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ARTICLE



## 'Swamped by Muslims' and facing an 'African gang' problem: racialized and religious media representations in Australia

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the implementation of multicultural policies since the 1970s, anxiety over cultural and religious 'others' continue to challenge Australia's diversifying national identity. Problematic media representations of racial and religious minorities persist in Australia and continue to shape public perceptions and political discourses on issues of migration and intercultural relations. This paper examines how Muslims and Africans are contemporary scapegoats of Australian anxieties. These fears continue to be present in racialized rhetoric and attacks on Chinese Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying discourse analysis on two recent case studies as illustrative examples – the 2018 Bourke Street attack and the so-called 'African gangs' – this paper argues that despite substantial research and critique, mainstream media continue to rely on familiar and problematic tropes for framing racial and religious minorities that dehumanize them based on essentialized characteristics of crime, violence and anti-social behaviour. These characteristics tend to be exploited for political gain, with Muslims and Africans portrayed as a disruption to social cohesion and national security. A critique of the role of media and political discourses is presented, as they remain critical instruments in the pursuit of a new ethics of openness, respect and mutual understanding, which are fundamental to living well with difference.

### KEYWORDS

Media representations; multiculturalism; social cohesion; muslim migrants; african youth; race and religion

## Introduction

There has been a recent surge in academic interest in how media representations and reporting influence public opinion and political discourse around issues of migration, diversity and intercultural relations (King and Wood, 2013; Mansouri and Lobo 2011). This influence has been evident in the way issues pertaining to asylum seekers, conflicts, terrorism and migration have been reported and politicized in the public realm both domestically and globally. And although this phenomenon is global and affects many culturally and religiously diverse societies, this paper will focus specifically on the Australian situation, and more specifically on two communities that have in recent years become the focus of much of this public mediatized scrutiny.

Anxieties over culturally and linguistically diverse migrants, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds have continued to be a defining feature of Australia's

national identity debates and have endured even after the adoption of a relatively progressive multicultural policy in the early 1970s (Mansouri 2015). Concerns over particular racialized minorities have increasing saliency in mainstream media, digital media spaces and in popular consciousness. The Christchurch massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in March 2019, a crime committed by an Australian white supremacist, was but one in a series of globalized attacks that send a strong message that certain minorities are not welcomed by parts of the Western world (ABC News 2019). Supporters of far-right-wing ideologies, including former Australian Senator Fraser Anning, have blamed 'Muslim fanatics' and the 'immigration program' for these attacks and other social problems in Western contexts (Baker 2019).

Since the establishment of Australia as a settler colony and the subsequent denial of Indigenous Australians in land rights and identity, a 'fear of invasion' discourse has shaped Australian identity debates following federation in 1901. The right to call 'Australia home is inextricably connected to who has possession [of land], and possession is jealously guarded by white Australians' (Moreton-Robinson 2017, 7). Significant Chinese immigration during the gold rushes of the mid-nineteenth century expedited the implementation of the White Australia Policy to restrict the entry of non-whites into the country (Hodes 2004). The notion of the 'Yellow Peril' was invoked in the context of this early Asian migration, racializing a group of migrants as an existential threat to the emerging nation (Walker 1999). Historical documentation of this racialization and discrimination were similarly found in print media analysis during that period (Cleland 2002; Monsour 2009; Walker 1999). This racialized rhetoric has been revitalized and invoked once again in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Chinese and Asian-looking Australians reporting encounters of racism in their everyday experiences (Zhao 2020). As the assimilationist tendencies of the White Australia Policy gradually gave way to a multiculturalism policy that led to successive waves of migration from the 1970s, other ethnic groups, including Vietnamese, Italian, Greek and others, had to endure similar prejudices, racism and intolerances (Richards 2008). Constructed against a Eurocentric majority, mistrust towards the ethnic and religious other, emerged especially through news media representations and political discursive repertoires and have continued in present-day Australia.

### **Problematized media representation of minorities: conceptual framings**

Media plays a significant role in shaping public opinions on issues and attitudes towards certain groups and communities. Altheide and Snow's (1979) seminal work on media logic remains relevant today, where media logic, defined as the institutional process and formats in which media messages are delivered, remains significant in influencing and shaping media content because 'events, action, and actors' performances [are reflected through] information technologies, specific media, and formats' (Altheide, 2013: 225). While audiences can have diverse responses to media messages, their 'social action [remains] shaped and informed by media technologies and the logics that orient behavior and perceptions' (Altheide, 2013: 225). Indeed, research on media's influence on attitudes and behaviours towards outgroups has highlighted how cognitive priming processes function to shape majority attitudes in the short term and how these attitudes develop into prejudicial, discriminatory processes in the long term (Saleem et al. 2015). As Saleem et al. (2015) argue, this suggests that 'our memories, thoughts, and decisions are based on

complex associative networks of nodes representing cognitions and emotions' and this is why 'media depictions of outgroups can activate certain kinds of associations in the short term (through priming processes), and with repeated exposure can lead to long-term changes in schemas (through learning processes)'. In other words, when media engages in negatively framed reporting of particular outgroups, it not only engenders and permits short-term spikes in racist attitudes, and especially towards Muslim women because of their religious visibility (Mansouri 2020a; Iner 2019), but because of the cumulative nature of such representations, it also contributes to more entrenched, longer-term discrimination that is justified with non-factual knowledge (Mansouri and Vergani 2018).

It is arguable that Muslims and Africans are contemporary victims of the accumulation of bias attitudes and associations. As part of a global phenomenon since the 9/11 attacks, Australian media have escalated in its use of discriminatory and essentialist reporting when it comes to representations of Muslims and Islam (Aly 2007; Ewart and Rane 2011: 58; Rane, Ewart, and Abdalla 2010), more frequently using negative media framings to reinforce existing prejudice and discrimination (Akbarzadeh and Smith, 2005; Ewart, Cherney, and Murphy 2017; Islam 2010; Poynting and Perry 2007). Much of the coverage depicts a 'radical' Islam as illustrative of broader Muslim beliefs and practices. Islam is frequently depicted as synonymous with violence and terrorism (Mansouri and Vergani 2018). Terms such as 'jihad' and 'terrorism' reinforce these negative representations, while little attention is given to the inherent heterogeneity of Islam and Muslim communities or to the distinctions between the overwhelming majority of ordinary Muslims and the very small and fringe groups and individuals identified as extremist Muslims (Dreher 2010: 197; Ewart and Rane 2011, 57–58). 'Islamophobia' has been conceptualized as a form of moral panic towards Islam and Muslims, in large part as consequence of sustained biased media reporting (Morgan and Poynting 2012; Islam 2010; Said 1997). The persistence of media tendency to reproduce these reductive connections between Muslims and terrorism further obfuscates the media's capacity to act more responsibly and provide alternative perspectives and story angles (Karim 2006, 125).

Similar media treatment has been applied to Australia's African communities, with the emphasis on associating African youths especially with violence and crime to the exclusion of all other attributes and factors (Bailey, Farquharson, and Marjoribanks et al. 2014; Han and Budarick 2018; Marjoribanks, Nolan, and Farquharson 2010). The term 'African gangs' has become a convenient catchphrase to meld race and crime and has been invoked, sustained and affirmed through media and political repertoires. African representation in Australian media tends to be depicted through the conflating lenses of race and crime, moralized as deviant from so-called Australian values and associated lifestyle (Nolan et al. 2011). By racializing crimes with an emphasis on the need to protect a particular Australian lifestyle, such media discourses problematically assume an otherwise crime-free context (Markus 2001; Williams and Greenfield 2001). Violence becomes racialized in these news reporting, compounded with issues on national identity and belonging (Marjoribanks, Nolan, and Farquharson 2010, 11), and frequently portrayed Sudanese people (in this research) in association with ideas of 'gang violence' and 'troublemakers' (Nolan et al. 2011 665) as an echo to the portrayal of Arab Australians as part of 'gangs' in the 1990s (Tufail and Poynting 2013).

Some scholars have considered media attention to religion 'a form of racialization' (Nye 2019, 1). This means that when religion is the focus of a media story, 'there are issues of both

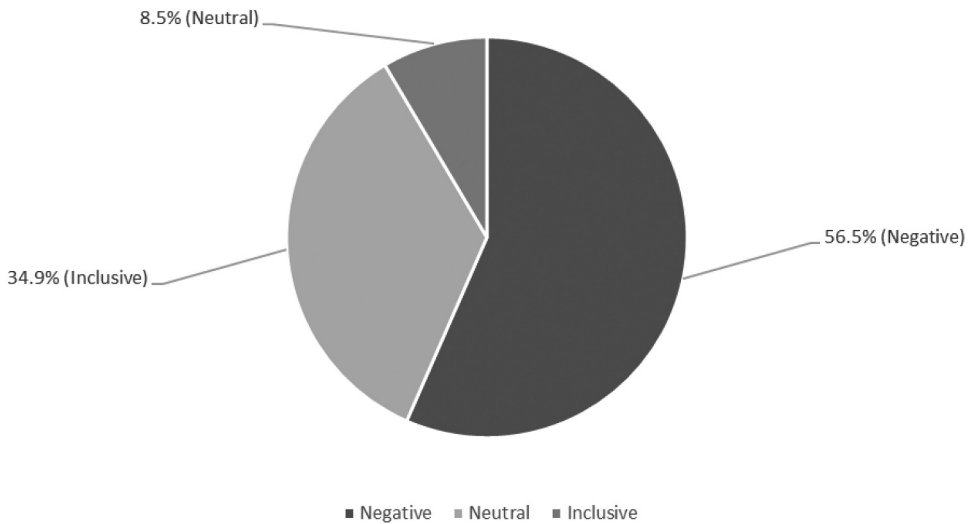
religion and racialization' that are occurring simultaneously (p.3). Racialization, as argued by Robert Miles refers to 'those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities' (Miles, 1989:75). It is this collective social categorization of Muslim Australians that at once denies the heterogeneous nature of Australian Muslim communities and imposes a set of binary value-laden judgements on them. In recent times and in the context of securitized agendas both domestically and globally, this collective categorization (Mansouri 2020b) Brubaker, 2012) of Muslims has tended to reduce them to homogenous groups susceptible to extremist, violent ideologies that are justified at the level of their doctrinal faith traditions (Mansouri and Keskin 2019). In this context, references to religion are invoked in racial terms and vice versa (Garner and Selod 2015; Meer 2013). Wolfe (2002) argues that the category of 'race' is conceptualized during colonialism as a category that differentiates to perpetuate inequality of power. Nye considers that 'on a superficial level, most popular definitions of race and religion define them as opposites – race is seen as being on the outside (about skin colour) whilst religion is internal (a matter of belief or faith)' (2019: 8). The overlapping of these categories occurs, where an emphasis on religion is in fact a form of racializing, especially in incidents such as when Sikhs are mistaken for and treated as Muslims based on their skin colour (Nye 2019: 4).

Scholarly discussions about Islamophobia frequently miss this racialized aspect. Drawing on parallels between Islamophobia and antisemitism, Meer and Modood (2009) argue that there needs to be concerted discussions to examine Islamophobia as a persistence of racism. Using historical examples, Meer demonstrates that 'the category of race was co-constituted with religion, and our resurrection of this genealogy implicates the formation of race in the racialization of religious subjects' (Meer 2013, 389). Not all Jews, however, are seen through an anti-Semitic lens; Jews can be considered 'one of us' where they have assimilated to become 'Westernized Jews' and are seen as different from other Jews (Kushner 2006, 211). Hage (2012: 20) makes a similar point in his critique of Australia's 'white nation fantasy' where 'whiteness is an aspiration' and 'people can be said to be more or less White and Australian' that is arguably dependent on their ethnic visibility, religion, language and values. The formation of an 'other' as a threat then typically invokes alienation on the basis of racial and moral differences (Morgan and Poynting 2012, 6).

### Recent cases of racialized media coverage

Critical questions are then raised about the twinning of race and religion in media representations of Australian minorities given attitudes informed by the media have social, cultural and political implications. Over the past decade, reports of increased racism have been concerning: in 2014, around 40% of Australians surveyed reported that 'there are [racial, ethnic or cultural] groups that do not "fit in"' and the number of these responses 'increased by 17% between 2006 and 2013' (VicHealth 2014). The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2018: 5) more recently reported an 88% increase in complaints about racism, despite claims that the African and Muslim communities were underreporting.

Australian media research informs and reflects these public attitudes towards Africans and Muslims. Through the analysis of a year's worth of reporting in mainstream media, All



**Figure 1.** Tone of racialized media reports (newspapers and broadcast) from 2017 to 2018 (All Together Now 2019)

Together Now (2019) found that '57% (out of 281 media articles) were negative when discussing race', a significant portion of them were published in the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*, at around 73 and 53 articles respectively (See Figure 1 for breakdown of racially negative, inclusive and neutral articles found). Furthermore, when race was invoked in these media reports, 70% of these articles 'used covert techniques such as dog-whistling, irony and de-contextualisation' (p. 3). Muslims and Africans were most frequently depicted negatively, along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (p. 9). Moreover, these negatively racialized reports were generated primarily by journalists of Anglo-Celtic (72%) or European backgrounds (24%; totalling 96%), and none of these media reports focused on Australians of Anglo-Celtic or European descent (p. 4)<sup>1</sup>.

These findings demonstrate that media discourses continue to present African and Muslim Australian communities as different from the Australian way of life and the norms of civility, as defined by the Anglo-Celtic majority. Sustained through an "us versus them" discourse, African youths and Muslims are depicted as socio-culturally incompatible outsiders. Media discourses about Muslim Australians continue to describe and refer to them as cultural and religious "others" (Ewart, Cherney, and Murphy 2017; Kabir 2006), informed and sustained by a normative and dominant Judeo-Christian whiteness (Stratton 2016; Weng 2019, 2020). An analysis of the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Q&A discussion programme found that topics related to Islam and Muslims continue to be framed as separate from and needing to integrate into the Australian way of life (Weng 2019, 2020). The impact of these media discourses is reflected in Muslim Australians' view that these media coverage can 'damage some Muslims' self-esteem, isolate others and make Muslims and their communities targets of vilification and discrimination': in a study involving 104 Muslim participants, participants remained exceedingly pessimistic about mainstream media portrayals of them and their faith, although a few mentioned that they have started seeing favourable coverage in more recent times (Ewart, Cherney, and Murphy 2017, 159). Australian youths<sup>2</sup> are not exempt from these impressions: in

a national survey of 1,005 high school students from schools across Australia, 82% of them 'offered either negative comments or comments that alluded to the differences between them and Muslims' when asked for their immediate thoughts to the term "Muslim" (Ata 2016, 346). The latest Scanlon Foundation report reflect this perception more broadly where negative attitudes towards Muslims (21–25%) are disproportionate compared to attitudes towards Christians and Buddhists (4–6%) (Markus 2019: 61). Negative attitudes towards Muslims were found to be informed by bias; a study found that while survey respondents self-reported knowledgeable about Islam, they were also inaccurately informed (Mansouri and Vergani 2018, 92).

More recently, the intense racialized reporting on African youths has been a salient feature of contemporary media and political discourse. Overseas-born Africans were disproportionately represented in Victorian crimes reported in the media compared to Australian-born offenders: from 2017 to 2018, Australian-born offenders, comprised 71.7% of all offenders. Comparatively, African-born (Sudan) offenders made up one per cent of all offenders (Crime Statistics Agency 2018; RMIT ABC FactCheck 2018). Figure 2 shows a breakdown of total unique offenders by country of origin. This disproportionate form of reporting was similarly noted from 2011 to 2012. While crimes committed by Sudanese – and Somali-Australians was at 0.92% and 0.35% respectively, it only made up 1.27% of crimes committed by all Victorian youths (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2014, 8–9). Media headlines from *Herald Sun*, *The Australian* and *The Age* during that period racialized these crimes through the use of phrases like "race-based street gangs", "African youth crime concern" and "migrant groups going gang busters" (p.8).

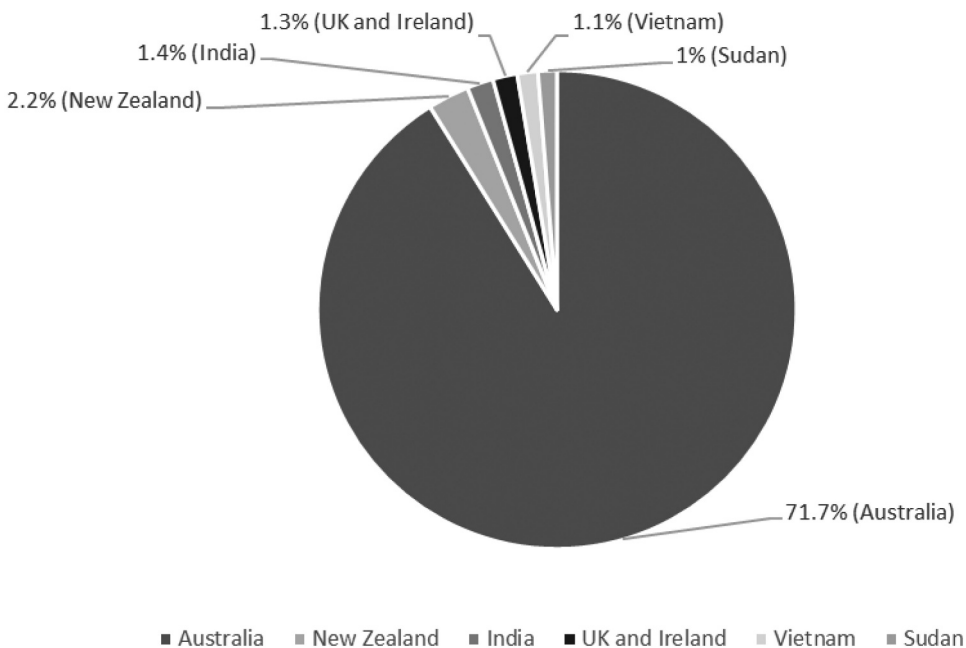


Figure 2. Unique offenders' country of origin by end of September 2017 (Crime Statistics Agency 2018)

Indeed, this trend was confirmed in a study on media representation of Sudanese in Australia that found that news tended to characterize them as “both perpetrators and victims of violence”, frequently in association with issues of migration, citizenship and settlement in Australia (Nolan et al. 2011). Of critical concern is that the culmination of persistent negative media coverage about racial and religious minorities can have long-term effects that would transfer the risks and cultural problems to new generations of Australian youths (Mansouri et al. 2017, 9). This is especially the case for racialized groups such as Australian Muslim youth who have in recent years become the focus of problematized media scrutiny in the context of terror threats, anti-social behaviour and lack of social integration. The risk of such social alienation is that these youth will withdraw even further from mainstream society and engage in a form of social bonding that does not further social cohesion and positive intercultural relations. Yet and despite these discourses, young people from migrant backgrounds, including African and Muslim, continue to have strong desires for engagement across cultures to locate their belonging and place in Australian society (Mansouri et al. 2013). Negative perceptions can especially and adversely impact young people and their sense of belonging, contributing to a range of social issues (Ewart, Cherney, and Murphy 2017, 150). There is cause to be concerned when such views are normalized across society, across political and media discourses and especially when they are replicated by younger generations.

Australia has a history of linking racial minorities to crime and this remains true even in recent times, especially in 2018 and 2019, where racialized coverage of Muslim and African Australians remain apparent in its media (Collins and Reid 2009). The continuity of these negative portrayals reflects a broader system of exclusion, despite sustained research advocating for more diverse media representation of minority groups (Al Jazeera English 2018; Rashid 2018). The salient resurgence of negative media and the public discourses that transpired in 2018 in particular have taken place in a political climate dominated by news of violence, fear and moral panic associated with certain racialized minorities. It was within this political climate that the Christchurch mosque attacks occurred in New Zealand on 15 March 2019. The scale of this violence, as a consequence of the normalization of hate speech on social media platforms towards Muslims minorities, has finally raised alarms as to the weaponization of these narratives and challenged governments and media institutions alike to start mitigating harmful language targeting specific groups of people (Bogle 2019). Media discourses that refer to race and religion need to tread lightly on the fine line between free speech and responsible reporting in this regard. Two recent case studies on Muslim and African media representation will be used as illustrative examples. The intention of this paper is not to present a full media analysis of how race and religion were utilized in this news reporting, but to use these incidents as examples to problematize how narrowly selected frames continue to be employed by the media in such incident reporting. Salient examples from mainstream newspapers and current affairs programme, that collectively cover a broad range of Australian demographics, are considered in the selection of these news pieces, given that collectively, they maintain dominance in shaping public perception and its content are shared and amplified across digital social media spaces (O'Donnell et al. 2018:13). As our interest for this article is to focus on how news media continue to frame specific events and issues, we have turned our attention to mainstream news media instead of social media for our analysis and discussion.



### *Bourke street attack*

On 9 November 2018, Hassan Khalif Shire Ali drove “a 4 × 4 vehicle loaded with gas bottles into [Melbourne’s] city centre, igniting the vehicle into a ball of flames and attacking passers-by with a knife’ (Henriques-Gomes 2018). News articles from major Victorian mainstream media outlets reveal the discursive frames and tropes journalists relied on in reporting this tragic event as it unfolded. They focused on Shire Ali’s Somali and religious background, speculated his alleged connection to the Islamic State and informed that he was on the Australian Security Intelligence Organization’s watch list. It is common for mainstream media to unveil more information on new stories days after a significant incident as the public grapples with its impact on the community and society more broadly. The use of “live blogs” has been a recent shift in media practices to add new information to a news piece as a live situation unfolds (Thurman and Newman, 2014). This new practice can mean having a more sensationalized headline for online articles to entice readers to click and read, as was the case for this incident and shown in an example below (Kuiken et al., 2017).

A sample of headlines on the Bourke Street attack shows that journalists continue to associate Islam with violence and extremism. Familiar terms associated with Islamist-initiated violence such as “jihad” and “terrorist” were consistently applied in reference to Shire Ali in these news reports. On the day of the attack and for several days after, *The Australian*, *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* ran sensationalized reports with headlines such as “Police link Bourke Street terror attack to IS” (Mills, Cunningham, and Hinchliffe et al. 2018), “Violent Islam strikes Bourke St” (Ferguson 2018b), “‘Crazy Eyes’ stabber killed” (Hurley, Simonis, and Devic 2018), “Bourke St killer’s ties to notorious jihadist” (Schliebs and Ferguson 2018), and “‘Dob in a jihadi’ call to Muslims” (Ferguson and Hutchinson 2018), to name a few. Some of the online news articles had different headlines to their print version. For instance, *The Australian*’s 12 November 2018 online headline of “Bourke St killer’s ties to notorious jihadist” was changed to “Police find no evidence Bourke St killer was mentally ill, links to notorious jihadist revealed” (Schliebs and Ferguson 2018).

Details about Shire Ali, his cultural and religious background, and the motivation behind the attack were referenced across the sample articles. On the day of the attack, it was already reported that “counter-terrorism investigators” were involved (Davey et al. 2018). Details of Shire Ali’s brother, “who will face a Supreme Court trial after pleading not guilty to preparing and collecting documents to commit a terror attack in Federation Square on December 31, 2017”, were included in a *Herald Sun* article the day after the attack (Hurley, Simonis, and Devic 2018). News consumers would also become aware that Shire Ali “had links to the Islamic State terrorist group”, that he “held radicalised views” and was known to security and intelligence agencies (Ferguson 2018b; Mills, Cunningham, and Hinchliffe et al. 2018). This was evidenced by his passport being cancelled in 2015 when he attempted to travel to Syria (Mills, Cunningham, and Hinchliffe et al. 2018). Additional evidence of his radical Islamic association was derived from his online friendship with “Khaled Sharrouf, who by then was a convicted terrorist on the road to international notoriety for his head-severing barbarism” (Schliebs and Ferguson 2018). There were also questions about the attacker’s mental state and whether he shouted “Allahu Akbar” during the attacks (Davey et al. 2018).

Information provided by authority figures is critical in shaping public perception of high-octane events such as this attack. Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton revealed that Shire Ali “arrived in Australia from Somalia in the 1990s [and] had relatives who were persons of interest to Victoria Police” (Ferguson 2018b). Acting Deputy Commissioner for National Security, Ian McCartney, was cited as suggesting that there was a terrorist association between Shire Ali, his family and the Islamic State (Mills, Cunningham, and Hinchliffe et al. 2018). Within the same article, then opposition leader, Bill Shorten, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews and Somali leader Sharmarke Farah were quoted as condemning the act of violence. Muslim communities were also co-opted in this story, where they were encouraged to “dob in a jihadi to help security agencies prevent lone-wolf terror attacks” (Ferguson and Hutchinson 2018). Prime Minister Scott Morrison criticized such acts of terror yet also mentioned that “radical, violent extremist Islam” is a force “that opposes our very way of life” (Henriques-Gomes 2018). While critical of this form of “religious extremism”, Morrison acknowledged that the Muslim community is actively challenging it. Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton went a step further when he placed greater responsibility on Muslim community leaders, stating that if they had information about extremists “but withhold it from the police or intelligence agencies [it] is unacceptable” (Rashid 2018).

### “African gangs”

Similar to the reporting of Australian Muslims and Islam, Australian African youth became the focus of sensationalized media reports and political discourses in Melbourne in 2018 through strong criminal associations. Specific incidents instigated these discourses and media coverage of them were included for this analysis. One of these events was the stabbing of a 19-year-old woman, Laa Chol, in an apartment in the Melbourne CBD in late July 2018. There were speculations that the crime was committed due to “warring factions” within Melbourne’s African community (Oaten 2018). These “ethnic gangs” were reported to have caused violent brawls at the Moomba Festival annually since 2016, and their violence was contrasted against the “family-friendly” festival (Duncan 2018; Reid 2019). Videos and images embedded within some of these articles focused on groups of dark-skinned individuals who outnumber and appear threatening towards police officers.

In reporting a spate of petty crimes, mainstream media chose to run a series of reports and stories under the headline “African gangs”, which legitimized additional political scrutiny of this particular community. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all of these news reports, but these media reports culminated in a *Sunday Night* TV special programme in July 2018 on Melbourne’s “African gangs”, with deliberate and simplistic linking of ethnicity and race to crimes and anti-social behaviour (Budarick 2018). This led to the investigative journalism programme *Four Corners* to launch an investigation into these sensationalized crimes, where crime victims, police officers and representatives from the African community were interviewed to provide broader perspectives on these discourses (Khalil 2018).

Politicians were quick to use these stories to support their own electoral agendas, which further contributed to public hysteria and panic. In response to these crimes, Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton opined that these “African gangs” were affecting Australian lifestyles and that Victorians were “scared to go out to restaurants”, though he

added a caveat that this stereotype does not apply to the whole community (Karp 2018). Former prime minister Tony Abbott argued along similar lines that there is a need to restrict African immigration to manage these social challenges (Koziol and Cunningham 2018). During the 2018 Victorian state election, the opposition Liberal party ran a fear campaign, frequently citing gang violence in Melbourne in their debates in the lead up to the election (Martin 2018), though their claims were rejected by relevant authorities and Victorian statistics on crime (SBS Radio 2018).

### Discussion: racialized and religious media discourses

Observations of news media discourses around the Bourke Street and “African gang” attacks reveal that familiar media tropes continue to be applied to generate specific discursive frameworks for these stories. These frameworks provide a basis for news consumers to comprehend or make sense of their current and future belonging in a community, society and geographical context (Kitzinger 2000). Not disputing that these incidents have led to injuries and deaths, this section will highlight areas of concerns to inform future media practices and areas of immediate and projected social concerns that need to be addressed.

Despite significant research that has challenged narrow media representations of Islam and Muslims, the association between Islam and violence was persistent throughout the reporting of the Bourke Street attack, especially through the use of trigger words such as “jihad”, terrorism” and “violence” in headlines. Similarly, familiar media tropes focusing on violence and African settlement were observable in media reports on so-called “African gangs”. In the reporting of African crime, gangs and violence, media angles continue to focus on these “African gangs” through the challenges African migrants face settling in Australia, the psychological trauma they experienced in their home countries and their carrying these traumas into their host country (Nolan et al. 2011). The use of these familiar keywords can be seen as a covert technique that relies on readers’ familiarity with intertextual meanings, which invoke problematic racialized and religious discourses in these instances (All Together Now 2019). Moreover, when religion is invoked, it tends to be politicized and viewed through narrow perspectives and discourses (Weng 2019, 2020; Weng and Halafoff 2020). This translation is evident in the political rhetoric used in the lead up to the Victorian election, where politicians leveraged these politicized media discourses to call for restrictions on African immigration as a way of curbing related social problems. Media practitioners are well placed to be aware of these intertextual discourses and can be more conscious in their choice of words, and should consider other possible angles for news stories.

Deviancies are constructed through these news stories, where mental and psychological issues are moralized in association with race and religion. Moral discourses are frequently employed in media discussions associated with religions, and while Christianity’s privileged position is increasingly challenged in these spaces (Weng 2020), a hierarchy of religious privilege is present when comparing the 2017 and 2018 Bourke Street attacks. James Gargasoulas, the 2017 Bourke Street attacker who claims to be Christian, was primarily described as mentally ill, whereas Shire Ali was mostly characterized as a radicalized Muslim (Rashid 2018). In these media reports, the question of Shire Ali’s mental state was raised. As evidence, witness accounts were given that Shire Ali may have shouted “Allahu Akbar” at the time of the attacks, although this remains

unconfirmed. References to religion are frequently associated with irrationality when invoked in secular, rational public spaces (Arnal 2007; Weng 2020). Deviancy is likewise racialized in the case of the so-called African gangs and associated with crime and violence. The visual inclusion of images of groups of dark-skinned youth caught in motion next to groups of policemen further serve to highlight the disparity between race, morality and chaos next to the institutionalization of social order (Reid 2019). Media emphasis on deviancies not only highlights and affirms the behaviour of a “moral majority”, but in reporting on the majority’s response to these events, “serve to distort and otherwise amplify the perceived deviance which is the object of their outrage” (Rohloff et al. 2013, 3). It is within such media applications that a “moral panic” emerges; where the moralization of specific events and actions discursively constructs the “cultural scapegoat” who embodies and strengthens a hidden anxiety (Garland 2008, 15). In that respect, media practitioners are called to apply caution to the way they moralize discourses, especially when it involves racial or religious minorities, and to consider their positions in their constructions of morality.

News media reports on these incidents continued to employ othering discourses that serve to separate and segregate Muslim and African communities from an otherwise normalized Australian society. Perpetrators were racialized through a media focus on their ethnic backgrounds and religions, and reference to their potentially extremist beliefs. Shire Ali and his family’s immigration to Australia from Somalia was frequently included and questioned in media reports that othered not only him but served to other his entire culture and community from the centre of Australian society. Likewise, discourses on “African gangs” focused on the violence wrought upon quotidian Australian life and politically legitimized questions on immigration and settlement issues. Both the Bourke Street incident and the so-called African gang crimes instigated problematic media reporting and discursive framing of crime, security and belonging in ways that stigmatize whole communities and construct them as inadequate for local and national belonging. Media practitioners ought to consider a more inclusive approach to their reporting of racial and religious minorities (All Together Now 2019), which call for comprehensive and complex background and perspectives. There also needs to be greater cultural diversity in newsrooms as this presents a critical gap in lived knowledge to which minorities can contribute (Rodrigues and Paradies 2017). A more nuanced understanding of religion and its contextual development, in the form of increased religious literacy, is also recommended so that journalists are well prepared for this type of reporting (Weng 2020).

The othering process is further amplified when figures of authority stand up and call for greater self-regulation in minority communities, which needs to be questioned and challenged. When the Bourke Street attack occurred, several authoritative figures, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton, made comments to the media that alienated the Muslim community. At a press conference the day after the Bourke Street attack, Morrison said that “‘radical, violent, extremist Islam’ [is] the greatest threat to Australia’s national security” (Ferguson 2018a). While leaders from the Muslim community were given voice to respond to these attacks and comments (SBS News 2018), other key figures from various communities could also be sought for their opinion as part of a collectivized multicultural effort, while veering away from an us-versus-them discourse.

The increasing politicization of racial and religious minorities in Australian media discourses has brought to the fore ethno-nationalist discourses that popularly reference Christianity. An extreme conservative interpretation of Christianity is frequently adopted by right-wing politicians as a response to religious and cultural diversification. Indeed, in August 2018, then Katter's Australian Party senator Fraser Anning incited a media frenzy over the choice of his words in reference to the Muslim community in his Parliamentary maiden speech (Anning 2018). Self-identifying as a conservative Christian, he argued against Muslim immigration and advocated for a return to a "cohesive, predominantly Anglo-Celtic nation". His offences to religious people extended to the Jewish people through his "ignorance" of the Holocaust when he referred to the necessity of restrictive immigration policies as a "final solution" (Conifer 2018). It comes as no surprise then that Australian alt-right factions support Anning in their plans to reclaim a racialized version of nationalism (Mann and Sveen 2019).

Right-wing extremism has become increasingly legitimized in public discourses as media platforms permit and enable these political articulations. Race and religion are instrumentally politicized in these agendas. Although Anning condemned the Christchurch massacre and its violence, his view that the act was a form of "violent vigilantism" (Baker 2019) revealed the perception of Muslim immigration as criminal in nature and the act of terror, a form of justice. This attitude of racial superiority is also observed in Pauline Hanson, founder of the ultra-nationalist One Nation Party, who has compared Islam to "a disease, we [need to] vaccinate ourselves against" (Remeikis 2017). Against this normalization of ethnocentric nationalism, it is not surprising that the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacres, was represented as a normal white person from a working class background, presented as an "angelic boy" and described as "good" by his grandmother in media discourses (Al Jazeera News 2019; White and Hanrahan 2019). The discourse of white terrorism still appears unfamiliar to Western media. This was demonstrated by the coverage of the 2011 Norway attack, in which 77 people were killed by white nationalist Anders Breivik. Early reporting of this mass attack in Western media immediately assumed it was incited by an Islamic group terror attack, and Breivik's Christian faith and white supremacist motivations remained less identified (Hervik and Boisen 2013, 203). The danger of normalizing exclusionary and banal racialized narratives is that it gives credence to racially motivated violence perpetrated by white supremacists and far-right groups against those declared socially and morally unfit to belong to the national community. Media discourses ought to consider and critique their privileging of an ethnocentric understanding of terrorism and violence, and it is critical that the media expands understanding of radicalization and terrorism beyond their racialized and religious conceptualizations.

## Conclusion

The discussion presented here highlights the critical role that mainstream media plays in framing racial and religious minorities in ways that dismiss their heterogeneity and reduces them to a few essentialized characteristics around crime, violence and anti-social behaviour. These characterizations are further exploited politically to argue for the inherent inability of these racialized groups to socially integrate and culturally coexist, thus painting them as a risk to social cohesion and national security. But as the discussion

of media reporting around recent incidents revealed, the racialization of minoritized groups comes with a high social cost, often leading to a politics of social exclusion and in some cases outright violence against innocent members of those communities, as witnessed tragically in the Christchurch massacre.

News media, both traditional and its new social iterations, continue to contribute significantly to everyday Australians' understanding of issues of immigration, national identity and security threats. The recent advances in information and communication technologies have meant that news and reporting are now able to be shared across different media platforms almost instantly, thus adding further to the potential of media outlets to shape public opinions on critical matters. Such tectonic changes call for more responsible and ethical reporting that avoids the twinning of race and religion in reporting on crime and violence in a manner that ostracizes whole communities. This obviously demands a deep critical approach to entrenched power relations in contemporary societies, where not only narratives are countered, but, more importantly, structural inequalities are redressed in ways that do not privilege particular groups over others (Moreton-Robinson 2011; Crenshaw 1989; Appiah 1998).

In the classical orientation of critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 1998), resisting and disrupting vestiges of hegemonic social and political structures requires more than providing counter-narratives about identity, with national and grassroots struggles for more ethical, inclusive modes of relatability and engagement at the heart of it all. The practical outcome of all of this structural power re-alignment is that it might become possible to re-imagine and indeed improve cultural diversity and religious literacy within newsrooms so that journalists are better equipped to handle complex news stories involving culture and religion, since more nuanced contextually appropriate cultural and religious knowledge is required in the presentation of news involving racial and religious minorities in multicultural Australia (Rodrigues and Paradies 2017; Weng 2020). There is a great need to challenge the dominance of bias and selective media framing in newsroom culture and in the repetition of these narrow representations. Living with diversity requires a particular ethics, oriented towards empathy and connectedness rather than apathy and divisiveness. Beyond the mere inclusion of minority representation and voices, there is also a need to encourage 'listening across differences', where responsibilities are shifted to media institutions to create and facilitate 'receptivity and response' (Dreher, 2009: 451). Media reporting and political discourses are critical instruments for pursuing a new ethics of openness, respect and mutual understanding, all of which are requirements of living well with difference.

## Notes

1. The cultural background of journalists was determined by the All Together Now team in collaboration with the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) (All Together Now, 2019: 34).
2. As the study was based on voluntary participation, the sample of schools played a part in shaping its findings. Respondents overwhelming came from Catholic (53%) and Christian schools (26%), where schools from NSW and ACT (42%) and VIC (34%) were dominant in representation (Ata 2016: 338).

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