islam is a religion of peace: “One doesn’t decide to transgress Allah’s laws just because they feel they’ve been unjustly dealt with. Allah’s law is there for the benefit of all humanity, not just Muslims” (RI, muslimvillage.net).

3.24 Muslim disaffection

There is a large amount of criticism of the West through the blog threads that emphasises how Muslims feel “unjustly dealt with” in a global context. Whilst some bloggers feel the bombings are just cause for the West’s imperialism: “do they expect to wreak so much havoc in the Muslim world, occupy our lands, slaughter our sons, dishonour our daughters and not expect some form of reaction?” (RJ, muslimvillage.net). Others make a point of distancing Islam from violence but make strong references to Muslim mistreatment and victimisation at the hands of the ‘Crusader armies’. The blog entry by RK (muslimvillage.net) summarises much of the sentiment expressed by Muslims in the fora whereby he/she comments on the simplistic responses by Western figureheads in the aftermath of the bombings:

The explanation becomes – ‘We may have made mistakes (i.e. done the wrong thing) through our foreign policy, but even if we hadn’t they’d hate us (for who we are) anyway’. And so the answer is neat and tidy. Foreign policy – just or unjust, a small or large part of the fuel for terrorism – need not be mentioned to any great degree, if at all.

Reading the blog entries gives much insight into the extent of Muslim disaffection and anger, and although many do not see the London bombings as a just act in reaction to unjust Western practices, the emotionality of the event precipitates Muslim grief and
outpourings of emotional responses directed at Western governments. One thread on muslimvillage.net (London blasts on tubes and buses), includes four press releases from Australian Muslim organisations in the first 24 hours after the bombings. In addition to this there are many journalistic articles written from a Muslim perspective (many downloaded from UK news sites), most denouncing the bombings, but going much further into depth regarding Muslim disaffection in Western societies than Australian News Ltd media, as well as postulating both Islamic and Western responsibility in improving cultural and religious understanding.

There is much anger directed towards the Western media and protestation at the extent of coverage and outpouring of grief for the victims of the London bombings as opposed to the minimal global sympathy directed to Muslim victims of global atrocities: “Where are the tears of the world for the thousands of slaughtered innocents in Chechnya? Is an Iraqi life not worth an American or British one?” (BH, AussieMuslims.com). This is what Edward Herman (1988) describes as worthy and unworthy victims in the reportage by Western media: where Westerners or allies of Western states receive greater coverage and empathy in the media than those thought of as enemies of the state. Many bloggers feel demonised by the mainstream media and believe that Islam is misrepresented as well as under-represented. RL (muslimvillage.net) illustrates the doubt many Muslims have at being heard in wider society, where he/she makes reference to the Australian mufti’s May 2005 efforts in helping to save Australian engineer, Douglas Wood, from Iraqi captors:

I was very impressed with the mufti’s action in Iraq in helping save Mr Wood. Perhaps if he publicly condemned these attacks that would help any potential backlash. Not sure if he has the power to get coverage in the media on such an issue but I am sure it would help if possible.

Many bloggers feel that the Muslim community was indicted before any firm evidence, believing “we have to come to accept the fact that Islam and Muslims cannot expect fair treatment from the media” (RM, muslimvillage.net). RN’s (muslimvillage.net) cynically-toned post further illustrates the disparity in pertinence the Western media
gives to Western-based atrocities as to Islam-based ones, in this case terrorist acts in
Iraq and Afghanistan:

Unfortunately the cameras were not there to let us have colour video
recordings and continuous live TV coverage of unfolding events or
interviews with the shocked and distressed survivors, nor to show colour
photos of the bombed out homes or colour aerial views of the bombed
streets, nor to give you any time lines in minutes and days of the cluster
bombs and missiles. As hospitals have also been indiscriminately bombed
there are also no interviews possible.

3.25 Questions of Australianness

It is clear through the blog threads that many Muslims feel victimised by both Western
governmental actions and through media reports which in turn sparks debate about
how Muslims view their place in Australian society and notions of Australianness. In
response to a debate about sympathy for Western victims and Australia’s foreign
policy, BI (AussieMuslims.com) explains:

The sharia that I learnt taught me that I have made a pledge of loyalty to
Australia through my citizenship. This is a promise I have made. I am
therefore duty-bound to follow the law of the land. I am also bound to
respect and honour people regardless of their faith.

Whilst some forum members feel that their religion and identification as a Muslim
comes first, many appropriate a joint Muslim/Australian identity in their posts. RO
(muslimvillage.net) for instance, introduces his post “Asalamualikum and G’day
everyone”, using both an Arabic and Australian greeting. Also, a Christian-Australian
pops up in a number of discussions on muslimvillage.net and is welcomed to join in
debate by the Muslims on the site. In response to the Christian-Australian’s
questioning over whether it would be appropriate for allied troops to pull out of Iraq,
RP thanks him for his input (muslimvillage.net).

Not all debates are conducted with such politeness and inclusion however. One of the
threads on AussieMuslims.com entitled Blast on London tube, buses was closed by an
administrator after inflammatory comments by a few of its members. In response to comments such as: “it’s a Sunnah to carry a weapon, and the least you should carry is a stick... keep that in mind” (BJ, AussieMuslims.com) and “When the time comes to defend ourselves, stick or no stick, Insha’Allah I’ll take hundreds of them down if I can” (BK, AussieMuslims.com), the administrator, aussiemu (BL, AussieMuslims.com) posts:

I’m closing this thread for the time being. I actually can’t believe the attitudes displayed here to each other. And some of the views portrayed here are dangerous and stupid.

Learn to speak to each other politely and respectfully like Muslims are meant to.

It is clear through closing this thread that had escalated into an argument between members and its inflammatory posts of violence, that the site administrators are keen to promote constructive debate and inclusion, even in the aftermath of an event sparking so much emotionality as that of the London bombings. At the very least, such fora are spaces for Muslims to vent their frustrations at global events and their treatment from the Western media where many Muslims believe they are misrepresented and vilified.
4.0: Cross-Analysis of Media Texts

To understand the current climate of Western reporting of Islam and Muslims and the associated Muslim sentiment in regards to this reporting and the West in general, it is important to look at the historical framework. The fact that such a polemic exists, so entrenched in the ideology of Western society, of which Australia is a part, cannot simply be looked at in isolation of current events. Notions of the ‘other’, Said’s imperialist/orientalist dialectic and ideas of ‘Australianness’ all contribute to the positioning of Muslims in Australian society. These deep-rooted systemic beliefs have become a self-perpetuating false truth that are consistently reinforced by what is supposed to be an impartial media, that in all actuality further exacerbates the limiting of understanding and serves as a tool of a conservative political agenda. That Muslim voices are rarely heard in mainstream Australian media is no accident. The political and social ideology that has positioned ‘them’ as so far different to ‘us’ is entrenched to the point that ‘we’ do not believe ‘they’ could be anything like ‘us’, so instead the media speaks on their behalf, of an ‘other’ that is a composite of myth and misunderstanding. As can be seen through the Muslim voices expressed in Chapter 3, this is of a great detriment to our Australian society, one that not long ago was championing itself as a nation of multiculturalism and acceptance (Clarence, 1999, pp. 202-208).

4.1 A history of conflict

The Islam/West dialectic was born out of the Medieval struggles of Europe in the seventh century, when Christianity faced a fierce, competitor in Islam (Kabbani, 1994, p. 14). The struggle for religious and cultural ascendency, alongside the willingness to access the important commercial routes of Eastern Europe produced a hostility and an
anti-Islamic polemic, "which made it possible to protect the minds of Christians against apostasy and... gave Christianity self-respect in dealing with a civilisation in many ways its superior" (Daniel in Kabbani, 1994, p. 14). In order to position Christianity as morally advanced, it was necessary to denounce Islam as "savage", implying "that the acceptance of Islam would lead to the destruction of Christianity" (Kabir, 2006, p. 314). For two religions that share much in terms of belief and doctrine (Saikal, 2003, p. 24), it has been necessary for the West to mythologise and marginalise Islam in order to dominate and provide a framework of morality in occupying Islamic territories as well as enforcing a Christian-Imperialist political and social agenda, as is evident in the Euro-colonial expansionist movements of the post-medieval Enlightenment period. In this way:

a pattern of stereotyping emerged that was a guarantee of Western self-respect and a projection upon the rest of the world of Western values. The Medieval picture of Islam was replete with errors that were wilful, and contained within itself a high degree of mythomania. (Kabbani, 1994, p. 17)

Such myths were further built upon as Islam resisted European involvement in its affairs. It became a self-fulfilling prophesy that Muslims were seen as aggressive, hostile and barbaric as they defended occupation of their land, culture and religion from Western hegemony.

Whilst a mythology of the orient and Islam was built upon through Western literature during the medieval and colonialist ages (Said 2002; Kabbani 1994), in the contemporary era this has been perpetuated through Western media. Although Muslims make up around 21% of the world’s population (adherents website, 2007), very little knowledge, information, global analysis or views disseminate from this section of global society through to the West, and “What is known... is extremely attenuated and a series of stupid clichés: violent this, despotic that” (Said, 2002, p. 371). What information we do receive regarding Islam comes from a Western perspective, one that has not advanced from the simplistic medieval polemic. This has been extenuated even further through state-controlled propaganda of foreign news reporting from the early twentieth century where “political and bureaucratic operators
(used) their manipulation of the military and security forces for political ends... in close symbiosis of the media” (Poyting, 2004, p. 242). This has extended through to today’s corporatisation of news and media and the resulting impartiality this has brought. Such media:

advance the agendas of the organisations that own them and the politicians they support, who in turn pursue the interests of the media conglomerates in governmental institutions such as the Federal Communications Commission. Corporate media increasingly promote entertainment over news and information, like the tabloids framed by the codes of spectacle. (Kellner, 2005, p. 5)

Although the media in Western societies are often thought of as ‘watchdogs’ for society, and are often promoted as such by their own public relations machines, the truth is they succumb to pressures of market forces, and are thus easily manipulated through corporate interference, at the expense of investigative reporting and a balanced critique of the news (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Kellner, 2005).

4.2 Murdoch media as propaganda

Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, of which The Australian, The Sunday Telegraph, and The Sunday Times are part, is a prime example of media corporatisation, with a huge influence in the Western world through its various networks. News Corporation’s alignment with the Republican Party in the United States and the conservative agenda has been critiqued widely, particularly in reference to US elections and the current administration’s ‘War on Terror’. According to Kellner (2005, p. 7), the media giant displays “symptoms of authoritarian personalities, who think in binary categories of good and evil, project evil onto an Other, and believe only they are good and right”. It is clear from the analysis of Murdoch Newspapers in Australia after the London bombings that such a conservative position is not unique to American media, but extends broadly through the print news sector in this country. The fact that Prime Minister John Howard is given priority voice in the newspapers examined is representative of such a political agenda, as are the consistent references to the West ‘doing the right thing’ against a ‘barbaric evil’. It is in the interest of Murdoch media,
both politically and socially, to persuade the public of the imminent threat of an 'evil other': not only does it aid in the government’s policy-making, but an alarmed public is also hungry for more information and news, aiding a self-perpetuating cycle for the public to consistently access mythologised disinformation.

In captivating the public’s fear response and sense of vulnerability, the media and politicians are able to work in synergy to meet both their needs of a society hungry for more information regarding an ‘imminent threat’ and to sway public opinion. If the public are alarmed about Islamic terrorism, then it is much easier to pass laws such as the Anti-terrorism Bill 2005, as well as many other laws in relation to the ‘Islamic threat’ such as immigration and border security. In her article about fear and politics post 7/7, Helen Razor cites the Lowy Institute’s poll of potential threats from the world outside Australia, where “international terrorism scored third place. Nudging in at fifth, just behind disease epidemics, Islamic fundamentalism romped away with a robust 57 per cent of public anxiety” (Razor, 2006). In light of such statistics it is easy to see why terror legislation has passed through parliament unabated, highlighting “the idea that society gains by playing it safe” (Furedi, 1997, p. 107). Even Carmen Lawrence concedes that "we are living, not for the first time, in an era of heightened collective fear, a fear which is being exploited and encouraged by our governments through the media" (Lawrence, cited in Razor, 2006).

In democratic societies it is very easy to disguise propaganda as objective journalism because “it is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 1). Also, the public relations branches of corporate media are very adept at promoting their journalism as accurate and objective versions of the ‘truth’. For example, The Australian website makes reference to the values of its first edition, that "This paper is tied to no party, to no state and has no chains of any kind. Its guide is faith in Australia and the country's future” (The Australian website, 2006). It is as if, in the increasing
corporatisation of the West and its inherent individualism, liberties and freedoms, that society has become ambivalent to the capitalist authority, in the false belief that a system based on individual meritocracy and democratic governance insofar as the vote, is a system that does not subvert to the influence and control of a few. Therefore, the state is able to incorporate and give direction to the popular mythologies and ideologies that circulate with greater or lesser intensity within its realm... (and) claim unforced, democratically won loyalty and have that claim upheld. (Kapferer, 1996, p. 232)

4.3 The Muslim other

It is in the interest of the controlling elite in Australian society to upkeep the status quo of the imperialist Anglo-centric hegemony, and in reference to Muslim Australia, this is achieved by the positioning of Islam as an ‘other’ and its framing as un-Australian. Throughout the reporting of the London bombings, The Australian, The Sunday Telegraph and The Sunday Times incorporate dialectical positioning, often utilising:

aggressive hyperbole (and) misapplied euphemism, usually stemming from ignorance but often deriving from a barely concealed ideological hostility. Its most prevalent form is the device of displacing actuality with a plausible ‘explanation’ of the reporter’s own. (Said, 1981, p. 108)

This can be seen as “an antipodean development of a Western way of seeing the Orient” (Manning, 2003, p. 50) as defined by Said’s ‘orientalism’, an ideology that was extended upon in the media reports of the London bombings. The language used in the reports analysed serves to further develop the myth of the orient and to confirm the West’s civility and ideological righteousness. The language used in the articles is no accident: they serve as signifiers and symbols entrenched in Western culture:

which are common to the whole group – and may indeed define that group – which constitute the stock of knowledge upon which that group is able to draw in order to explain, justify and imagine their world, and to persuade others of its power, beneficence, righteousness and perfectibility. (Kapferer, 1996, p. 228)
In other words, it is the West’s collective identity as a superior culture, incorporating a perceived history and mythology, that perpetuates a language of dominance and superiority.

In positioning the West and Australia as a collective ‘us’, the media place Muslims as a collective ‘them’, removing any individuality the Muslim community’s citizens have within their social and religious categorisation. In homogenising Islamic culture, the language that is used to describe them “can be summarised as essentialist, empiricist and historicist; it impoverishes the rich diversity of Islam by producing an essentialising caricature” (Richardson in Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005, p. 4). As a result, the non-Muslim public and those who do not seek understanding of Islam, “gather negative information and fearful images of Muslims” (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005, p. 5), which serves to vilify all Muslims as “alien and treacherous” and as “non-citizens” (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005, p.7). In the production of such a caricature, the media position the Muslim ‘other’ as a spectacle, in essence part of the entertainment structure of the media and culture industry, whereby the delineation between good and evil serves the purpose of a diversion from our own ordinary lives. This can have the added benefit to political institutions of engaging us in matters that are of importance to government and the corporate elites, such as instilling fervour and outrage at a liberal immigration policy and the lack of ‘Australian values’ testing for immigrants, and can even elicit support for wars, such as that in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such ‘dog-whistle politics’ can “appeal successfully to popular xenophobia and insecurities” (Poynting & Noble, 2003, p.41), having the ability to change the course of elections, as seen in the 2001 federal election in which the Howard government successfully manufactured consent around the ‘Tampa crisis’ and September 11.

By omitting historical bases and related elucidations surrounding global Islamic affairs, the Australian print media sources analysed greatly reduce the readers’ capacity for informed opinion as to why the London bombings occurred, reducing the event to an
insensible atrocity in isolation which could only be carried out by ‘evil’. By removing the rationale behind the act, it leaves open “the possibility of other explanations for their violence: their inhumanity, their cruelty, their irrationality” (Manning, 2003, p. 53). The absence of context has implications for the non-Muslim community who may rely on mediated news as their only source regarding Muslim affairs. By removing context and a balanced historical perspective, the outcome and interpreted meaning becomes that of a “fear-based discourse (implying) that ‘we’ should ‘fear’ ‘them’ because essentially Islamic terrorists are fighting a ‘holy war’ or ‘jihad’ against Western culture and values” (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005, p. 21). This has the effect of reducing socio-political responsibility in national governance and policies, as well as those abroad, because compromise and the encouragement of discussion with an ‘evil and irrational’ enemy would be seen as futile by Western governments and their publics.

4.4 An imagined Australian community

Through the binary imposition that Muslims are different to ‘us’ Westerners, we effectively deny Muslims membership to ‘our’ Australian community. Even though many Muslims in Australia were born here, or are legal citizens of this country, the media and the government, particularly in the time of Howard’s Prime Ministership (Clarence, 1999, pp. 214-215), have limited the definition of what constitutes an Australian. Kapferer (1996, p. 201) in describing Australianness, explains that

The welding together of disparate peoples, often traditional enemies, into a modern nation-state requires, according to the ideology of nation-building, the formation of political and social institutions which conform to some universal ‘standard’.

This ‘standard’ reflects the mythology that constitutes an Australian, as is reflected in the history, literature and media of the nation. The idea of Australianness, and who does and doesn’t belong “is reinforced in the way that history is told, the way conflicts are portrayed, and in the way certain voices are heard and others are silenced and ignored” (HREOC Report, 2004, p. 3). In the last decade there has been a move away from the ‘multicultural Australia’ as championed by the governments of the 1970’s,
1980's and early 1990's to “an alarming shift in how we now define and regulate membership to the imagined community of the Australian nation-state” (Turner, 2003, p. 413).

This shift has seen a move towards a “conservative redefinition of this imagined community” (Turner, 2003, p. 413), visible in the government's focus on illegal immigration and asylum seekers, Australian 'values' testing for immigrants and the perceived Islamic terrorist threat. Since the mid-90's and Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, there has been “a renewal of populist White Australia ideology, in forms more or less rapidly incorporated into the political mainstream” (Poynting, 2004, p. 241). No longer is Australia a nation of diversity, but one that has become polarised, particularly since September 11, where the majority respond to the fear of a demonised 'other'. The politics of fear are described by Furedi (1997, p. 109), in his explanation that:

Not only are more people seen as strangers but they are also seen as potentially threatening to our security. That is why it is better to play it safe. A lifestyle influenced by the value of caution is one that is subject to new limits and restraints. It holds back social experimentation and strengthens concern about personal security.

The atmosphere of fear has enabled the government to introduce legislation that are "arguably, the most drastic anti-libertarian measures Australia has witnessed" (Aly & Balnaves, 2005). It has also enabled a nonchalance to discrimination towards Muslims, becoming somewhat systemic in government speeches and media reports. Whilst not overt discrimination, such continuous finger-pointing and demonising of a community as a whole, has certainly been central to anti-Muslim hysteria and sentiment. According to former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (cited in Carlton, 2006):

Too many have taken the easy path and accepted the governments contentions that Muslims aren't like us and therefore it doesn't matter if discrimination occurs and if access to the law does not apply.

As a result, Muslims in Australia now exist in what can be described not-Australia: "once Muslims were constructed as different, as alien and treacherous, they could then
be treated as non-citizens” (Dunn cited in Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005), and are denied the egalitarian treatment the wider community takes for granted, including fair representation in the nation’s media. What is most prominent in the analysis of the newspapers regarding the London bombings is the absence of a Muslim voice. It is clear from the analysis of the newspapers that the only time Muslims are quoted is when they are expressing extremist viewpoints, which further the conservative media agenda and the ideological positioning of the political hegemony. Although the news sources examined are resolute in promoting their objective and inclusive values, such as *The Australian* editor, who states: “we are the forum in which all sides of these big issues are chewed over. But where we believe we can lead the national debate forward... we will clearly make our own views known while providing a voice for those who disagree” (Sutchbury, 2007), it is obvious that in the case of Muslim Australia, this does not apply. There was only one quote from Muslims in *The Australian* and three in total across the three papers analysed, and as pointed out above, these minimal representations served only to further entrench the West/Islam dialectic.

4.5 Countering alienation and an eroded public sphere

The omission of Muslim voices is extremely unfortunate, particularly when it is so evident that such a voice is willing to be heard. As can be seen from the posts on Islamic blog sites, as well as the number of media releases issued by Islamic community organisations such as The Islamic Council of Victoria, there are many Muslims who can comment on Islam and their community in a intelligent and balanced form that would aid in communication and understanding for the wider community. As explained in the HREOC Report (2004, p. 3), “negative views in our community succeed when the media either facilitate or promote such characterisations, or at the very least do nothing to challenge or refute them”. By not being included in the media of wider Australia, Muslims can become further alienated, whereby “This silencing can minimise people’s participation in society, affect their educational and career opportunities and life chances” (HREOC, 2004, p. 5). According to Kabir (2006,
(with) the ratio of people in unprivileged position in the labour market remain(ing) three times higher than for wider society”. Schindler (1998, p. 80) describes this process of alienation in reference to discourse analysis:

Modalities of alienation can be found not just in the production process. Human beings are also symbol-forming creatures, and distorted communication processes have decentred the human structure of subjectivity. With language theory and hermeneutic techniques, we can aspire to regain the suppressed layers of meaning which lie beneath the reificational institutions of industrial society. Humanity can then engage in praxis so that political interests will no longer mechanically serve the forces of domination.

Having fora to facilitate a voice for Muslim Australia can certainly help to offset some of the anti-Muslim disinformation and demonisation that occurs in the mainstream media. In reflecting Habermas’s model of an eroded public sphere, Kellner (2005, p. 13) explains that “The internet provides the possibility of participatory democracy, a wide range of news and opinion, and a lively public sphere, and thus an important check against our increasingly arrogant, incompetent, and cowardly mainstream corporate media”. In checking our own Australian media against that of Islamic blog sites, its incompetence as objective news-providers and interpreters becomes obvious. As was illustrated in Chapter 3, the general themes through the blog threads were that of compassion for the victims and populace of London, fear and anxiety at reprisals by the Australian community, and a great deal of anger and resentment at the mainstream media and the allied governments for their treatment of Islamic affairs and Muslims, both historically and in contemporary practises. It is unfortunate that these sentiments aren’t reflected in the mainstream media to aid in understanding of Muslim affairs and offset at least some of the anger and bitterness directed towards Muslim Australia.

In a democratic system of government it is essential to have an impartial, balanced and objective media in order to facilitate an informed public. It is also essential for all sections of the public to be represented, and at the very least have a voice whereby
they may partake in community, policy and governance, where there exists “institutional sites where popular political will should take form and citizens should be able to constitute themselves as active agents in the political process” (Dahlgren, 1991, p. 2). In the absence of such representation, it is not surprising that with the advent of internet networking technology and blogging, Muslim Australia has at least found some arena to engage in debate about issues of pertinence. These fora exist “around flows of information and multimedia, and postsubcultures can be seen to be using the internet as an environment that supports their attempts to gain and provide access to information and culture that exists beyond the means of control of the dominant order” (Kahn & Kellner, 2005, p. 218).

In this way, Muslim internet culture, with its fora, blog sites and networks, can be identified as a counter-culture or counter-public to that of mainstream Australia, “because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public” (Warner, 2002, p. 113). As a counter-public, the Muslim internet culture becomes a reactionary force against the “projective character of public discourse, in which each characterisation of the circulatory path becomes material for new estrangements and recharacterisations, (and) is an engine for, not necessarily progressive, social mutation” (Warner, 2002, p. 113). Non-progressive social mutation in relation to Australian social and political life is illustrated by the return to the non-inclusionary nationalism since the mid-1990's, in which society has become less tolerant and multicultural in its stance. As a counter-public with access to a sphere of representation and debate via the internet, Muslims in Australia have the ability to produce their own characterisations and portrayals of Australianness, outside that bestowed upon it by the mainstream media and dominant public.

Through the existence of a counter-public whereby many voices can engage and be heard, it is possible for such technology to not only counter alienation, but also revive,
at least to some degree, a public sphere that has come under the control of corporate and political elites. As noted by Akbarzadeh & Smith (2005, p. 2), referencing a UK report (Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action, 2004) “systemic discrimination against Muslims and the recurrent negative portrayal of Muslims has pushed UK Muslims to the very margin of society – a dangerous trend that threatens to alienate them”. It can be taken for granted that such alienation is of great concern to Australian Muslims in regards to the widespread condemnation of Islam in this country. It is possible however, through internet networks, blogs and fora, to aid in countering alienation by providing a space for Muslims to voice their opinions and fears, and engage in debate in a sphere where they are genuinely being heard, even if it is only in arenas where individuals share a common interest.

With individuals of various locales being able to converse and form common identities within such spaces, it is then possible for a unified and proactive culture to emerge as a reactionary force against dominant perceptions. In his examination of a Muslim internet site in Sweden, Larsson contends that “by using information and communication technologies, members... are on the one hand linked to the rest of the Muslim world and on the other hand contributing to the creation of Muslim space in northern Europe” (Larsson, 2005, p. 14). It also becomes possible then, for a public that has formed through internet communications, to become a practical force in more traditional arenas, such as lobbying and activism. ¹

¹ It must be stated that such fora can have the ability to foster as many negative reactionary publics as positive ones, such as in the case of terrorist networks that may use the internet to gather support and recruit members.
5.0: Conclusion

The textual and critical discourse analysis of three of Rupert Murdoch’s Australian newspapers identifies the upkeep of historical Western hegemony through the language and symbolism evident in these media. In the wake of the London bombings of July 7, 2005, all three editions enforced anti-Muslim sentiment that had been precipitated since 9/11, and a pro-Western and intolerant stance that has been gaining in momentum since the mid-1990’s. Due to the widespread and extensive readership these newspapers have in Australia, such one-sided and highly subjective journalism has the effect of eroding the public sphere in Australia and limiting the capacity for Australians to access unpartisan information and engage in informed debate about issues relating to Muslims in Australia and globally. This also has the effect of alienating a section of the Australian public and producing even more fear and anxiety in white, mainstream society, serving to polarise the public of Australia along religious and cultural lines.

Whilst much can be uncovered through looking at language and relations in and between media sources, a further lengthier study could include empirical research particularly in regards to the impact media have on the lives of Muslims in Australian society in parallel to the analysis of virtual lives on the internet. Larsson (2005, p. 2) contends that “to develop research on religion and the Internet, it is also essential to combine online research with traditional fieldwork, participant observation and interviews. In addition, it would be of benefit to extensively analyse media effects in Australia in relation to the fear rhetoric as espoused by Furedi (1997) and Lawrence (2006), and how this is impacting on the politics and society of this country.
Nevertheless, this review and analysis of *The Australian, The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Sunday Times* has revealed a pro-conservative and anti-multiculturalist stance that is in line with the allied Western governments in terms of producing a Muslim 'other' both globally and nationally. In the absence of balanced alternative viewpoints, historical bases and Muslim voices regarding the current Islam/West conflict, what prevails is a very one-sided and limited discourse. The fact that the only Muslim commentary that is included in the articles is that of extremist opinion further exacerbates this situation, particularly when there were press releases and Muslim leaders available to provide intelligent and balanced opinion from the Muslim perspective. This has produced what Schindler (1998, p.80) calls a decentring of “the human structure of subjectivity”, which lie in the “reificational institutions of industrial society”.

As can be seen through the analysis of Islamic blog sites, there is much more to the Islam/West conflict than is being reported in major media sources. In addition, many Muslims feel vilified and demonised by a media which champions itself as objective and balanced, but in reality serves the basic assumptions outlined above. This is extremely detrimental to Australian society in terms of inclusion and tolerance, particularly in regards to the much-promoted values of egalitarianism and a fair go for all. Internet counter-cultures have the ability to counteract the decentring of subjectivity caused by media corporatisation by allowing counter-arguments and divergent opinions to be heard, and in turn may revitalise a public sphere that has been eroded through modernity, corporatisation and industrial society. It is not enough, however, for the public to become reliant on the internet for access to objective news and information: this should also be accessible in the forms of mass communication such as nation-wide press, television and radio. This echoes Kellner’s (2005) sentiments for the increase in public broadcasting and alternative media in order to further democracy. Alongside this, there should be a greater emphasis placed on investigative reporting in replacement of the emotive headlines and editorial copy that are often poorly researched and checked. This would stimulate a move towards praxis whereby
"political interests will no longer mechanically serve the forces of domination" (Shindler, 1998, p. 80).
6.0 References


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