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# News media and the Muslim identity after the Christchurch mosque massacres

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses news about Muslims via one researcher's social media news feeds after the Christchurch tragedy. Using intercultural and Islamic communication theories, the contents of several news stories are analysed for their contribution to the Muslim person's identity. Findings reveal four main categories: Muslim women and hijab; religion and terrorism; media, government, democracy and the politics of oppression; and representation of the Muslim voice. Substantial news content also depicts peace, love and forgiveness in its presentation of the human angle in New Zealand media. There is a significant shift from the negative othering rhetoric of international media to an inclusive national approach in the tone of the New Zealand press. However, Muslim narratives reveal that structural discrimination and systemic oppression do exist and pose safety and identity challenges. While news continues to divide and unite people depending on the press agenda, their depictions of Islam and Muslims have potentially major influences and serious consequences on the Muslim person's identity within the local and global Muslim communities.

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## Introduction

Over two billion people in the world identify as Muslims (World Population Review 2019) with 57,276 residing in New Zealand (Stats NZ 2018 census). Like all groups of people, Muslims are diverse. Yet media research on Islam and Muslims in New Zealand showed that the faith and its followers have been misrepresented as homogenous and typified as exclusively terror-prone and a danger to civil society (Eid 2014; Terzis 2016; Rahman and Emadi 2018). This misrepresentation tended to correspond with international news that was recycled for local consumption.

The normalisation of Islam and Muslims as a faith that preaches violent acts is dangerous, worrying and painful for those who identify as Muslims. The Christchurch attack on Muslim worshippers on 15 March 2019 is a tragic outcome of one person's irrational hatred born out of misconceptions.

Like all group identities, the Muslim identity is shaped by the concept of self and external attributions. Reinforced negative public perception of a group's identity has both

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personal and social consequences. With discrimination, alienation, false media representations and Islamophobia, the Muslim person's identity is consistently impacted in a negative way.

For Muslims in socially networked environments, news stories about Muslims are likely to be accessed through social media newsfeeds. Whether pushed through algorithms or shared networks, these stories contribute to public perception of the Muslim identity. To understand the media's treatment of Muslims after the Christchurch attacks, twelve news stories about Muslims from social media were analysed using Islamic and intercultural theories. The treatment of Muslims as a minority group is not unlike other marginalised minorities. Negatively targeted by the media of a dominant culture, Muslims suffer normalised abuse, discrimination and oppression (OnePath Network 2017).

To uphold social justice in a democratic society, collective social action is needed to address minority concerns. But New Zealand has had a colonial history of racism, discrimination and marginalising minorities and these negative treatments appear to be normalised and continue to be an issue (Anae et al. 2015; Ng 2017; Reid et al. 2018).

The normalised abuse of people from an ethnic, religious or cultural background, supported and enforced by society and its institutions is known as systemic oppression. A related concept is structural discrimination. This refers to institutionalised prejudice against a people that results in limiting their opportunities such as racial profiling by security and law enforcement agencies. It is important to recognise the negative treatment of minorities generally and understand how this extends to the oppression and discrimination faced by Muslims in New Zealand.

### ***Oppression of minority groups***

Historically, Māori have suffered marginalisation and oppression by the dominant European culture represented by the government or the crown. Oppression means the absence of fair treatment and it thrives on the humiliation and subjugation of people who are considered inferior by virtue of being different from the mainstream group, culturally or ethnically. Discrimination against Māori and the stealing of their lands and sovereignty have been well documented (Ministry of Culture and Heritage n.d.). The colonialist mentality also saw the dominating race as superior and systematically imposed their way of thinking and learning.

After the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, there were several unethical practices committed by the Crown including taking and condoning questionable purchases of Māori lands and disregarding Māori input in areas of governance that involved community interests (New Zealand History n.d.; New Zealand Parliament 2014). However, since New Zealand attained its citizenship status in 1948, the government has consciously worked on 'assimilation and integration' of a bicultural Māori – Pākehā (European New Zealanders) society, acknowledging the rights of Māori as indigenous people.

Reparation for the unjust treatment of Māori came in the form of government policies such as the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 which established the Waitangi Tribunal, an ongoing commission of inquiry investigating treaty claims dating back to 1840 (New Zealand History n.d.; New Zealand Parliament 2014).

But some acknowledgements took time. It was only in the year of the Christchurch mosque massacres, on 2 October 2019, that the British High Commissioner offered an

apology and acknowledged the murder of some Māori when Captain Cook first arrived in Aotearoa (Graham-McLay 2019). While some felt this was a progressive diplomatic move, others argued that the apology rang hollow and was not good enough (Ngata 2019).

One of Ngata's main objections had to do with the British ambassador's explanation that Captain Cook documented his regret of the murders in a journal and that this admission of wrong 'equips you better ... to look to the future and build a partnership' (para. 10). Indeed, the complex mire of historical injustices cannot be solved in a single apology; it needs ongoing dialogue and resolution by consensus. Any genuine attempt to 'address the wrongs of the past' must invest the time that it will take to do so.

The normalisation of Pākehā interests and perceived superiority of their culture, people and viewpoint is known as 'white privilege'. It includes a presumption that people of colour are somehow less, whether socio-economically, culturally, intellectually or spiritually, and thus need saving, guidance and control. This ideology underscores the dominant culture's attitude towards minority groups in New Zealand, resulting in various forms of discrimination including in the implementation of policies. For example, the Pasifika community suffered the 'dawn raid', an immigration and police crackdown in the 1970s that targeted and deported Pacific Islanders who were overstayers while those of European origin were overlooked (Andrew 2019).

Wilson (2019) argued that the Christchurch terrorist's manifesto was an 'ideology of nativism and white supremacy' (para.10). These terms describe the ethnocentric historical origins of bias during colonial times towards European settlers. While they do not characterise European people in general, society must recognise and remain cognisant of the structural discrimination in policymaking and implementation, which has been biased towards 'whiteness'. Wilson (2019) also warned social commentators, immigration officials and political leaders to be conscious of the extremist ideology of nativism and white nationalism, for

Any exaggerations (or outright fabrications) of crimes committed by immigrants, or the supposed threat migration poses to society, quickly becomes fuel for nativist sentiment, legitimises it and motivates people to commit violence. (Wilson 2019, para.10)

Like other minority groups, Muslims in New Zealand have had to struggle for their place in New Zealand society. There have been many incidents of abuse and discrimination against Muslim women particularly, and concerns were raised between 2014 and 2018 by The Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand (IWCNZ) with various government offices, including the Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, Department of Internal Affairs in Hamilton and State Services Commissioner (Rahman 2019a).

The IWCNZ leadership reported that nothing was done despite their suggested preventive measures and concerns over the growing hate rhetoric, the alt-right group and the local Islamophobic news content such as the fake news on 'Jihadi Brides' (Rahman and Emadi 2018). Not only have Muslims failed to get their concerns addressed in government policies, but their voices were also underrepresented in New Zealand media (Rahman and Emadi 2018).

### ***Representations of Muslims in New Zealand media***

Before the Christchurch attack, Muslims were portrayed disparagingly in New Zealand media (Rahman and Emadi 2018) and this corresponded with the stories told in

international media, originating largely from the USA. Indeed, Muslims have had a rather troubling relationship with western media. This refers to media groups defined by historical Greek and Roman influences which discriminate against minority groups. The clash of civilisations (Huntington 1996) narratives tended to dominate media. These see cultures and religions as primary sources of conflict.

Fake news on the 'weapons of mass destruction' purportedly hidden by Iraq, a Muslim nation, framed Islam as a faith that supported violence. This was reinforced by 9/11 where US news media coined now standardised terms (*Islamicist terrorist*) that characterised Islam as a violent faith and Muslims as terrorists. Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, who were once backed by western powers (Worley 2016; Chossudovsky 2019), moved from allies to enemies.

The rise of 'terror' groups claiming to be Muslims further fuelled depictions of a violent people. Despite sympathisers who see these groups as disenfranchised and retaliating against western destruction of their people and properties, the consensus is that there is no excuse for exacting revenge against the innocent and calling for worldwide terror attacks to spread fear and panic. Western media however promoted terror-culture as mainstream Islam and the clash of culture narratives became staple material. Stories of and about Muslims are often told through western lenses and statements made by 'Muslims' are limited to the disgruntled and agenda-driven people with a violent outlook inside a conflict environment. Yet, Neiwert et al. (2017, para.1) reported that a study from 2008 to 2016 on 'homegrown terror' in the United States showed that 'far right plots and attacks outnumber Islamist incidents by 2-1'. In his study on counter terrorism, Koehler (2019), noted that far-right violence is under-classified and not treated as terrorism, indicating that democratic countries 'are blind on the right side' (p.1).

In another study involving the journalism industry and education sectors in Australia and New Zealand, Ewart et al. (2016) identified a range of factors for the lack of accurate stories on Muslims and Islam. These were newsroom culture, lack of knowledge about the Islamic faith and unawareness of the impact of journalistic actions on Muslims in social-political contexts. Stories that present Islam negatively while normalising ignorance of the faith rely on institutionalised 'newsroom culture' that supports a deep-seated psyche of othering. It explains the structural discrimination and continued oppression of Muslims within societies where the dominant culture adopts this mentality.

The Washington Post's study of the Global Terrorism database (Lowery et al. 2018) showed that between 2010 and 2017, right-wing domestic terrorism attacks in the United States accounted for the highest number at 92, along with attackers whose motives were not clearly political (92 attacks), compared to 38 attacks by those claiming to be Muslims. Clearly, when reporting on terrorism, media is focused on drawing attention to violent acts committed by people who identify as Muslims at the expense of white supremacist terrorism.

After the Christchurch attack, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, called for an end to Islamophobia perpetuated by the media. He blamed both Western and Muslim leaders for failing to address misconceptions, calling for an end to terms like 'radical Islam' which is intrinsically contradictory for Muslims (Merelli 2019). Khan called out Muslim leaders for coining terms like 'moderate Muslim' and 'enlightened moderation' to appease the West. Instead, he called for a concerted effort to bridge the gap of cultural ignorance. For example, Khan illustrated that Muslims and Western societies reacted

differently to satire on religion. He cited how a satire about a messiah was considered fair play in the West whereas for Muslims, it is sacrilegious and disrespectful to mock any messenger of God.

In their study of media representation of Islam and Muslims, Rahman and Emadi (2018) found that negative stories on Islam had increased annually between 2014 and 2017, with nearly seven times more stories categorised as ‘Islamic terrorism’ in 2016. Muslims are perceived as a homogeneous violent group and this is compounded by the media’s negative rhetoric, ascribing false meanings to Islamic terms. ‘Jihad’ and ‘Islamic Jihad’ were labels used to characterise calls for violent actions rather than its intended usage for the majority of the two billion Muslims who do not belong to or support terror organisations. In reality, ‘jihad’ generally refers to the struggle to be the best version of oneself in doing good. Eid (2014) noted that

media portrayals tend to promulgate racialized Orientalist stereotypes, create a Muslim enemy Other, and depict Muslims as irrational, uncivilized, backward, threatening, corrupt, oppressive, deviant, exterior to the dominant culture, and uniquely fundamentalist. (p.100)

Overall, Rahman and Emadi (2018) found more negative, and ambivalent or conflicting representations of Muslims and Islam than there were neutral and balanced ones. Visuals also showed clear patterns of falsification, contradiction and negative representation. The most unethical story was the fake ‘Jihadi bride’ news (Otago Daily Times 2016) with a picture of a masked man in the forefront brandishing a weapon and a flag that had Arabic letters.

Consistent labelling of Islam as synonymous with terror creates an environment of mistrust of Muslims and inculcates irrational fear against them. Khan (2016) argued that

The danger of the modern polemical fixation on religion as the ultimate cause of violence is that it does not end hatred and violence, but instead contributes to it by creating another monster—namely xenophobia towards members of religious communities. (Khan 2016, para.14)

He noted that it promoted ‘a toxic environment of ongoing hostile rhetoric’ and recommended that people switch to humanising one another. A cursory observation of mainstream news after the Christchurch attacks showed some effort in New Zealand media to humanise victims. Whether these positive media representations of the Muslim identity will be sustained remains to be seen.

The normalisation of Islam and Muslims as a destructive force is a dangerous lie that can initiate and sustain hatred in communities who rely on media for knowledge and information. The killing of 51 peaceful worshippers and the injury to many others are sad reminders of one person’s ideology of supremacism, intolerance, and consuming hatred born out of misconceptions reinforced by the media.

### ***A White Supremacist Attack on Muslims in New Zealand***

During Friday prayers on 15 March 2019, a gunman attacked worshippers in Al Noor and Linwood mosques in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, maiming dozens and killing a total of 51 people including women and children. As shock rocked the country with a diverse ethnic population (Rahman and Brown 2017), media began to tell the stories as

they unfolded. There were many voices of grief, disbelief and anger but mostly compassion and a resolve by the Kiwi nation that ‘this is not us’ and that any hate talk that encouraged threat and violence must stop.

TV media had special screenings of the aftermath as various community groups and people of all backgrounds gathered to pay their tributes to the victims and their families. New Zealand banned the live-streamed video of the massacres from circulation. As mosques around the country were guarded by police to safeguard Muslims from further attacks, the people of Aotearoa launched a site to raise funds for the victims and show solidarity with movements such as ‘Headscarf for Harmony’ (Feek 2019). Within a week, more than NZ\$10 million was raised for the victims with the government pledging to support their families (Kenny 2019).

Indeed, the people of New Zealand responded with shared humanity after the Christchurch attack. New Zealand media did live coverages of the crisis while maintaining no coverage of the terrorist, his manifesto or his background. The focus was entirely on the victims and their stories of grief and courage. The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, had taken the lead by refusing to give the terrorist recognition, stating that he will remain nameless when she spoke of the tragedy (Wahlquist 2019). Arden’s immediate reference to the act as ‘terrorism’ also exonerated Muslims from the unfair shackles of the label.

By the reactions of international media, New Zealand leadership was exceptional in showing empathy, grief, love and respect for the Muslim people. Muslims worldwide must have been confused and touched by the outpouring of kindness, a feature of news that is not normally connected with Muslims. Arden’s first public response to the pain and suffering of those affected was palpable on the front pages of international tabloids. She represented the iconic image of New Zealand’s empathy, love and compassion. Political pundits, critics and social commentators praised Arden for her ‘swift strong leadership’ (Fitfield 2019).

When Australian Senator Fraser Anning tried to link violence with Muslim immigration, Arden called it ‘a disgrace’ and in response to Trump’s offer of help, Arden was reported to have said what was needed at this time was ‘sympathy and love for all Muslim communities.’ (Jacinda Ardern is redefining leadership in an age of terror 2019, para.2). Arden’s steely reserve in refusing to acknowledge the terrorist, calling the act ‘terrorism’, and her immediate commitment to review gun laws were decisive actions that endeared her to the local and international Muslim communities. Her symbolic gesture of wearing a headscarf was an act of solidarity with the Muslim people whose identity had been dehumanised as worthless and disposable. Arden’s actions, which represented the Kiwi way, humanised the pain of Muslims.

Perhaps the best tribute that captured the overall gratitude of Muslims is the tweet message from Sheik Mohammed, the prime minister and vice-president of the UAE, and ruler of the emirate of Dubai:

New Zealand today fell silent in honour of the mosque attacks’ martyrs. Thank you PM [@jacindaardern](https://twitter.com/jacindaardern) and New Zealand for your sincere empathy and support that has won the respect of 1.5 billion Muslims after the terrorist attack that shook the Muslim community around the world. [pic.twitter.com/9LDvH0ybhd](https://pic.twitter.com/9LDvH0ybhd)

With the message was a lit-up image of Arden in a headscarf, embracing a woman at the Kilbirnie mosque in Wellington, on the 829-metre Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest building, accompanied by the word ‘salam’ in Arabic, meaning ‘peace’ (MacManus 2019).

While international adoration for New Zealand leadership meant that the eyes of the world were on the country, immediate reactions on the ground were focused on ensuring national unity, protection and support of the New Zealand Muslim community. But the hard question is how the attack could happen in a country known for its Kiwi hospitality, and a society that is inclusive and values diversity (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018). The answer has to do with appearance and reality. Outwardly, there has been general talk and show of including minorities but, the media and government have historically marginalised Muslims. The negative media misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims internationally and locally, and the government's apparent general lack of support for the reported abuse of Muslims prior to the Christchurch attacks have a part to play in the tragedy.

It is necessary to highlight how the Christchurch tragedy was undermined by unbalanced reporting of the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka by extremists who identified as Muslims. On the back of the Christchurch tragedy, suicide bombings in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 killed more than 350 people, largely Christian worshippers on Easter Friday. This was attributed to 'brainwashed' members of a Muslim family, which unfortunately strengthened the idea of Muslims being a danger to civil society. Reports indicated that the bombings were a retaliation for the Christchurch mosque massacre.

Interestingly, several Muslim groups had warned the Sri Lankan government about the hate rhetoric and extreme ideology of the terrorists, but no actions were taken. Innocent Muslims became the target of angry mobs, causing further death and destruction (Safi 2019). Media and governments have a responsibility to report fairly, engage in dialogue, and invest in preventive measures to address and eradicate all forms of extremism.

## **Rationale and methodology**

While there is research on news representations of Muslims internationally and in New Zealand specifically (Eid 2014; Ewart et al. 2016; Rahman and Emadi 2018), the studies are largely based on news gathered from a variety of media outlets rather than news disseminated from social media specifically. To tap into this area of news content dissemination about Muslims, this work focuses on one Muslim researcher's social media newsfeeds, namely via Twitter and Facebook.

Limitations in this approach may be that data analytics about users tend to push particular news stories via social media. Also, the circle of networks might have an influence on the types of news received. Regardless, with social media playing a major role in disseminating news through networked communities, the Muslim identity is constantly shaped, questioned and developed. This work presents some aspects of the Muslim identity via social media news content.

News stories that relate to Islam and the Muslim identity after the Christchurch attack were selected from this researcher's social media news feeds between March 15 and August 23, 2019. While there were many that appeared on both Facebook and Twitter newsfeeds, shared by the wider network of friends and the media's own social media presence, the contents of many stories were often the same or similar, particularly news on the charges against the terrorist and the ongoing situation with the victims and their families.



Out of the 23 stories collected, 12 news stories either mentioned the Christchurch tragedy or addressed some aspect of the Muslim person's identity. The articles are listed in the table below, indicating their dates of publication and their media/author.

The analysis section employs methods with Islamic underpinnings as research showed an absence of Islamic theories in media research about Muslims (Rahman and Emadi 2018). Ahmed and Matthes (2017) noted that 'even media studies on Islam tended to have an Anglo-centric focus, giving attention to Western media, Western journalism and applying Western ways of interpreting and knowing' (p. 169).

The theory of Ta'will (Emadi 2014) was used to explain the visual content. Ta'will is an Arabic term and the theory was conceived by Mulla Sadra, a Shia Muslim, whose philosophy was influenced by the Persian philosophers Ali Ibn Sina (980–1037 CE) and Shahāb ad-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191). Essentially, the term means 'bringing back to the root' through intensification and interpretation. Briefly, the theory is concerned with searching for the truth when interpreting meaning in messages. Because perception through sensory experience can be limiting and presents fragmented understanding, the interpreter is encouraged to question, to doubt the apparent and look for hidden meaning.

Ultimately, at the centre of all entities is the divine and theoretically, one can find the divine through perfection in understanding. Since complete knowledge belongs to the divine, knowledge for mortals becomes a journey of finding, uncovering and seeking meaning. Ta'will requires a holistic approach that considers the emotional, social and spiritual meanings of visual content. These include the purpose of the visuals, the effects of the symbols used, the emotional and spiritual benefit or disadvantage to those affected by the content, and what it says about society.

The theory of dialogue and persuasion from the Islamic perspective (Rahman 2016) is used to analyse the textual content. Unlike traditional western understanding, dialogue and persuasion are not mutually exclusive and both are ethical in Islam. Persuasion sits within the dialogic framework as both dialogue and persuasion do not have preconceived objectives.

In Islam, persuasion is not about winning an argument but about sharing a point of view with conviction and clear evidence. The idea relies on the Islamic missionary purpose to share the message of one God and the final messenger, without any expectation of conversion since God, not man, is 'the turner of hearts'.

Human communication follows a dialogic process of turn-taking, listening and understanding. Applying this to the text analysis of news stories, the author's representation of the Muslim and understanding of the reported situation were assessed. Persuasive elements were also identified to determine their purpose. Is persuasion used to present only one side of an argument or create understanding? Were Muslims included for their views in stories about them? Did these stories promote opinions that were factually presented? What purpose did the story achieve and who would it benefit?

## **Content analysis and discussion of news stories from social media news feeds**

Using the Islamic communication theories of Ta'will and Islamic dialogue and persuasion, the textual and visual contents of twelve news stories were analysed for their contribution to the Muslim person's identity. Where relevant, intercultural communication concepts

are applied including ethnocentrism, white privilege, structural racism, structural discrimination and systemic oppression.

Ethnocentrism refers to the assessment of other cultures based on one's own cultural standards, customs and values while structural racism refers to ways in which the history and culture of a society continue to grant privileges to the dominant culture, while withholding similar benefits from minority groups. Racial inequity is perpetuated through representations of culture and implementation of policies that benefit the dominant group.

The twelve stories can be grouped into four broad themes, identified in brackets by the numbered articles from [Table 1](#):

- (1) Muslim women and hijab (articles 6 and 12)
- (2) Religion and terrorism (articles 4, 8 and 10)
- (3) Media, government, democracy and the politics of oppression (articles 1, 2, 9 and 11)
- (4) Representation of the Muslim voice (articles 3, 5 and 7)

Each theme includes textual and visual analyses with integrated discussion of the findings.

### ***Muslim women and hijab Textual Analysis: Articles 6 and 12***

The association of hijab (a form of head covering worn by Muslim women in public) with the Muslim woman is something that is taken for granted. For Muslims, the hijab is unequivocally the dress code of a woman who identifies with modest dressing and closeness to God, the hijab being also the garb of prayer.

In article 6, women in New Zealand were encouraged to wear the headscarf to show support for Muslim women. Two people were interviewed; a non-Muslim female who was the organiser of the event and a Muslim male scholar. No comments were elicited from Muslim women. The article made a point of quoting the organiser who claimed that she had the support of her Muslim friend, the Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand and the Muslim Association of New Zealand. However, no actual persons from these organisations were cited.

The article quoted a male Islamic studies scholar who expressed his support for the event as 'it's not insulting to Muslim women' and 'it's a way of showing solidarity'. Ironically, the objections by some non-Muslim groups about 'wearing a symbol of oppression and discrimination' (Feek 2019) are in themselves oppressive and discriminatory as most Muslim women wear the scarf by choice. In response to these objections, the male Muslim scholar pointed out that historically, 'safety and modesty' were the main reasons scarves were worn by Muslim women, and that the campaign to wear the scarf was entirely voluntary.

The voice of the Muslim woman is missing. She is referenced through a third party and her situation is defended by a man from her community, albeit a scholar. A part of this article focused on the feel-good human angle of news story, which is the organiser's reason for the initiative. The organiser, a non-Muslim female, was saddened by the confession of a hijab-wearing Muslim lady on television that she was afraid to leave her home.

**Table 1.** Table of news stories via social media Facebook and Twitter feeds.

	Title	Date	Media/author
1	Australian PM slams 'disgusting' remarks by Senator blaming NZ immigration policy for Christchurch terror attack	March 16, 2019	TVNZ
2	Islamic Women's Council repeatedly lobbied to stem discrimination	March 17, 2019	Radio New Zealand Anjum Rahman
3	'I don't hate him, I love him': Widower forgives Christchurch gunman who killed his wife	March 17, 2019	Newshub Thomas Mead
4	Christchurch attacks were a form of 'Christian terrorism', as well as racial hatred, says religion expert	March 20, 2019	TVNZ
5	Wife of Christchurch terror attack victim's emotional, loving response to tragedy	March 20, 2019	The Project Newshub
6	Headscarf for Harmony about 'showing solidarity' with Muslim women in NZ	March 21, 2019	New Zealand Herald Belinda Feek
7	'You have not destroyed us': Christchurch terror victim's widow speaks out	March 22, 2019	Stuff.co.nz Oliver Lewis
8	Terrorists are not religious extremists; they are just scum	April 23, 2019	Dallas Morning News Omar Suleiman
9	NZ media companies agree on protocol for covering mosque terror attack trial	May 1, 2019	Pacific Media Watch
10	Teen convicted over 2017 Christchurch terror plot warned to control his anger	May 10, 2019	New Zealand Herald
11	Thanks for the offer but I'd rather not debate my own humanity	June 11, 2019	The Spinoff Anjum Rahman
12	Bullied Muslim teenager creates soft toy to spread awareness about acceptance	August 23, 2019	The Project Newshub

The report gave a somewhat balanced account of reactions to the campaign by including the views of a Muslim man and non-Muslim women. However, the Muslim woman's voice is represented by third party claims, undermining her importance.

While no Muslim women's view was represented in the article, as it turns out, some Muslim women also objected to the initiative in other news stories. The news however did not appear on this researcher's social media newsfeed. It was accessed through an intentional search for Muslim women's views about 'headscarf for harmony'. This demonstrated social media's potential to limit specific news.

One objection to the 'Headscarf for harmony' initiative is cultural misappropriation. The argument is against tokenism as headscarves are a sacred part of the Muslim woman's dress code. Non-Muslims wearing them as a costume to make Muslims feel 'like one of them' supports the ideology of the 'saviour mentality', which borders on white supremacy (Headscarves movement means well but it is "cheap tokenism" 2019).

Another objection is that not all Muslim women wear the hijab in public. The campaign would marginalise this group and impose the scarf as clothing that defined the female Muslim identity (Malik 2019; Shakir 2019). Malik argued that since the Quran did not specifically mention hijab, but modest dressing, the choice for Muslim women 'is therefore not whether to not veil, rather the choice is to veil' (Malik 2019 para. 5). She blamed western media's obsession with the veiled female Muslim as a product of Orientalism, an old construct of western thought to create marked differences between Muslim and western practices. She highlighted how perception of the female Muslim has transformed over time according to what negative values were prescribed for the Oriental female.

Ethnocentrism is apparent as the Muslim women's identity is subjected to changing western standards and values. Malik (2019) noted that traditionally, 'Muslim women were depicted as sexually active and exotic, when Western women were meant to be

demure and pious’ but ‘now Western women are meant to be liberated and sexually free, [while] Muslim women are portrayed as repressed and ignorant’ (para. 11). With an over-emphasis in the media and society on the hijab being a negative representation of the female Muslim, veiled women have borne the brunt of Islamophobia, with 60% of attacks reported in London between July 2014 and July 2015 (Malik 2019, para. 12).

Indeed, Muslim women have varied practices concerning the hijab. Some scholars would argue that the Quran *does* mention headcover ‘... place their khumur over their bosoms’ (Quran, 24:30). ‘Khumur’ (the plural of khimar) refers to a cloth that covered the head, which was extended to cover the bosom. While the role of the hijab as part of the female Muslim identity is widely recognised, Muslim women are not homogeneous in their dress code. They differ in their interpretation of modest dressing and the meaning of the hijab in the practice of their faith.

In article 12, a Muslim teenager was bullied for her hijab when the teen’s classmates turned on her with the ‘terrorist’ label and excluded her from groups (The Project 2019). There is an apparent lack of dialogue in the story as the report fell short of saying what was done to counter such negative perceptions at school. Instead, it focused on the teen’s social entrepreneurship as an outcome of bullying. The bullied teen had launched a hijab-wearing soft toy called ‘Izzy’ with the message that ‘We wear what we wear, and we should be accepted for what we wear’ (para.10).

The bullied teen represents the reality of young Muslim females. Her social rejection is deeply entrenched in Western psyche which has had a history of othering Oriental females. While the story focused on the feel-good outcome of the teen’s negative experience, there is no inclusion of other Muslim voices or opinion leaders that can address social injustice and accountability. The tone appeared to credit bullying for the teen’s determination and positive outlook: ‘... it [bullying] also gave her the inspiration to fight that discrimination’.

Society was not held to account that the teen was denied a safe learning space. The article simply glossed over her shredded identity with the statement: ‘Fast forward six years, and she’s become one of the country’s youngest social entrepreneurs’.

### **Visual Analysis**

The “Headscarf for Harmony” article showed a scene of flowers and cards outside a gated area and a solitary figure of a woman in hijab observing the tributes left by many (Figure 1). It highlights the visibility of the headscarf as a marker of the Muslim faith and the vulnerability of the female Muslims as walking targets for people with hate issues against them. The flowers and tributes around her demonstrate society’s support. This picture is accompanied by the words ‘An Auckland University Islamic scholar says he’s proud of the initiative and believes Muslim women in New Zealand would be too.’ It is interesting to note the choice of quote from a male Muslim rather than that of a female. In fact, no Muslim women were interviewed for their views in this report.

Article 12 on the bullied Muslim teenager showed a soft toy that the victim of bullying made (Figure 2). While the teen appeared in a video clip on the news site, the article first displayed a picture of her pale-skinned doll. Below the visual are the words ‘The Muslim headscarf, or hijab, is probably one of the most misunderstood apparel women wear.’ Yet,



**Figure 1.** The image shows a solitary figure of a woman in hijab.



**Figure 2.** This picture shows 'Izzy', the headscarf-wearing doll created by a youth who was bullied at school for wearing a headscarf.

the image of an inanimate representation of the Muslim women somewhat minimises her humanity.

In both stories, the Muslim woman appeared to be viewed with empathy. She appeared to be supported but not personally cited (article 6). When she *is* cited, her issues as a victim are not addressed (article 12). Overall, there is something insincere about her treatment. She is talked about, pitied and applauded for overcoming the abuse of her identity.

### ***Religion and terrorism Textual Analysis: Articles 4, 8 and 10***

In article 4, Douglas Pratt, Professor of theological and religious studies at the University of Auckland, suggested that ‘the Christchurch terror attacks were a form of ‘Christian terrorism’ and white supremacy’ (Christchurch attacks were a form of ‘Christian terrorism’, as well as racial hatred, says religion expert 2019, para. 1). Pratt described Christian extremism as an ideology that starts with a belief system which becomes aggressive and an imposition on others. Pratt elaborated that while terrorism had been focused on Islam, Christianity could be equally dangerous with ‘a similar kind of dynamic going on within the wider Christian world, particularly with links to the alt-right, and highly conservative Christianity that is antithetical towards Islam’ (para.7).

Citing the 2011 terror attacks by Anders Breivik in Norway that killed 77 people, Pratt pointed out that the agenda ‘to stir the white race against the invaders’ corresponded with the attack in Christchurch which sought to ‘stir up race hatred premised on a particular worldview that buys into a certain Christian interpretation’ (para.12). While this report fairly reflected one person’s viewpoint, it lacked representation from the religious groups accused of inherent ideas that could lead to extremism.

The article is a cautionary narrative on all forms of religion that can be subject to individual interpretations. As a news story, it lacked a balanced argument. It dangerously points to religion as a cause for unrest rather than the troubled personalities that used the concept of a creator to further their own agenda.

Interestingly, the article ‘Terrorists are not religious extremists’ (article 8) is a counter argument to Pratt’s warning about extremism in religion. Suleiman (2019) challenged the premise that there is something inherently violent in all religions with the focus on the perpetrators themselves. Suleiman (2019) explained that mainstream Muslims, including religious scholars like himself, have been targets of extremists who claim to be Muslims, noting that extremists use religion to fuel their own agendas. He proposed that society must respond by denying them legitimacy and stop the divisive talk they have created against a faith they claim to belong to:

We must deny them all their names, their goals, and their claims to legitimacy. The extremists in Myanmar that are carrying out a genocide against Rohingya Muslims are not Buddhist extremists. The extremists here in the United States that terrorize synagogues, mosques and black churches are not Christian extremists. The extremists that terrorized Sri Lankan Christians in their churches and people of various backgrounds in hotels this Easter Sunday are not Muslim extremists. All of the above are merely terrorist scum. (Suleiman 2019, para.10)

Clearly, what differentiates the victims from the offenders is the propensity for violence. Transferring blame to a higher power is to discount personal responsibility for the action. This argument resonates with peace-loving people of faith and contributes to a positive self-identity.

Suleiman (2019) also noted that western media, particularly American, is responsible for negatively politicising Islam as a faith of terror. He pointed out that terrorist attacks committed by Muslims receive 357% more US press coverage than those committed by non-Muslims, according to researchers from the University of Alabama (Suleiman 2019). He also argued that religion had nothing to do with terrorism and that those who deem terrorist groups as ‘Islamic’,

make it harder for ... Muslim scholars to address these degenerates for what they are: outcast criminals. They have no claim to our text. They have no authority in our midst (para.1).

For people of faith who see the incompatibility between religion and terrorism, this argument by a religious scholar is self-affirming and contributes to a positive religious identity.

In article 10, a Muslim teen who was convicted for the 2017 Christchurch terror plot had planned to ram a vehicle into a group of people. Touched by the nation's show of solidarity with Muslims in the Christchurch tragedy, the teen felt ashamed of his misplaced hatred and promised that he would 'never go back to extremist thinking or ideologies. All it does is cause, grief, anger and sadness' (Bayer 2019, para.20).

This report kept a neutral tone in reporting the court procedures although the story presented a human angle of regret and remorse. It explained that 'the teen had been radicalised online' but fell short of explaining how long surveillance lasted before the teen was caught, and what authorities are doing about such radicalisation.

The story is a warning that radicalisation happens when moral education, nurturing and monitoring are absent. The teen was said to be emotional, had boredom and anger issues and had viewed pornography. This is hardly a religious youth of any religion. To label his violent tendency as 'religious extremism' because he wanted to perform a violent act 'for Allah' is nonsensical. This is clearly a youth with multiple issues seeking attention and recognition from the radical group that he was said to have been influenced by.

### **Visual Analysis**

The news that distanced religion from terrorism showed a picture of school children carrying messages of support for the victims of the Sri Lankan blasts on April 21, 2019. The caption stated that the children were 'Pakistani Christian and Muslim students'. They depicted solidarity and shared values of empathy and a peaceful outlook. The image supports the narrative that religion has nothing to do with terrorism (Figure 3).

The news about the Muslim teen who planned a terror plot had the image of some flowers tucked between police "emergency" banners around a tree trunk (Figure 4). These flowers signified community support and a sense of loss. The image is clearly symbolic as the teen had not carried out the attack. It served to capture the grief of destruction and lives lost in an attack. It also symbolised the gratitude for the support that Muslims received in the aftermath of the terror attack in Christchurch.

Overall, the visuals capture some aspect of the news story. The news contents are either pro- or anti-religion to some extent. They demonstrate how religion can be misapplied and blamed for group tendencies towards violence.

### **Media, government, democracy and the politics of oppression Textual Analysis: Articles 1, 2, 9 and 11**

Australian Senator Fraser Anning's statement (article 1) that New Zealand's immigration policy allowed Muslims into the country and was responsible for the terror attacks is a clear example of structural discrimination. While he reportedly condemned vigilante violence, he excused it as a reaction created by growing fears of increasing Muslim presence, indicating that Muslims are essentially the problem. He labelled left-wing politicians' call



**Figure 3.** Children from Christian and Muslim backgrounds in Pakistan unite to show support for victims of the Sri Lankan blasts on April 21, 2019.

for gun law reviews ‘nonsense’ and blamed ‘the real cause of bloodshed’ on NZ’s immigration programme since ‘Muslim fanatics can enter New Zealand’. It is unclear which fanatics the senator was referring to since Muslims were at the receiving end of the weapon. The article also highlighted that the PM of Australia, Scott Morrison, called the senator’s



**Figure 4.** This picture illustrates grief and tragedy with the police ‘emergency’ banner and flowers to show empathy.



comments ‘disgusting’. TVNZ’s report is brief, factual and balanced, capturing the differences of opinion in the political hierarchy.

Senator Anning’s reaction is far from surprising as Australian media has long been responsible for a concerted attack on Islam. In a 2017 study on five of Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers, 31% of their largely negative and divisive opinion pieces by six of their most controversial commentators were devoted to Islam (OnePath Network 2017). This disproportionate negative media reinforcement of the Muslim identity as alien and unwelcome informed audiences to have a flawed assumption of all Muslims generally.

In an unprecedented show of social justice, The Media Freedom Committee in New Zealand agreed on the protocol (article 9) for covering the mosque terror attack trial (Pacific Media Watch 2019). The agreed list of guiding practices by TVNZ, Stuff, Media-works, NZME, and RNZ showed a concerted effort to deny the alt-right movement a platform to publicise their ideology and hate rhetoric.

Measures were based on the media’s intention to cover the trial ‘comprehensively and responsibly’. Detailed principles included an undertaking to only send experienced personnel and to pixelate any undesirable symbols and gestures used by the accused during the trial. Unlike the Australian press, New Zealand media have rallied around Muslims in the aftermath of the Christchurch attack to show solidarity and support. The protocol for press coverage demonstrates a clear social conscience.

Two of the articles (2 and 11) were written by a Muslim woman about her experiences of structural discrimination and systemic oppression, even as she served as a representative and spokesperson of her community (IWCNZ). She exposed how government departments did not follow up on the community’s concerns of abuse and their pleas over the last five years prior to the attack in Christchurch. And the same writer stood up to hate speech and systemic oppression by declining debates with white supremacists while pointing out the audacity of those who expect people of colour to defend their humanity (Rahman 2019a). Muslims who suffer similar abuse would identify with this reality and recognise that hate rhetoric, when unchecked and encouraged, would result in flawed thinking and irrational acts.

The tone in the article ‘Islamic Women’s Council repeatedly lobbied to stem discrimination’ (article 2) was one of frustration, disappointment and despair. It illustrated the marginalisation of Muslim women when their safety issues were ignored. It exposed a form of structural discrimination and systemic oppression through the problem of disengaged politicians. It recounted how the leadership of the Islamic Women’s Council of New Zealand (IWCNZ) had lobbied their concerns regarding the alt-right groups and the abuse that their members experienced (Rahman 2019a). Despite meetings with four separate government departments several years before the Christchurch tragedy, there was no follow-up action. The article then launched into the outcome of non-action and highlighted the victims of the tragedy.

The article ‘Thanks for the offer but I’d rather not debate my own humanity’ (article 11) spoke of being seen but not heard. The tone is assertive and defensive with an undercurrent of pain, sadness and hopelessness. As a minority, Rahman (2019b) had felt accepted when she was invited to the Hamilton Press Club, along with several people of colour. The gathering progressed into a rather uncomfortable situation when the host chided the audience for their ‘lack of willingness to listen to the two Canadian provocateurs who visited

New Zealand last year' (para.5). Rahman (2019b) sarcastically reflected that she, along with other people of colour, should have listened to

... two professional attention-seekers abuse us and then given them the dignity of a response, for the purposes of "debate" ... as if my humanity is a matter of debate. As if my life isn't already filled with people talking to me or treating me as if I am less than [them] (para.6)

She presented how ridiculous an argument it was to think that 'the solution to marginalisation is to expect marginalised people to debate those who openly practise hate against us'. She rallied against the expectation that people of colour should somehow 'withstand structural and institutional racism along with the casual barbs of prejudice and bigotry' and not be 'too soft, too easily offended, too intolerant even. As if we're the ones who need our minds opened' (Rahman 2019b, para. 7).

The blatant disregard for the dignity of people of colour demonstrates systemic oppression. The host had used the free speech argument in a democratic system to support his viewpoint which Rahman (2019b) noted usually applied to those who have racist rhetoric. In fact, she noted that research showed that 'free speech arguments were almost always used to defend racist or homophobic speech' (para.10). The article also paid tribute to Māori as indigenous people and gave an historical account of the Maori experience with racism and discrimination. It highlighted the atrocities and systemic oppression against Māori and praised Māori 's tenacity, perseverance and patience in the face of abuse and obstacles.

Rahman (2019b) reflected with some sadness that minority groups hardly got media time to talk about other rights (the right to safety, the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to practise one's religious beliefs or to not have a religious belief) as the focus of debates tended to be diverted to the right to free speech. She noted that the 51 lives lost in the Christchurch tragedy is a culmination of hateful sentiments: 'actual impacts of being a target of hate speech, the target of an organised campaign to diminish and demean based on identity' (Rahman 2019b, para. 18–19). Overall, the author's experience indicates that white privilege, systemic oppression and structural racism and discrimination are entrenched even in well-meaning inclusive group gatherings. There is the blind spot of cultural insensitivity when minorities are expected to listen to an advantaged group criticise their culture and identity as entertainment.

### **Visual Analysis**

There is an image of the prime minister in dark clothing and a headscarf 'comforting a woman at the Kilbirnie mosque in Wellington' (Figure 5). In the background, there are flowers hung on fences and people paying their respects. The presence of diverse people, garlands by the gate and a police vehicle collectively symbolise a united and compassionate society lending aid and protection to Muslims.

The New Zealand coat of arms accompanied the news about the media protocol at the trial. The icon is meaningful as it reflects New Zealand's unique history as a bicultural nation and symbolises the inclusive nature of New Zealand society.

An image in the news report about free speech showed a screen shot of a tweet from Flavia Dzodan, a social critic of racism, colonialism and politics. Dzodan had tweeted that being present to discuss who deserved access to rights and protection, meant that



**Figure 5.** The prime minister in dark clothing and a headscarf is seen 'comforting a woman at the Kilbirnie mosque in Wellington.'

people were legitimising such an idea by giving it consideration. She reiterated that debates did not change minds but that 'listening, reading, reflecting and learning' did (Figure 6). Rahman (2019b) had provided this argument as a reason for declining debates with groups that questioned the rights of others with hate rhetoric.

### ***Representation of the Muslim voice Textual Analysis: Articles 3, 5 and 7***

Several articles demonstrated the presence of the Muslim voice, including articles 2 and 11 from the previous section when news media (Radio New Zealand and The Spinoff) published stories written by Muslims about their own experiences. Unlike media stories before the Christchurch attacks, where representation was dominated by interpretation and manipulation (Rahman and Emadi 2018), these stories showed fair representation. There are signs of dialogic communication when the interviewer posed questions, listened to and presented the Muslim respondent's answers in their entirety (video segment of article 5).

In this section, the three stories displayed unusual strength, patience, kindness and forgiving natures of the family of the victims. One of the stories (article 3) showed a video interview of a disabled widower, Farid Ahmed, who said he forgave the terrorist who killed his wife and that he had love, rather than hate, for the man (Mead 2019). Ahmed reflected that the terrorist may be a troubled person with his own trauma issues. Appearing calm and speaking in a deliberate way, Ahmed credited his wife's kind nature and said she would have wanted him to be forgiving. The reporter ended the segment by describing the role that Ahmed played in helping his community deal with loss and closed with a final goodwill message from Ahmed: 'If someone is mean to you, remember to be kind to them.'



**Figure 6.** The tweet by Flavia Dzodan.

Another news story (article 5) showed similar strength, resilience and patience. It was a video interview of a woman, Ambreen Naeem, who had lost both her son and husband. Her tone and demeanour exuded calmness and peace. She also appeared reflective and thoughtful when asked about her late husband and son. When asked what she thought inspired her husband to be a hero, her response was measured and meaningful.

I know that he was a brave man, very helpful, very loving ... so ... love can make you do that. What he did ... he tried to save people's lives because he was loving. (The Project NZ, March 20, 2019)

Naeem continued by sharing some core aspects of Islam: 'My son and husband, they gave up their lives to save other people and this is what Allah wants from us. It's a religion of peace and love.' She even showed pity on the terrorist: 'I feel pity for him that he did not have love in his heart ... he had hate, and he can't feel the contentment and peace that we can.' In this and the previous response to tragedy, the Muslim personalities revealed strength of character under a situation where fear, anger and likely vengeful hatred would normally rule.

One question posed by the interviewer was somewhat limiting, requiring the responder to force-fit her response. The interviewer had asked what kept the widow strong, 'apart from your faith'. The clause 'apart from your faith' typically discounts religion as a significant element for coping with grief. It seems a rather unusual question since the Muslim woman was expected to come up with some other answer rather than her faith, especially at a time of loss, when it is clearly a prominent aspect of her identity.

Naeem thought about the question momentarily before responding with conviction:

I think that's the *only* thing. That's the *main* thing. I feel sad for that terrorist. Yeah, I feel pity for him ... that he didn't have love in his heart, he had hate. And he can't feel the contentment, the peace, which we can. (The Project NZ, March 20, 2019)

Clearly, Naeem refused to play by the interviewer's rule book, choosing instead to bring her religion back into focus. The interviewer's question showed a desire to control the responses by denying the expression of faith and demonstrated a level of unconscious systemic oppression. It requires Naeem to exclude an aspect of her identity.

Instead, Naeem showed unflappable demeanour, strength and fortitude as she portrayed Islam in her words and actions, modelling the faith in a way seldom seen in mainstream media. This was further exemplified in her response to the question if she would ever return to a mosque soon.

Yeah, that's the thing that I have learnt from this. Nothing can stop me. It just has made me stronger. And this is not just me. I've heard from my other sisters. It has just made us stronger. (The Project NZ 2019)

In a separate video interview (article 7), a widow, Salwa Mohamad, and her teenage son, Zaid Mustafa, spoke of the shock of losing their husband and father respectively. Mustafa said that he would have traded lives with his father if he could. The selfless expression of love for a parent is relatable and draws the viewer to the humanity of his experience. Mohamed showed courage and resilience when she sent a message to the terrorist and his supporters that he had not succeeded in destroying them. Most poignantly, Mohamad summed up the irony and injustice of the tragedy:

People say that Islam is [a] terrorist religion, or Muslims are terrorists, and now the whole world saw who was the terrorist. (Lewis 2019, para. 3)

There is a general feeling of victimisation and vindication in this statement. In some sense, she is mirroring the thought of all Muslims who have ever felt wronged by the media's false labels. Negative publicity of the Muslim identity has been a regular news feature since 9/11 and Muslims have been made to feel sorry and apologise for actions foreign to their faith. The Christchurch media coverage has given Muslims a voice and the public space to be heard, to show their pain, suffering and humanity. Mostly, it showed the world just what Islam really teaches: patience, forgiveness, strength and resilience.

### **Visual Analysis**

The video clip in article 7 is accompanied by seven pictures. Two of them were the two family members who had been killed. Three images showed the surviving brother in a wheelchair talking to the media, attending his brother's funeral and crying, as his mother looked on. One image showed the mother's clasped hand as she faced the media, and another showed the mother in tears. These collective images show the human angle of a tragedy that would resonate with audiences as they capture acutely personal and emotional scenes.

At the end of article 7 on the stuff.co.nz site, there is a simple image of a yellow banner with a candle and the words 'To our Muslim whanau, this is your home. You are us. Kia Kaha'. This is a message of inclusion and solidarity. 'Whanau', the Maori word for 'family'

means blood relations while 'Kia Kaha' means to 'stay strong'. The message implies love, support and deep connectedness. This show of support from a media site is unusual and characterises the nature of New Zealand's national culture. It is inclusive and values diversity.

These stories fairly represented the Muslim perspective. The three articles showed the faces and opinions of the Muslim victims as they heavily credited their faith for their patience, strength, love and forgiving natures. Earlier articles also included Muslim narratives to reflect experiences from the horse's mouth. The media is also shown to support Muslims in stuff.co.nz's public banner. Overall, these inclusions are empowering as they support a positive Muslim identity.

## Conclusion

Until the Christchurch terror attack, news stories on Islam and Muslims in the New Zealand media tended to follow Western news agenda. Muslims were represented as an entity driven by hate and destruction. The Muslim identity was not only constantly questioned and targeted but essentially manipulated and defined by those who had no empathy for or knowledge of the faith and its diverse people.

Contents of news media inform the Muslim identity. News on social media feeds are regular and repetitive, with algorithms that send topical and preferred stories shared by social links. Although this can limit the type of news received, reinforced negative media depictions can incite hatred against Muslims and cause identity issues. Social rejection can also cause isolation and resentment.

For Muslims to truly be a part of society, communication needs genuine dialogue and understanding with government and media, and not token acts of care, providing no aid or having an agenda to control. But there is no chance of a dialogue if the Muslim voice is absent or misrepresented in the media, as was the case before the Christchurch tragedy.

In New Zealand, media has certainly stepped up to responsibly present the Muslim identity. Stories on Muslims after the attack had substantial content from the human angle, depicting peace, love and forgiveness. Several media brands published stories by Muslim women about their own experiences, signalling a break from controlling agendas. New Zealand press also made a pact not to provide space for hate rhetoric. From the inclusion of Muslims' voices in news stories to the 'You are us. Kia Kaha' banner, New Zealand media have set themselves apart from the normative and culturally insensitive 'newsroom culture'.

Overall, there is a significant shift from the negative othering rhetoric of international media to an inclusive national approach in the tone of the New Zealand press. However, there is evidence that the female Muslim is still marginalised and typecast as oppressed and pitiful. It appears to be a vicious circle as even stories that Muslim women write align to this treatment of systemic oppression by government and hate groups. Unless treatment of her changes socio-politically, this will define her identity.

Media and government hold the power of fair representations of the people and equitable practices. As champions of democracy, they are responsible for checking equity imbalances, implementing measures to help disadvantaged groups and securing the safety of all. While media has stepped up to provide a platform for the Muslim narrative,

the government has yet to address the Muslim women's concerns over abuse from hate groups. The Prime Minister had shown great promise of empathy and support during the crisis. Whether this would translate into concrete actions as posed by the IWCNZ remains to be seen.

Muslims need to reclaim their identity, mend their reputation, and take back the meaning of Islamic terms falsely linked to evil acts. As Muslims are made up of diverse communities, they should establish links with one another to foster social awareness and share collective representation of issues. They should engage with government, media and communities of other faiths to foster understanding and initiate positive knowledge-sharing outreach programmes since religion generally has been blamed for a type of extremism.

A more comprehensive study of media narratives is recommended to highlight other identity and social issues affecting Muslims. It would also be helpful to know how the majority of Muslims in New Zealand feel about their identity and place in society. While news narratives continue to divide and unite people depending on the press agenda, their depictions of Islam and Muslims have potentially major influences and serious consequences on the Muslim person's identity within the local and global Muslim communities.

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