

SPECIAL ISSUE

# VOLUME 9 ISSUE 1

2024

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Published online: April 2024



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## Finding the Moral High Ground The Unshackled as Defenders of ‘Truth’

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To cite this article:

McGarry, Jade. “Finding the Moral High Ground: The Unshackled as Defenders of ‘Truth’.” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024): 27-54.

## FINDING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND: *THE UNSHACKLED* AS DEFENDERS OF ‘TRUTH’

Jade McGarry\*

**Abstract:** Immigration and border protection have consistently stood at the forefront of issues that divide Australians ideologically. The scholarly literature in this regard documents the role of conservative right-wing media in the formulation of anti-immigration rhetoric, particularly in relation to Muslim immigrants. This research builds on this literature, further exploring the role of ideology in shaping public perceptions. This study examines how an alternative news outlet – *The Unshackled* – reported on Islamic issues in 2019, the year prior to the COVID pandemic. While there is significant literature on media representations of Islam and Muslims, few studies have explored the relationship between alternative news outlets’ use of ‘free speech’ to spread anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric and Muslim immigration to Australia. By examining the coverage of Islam by *The Unshackled*, this article posits that, through the frame of free speech, the outlet gave voice and authority to unreliable commentators with anti-Islam, nativist views. This led to dissemination of information that lacked credibility and factual accuracy, reinforcing an image of Islam that contributes to negative sentiments regarding the religion and its followers, and further straining relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia.

**Keywords:** *journalism, alternative media, far-right, Islam, Islamophobia, Facebook*

### INTRODUCTION

The way in which Islam and Muslims are portrayed in the Australian news media is important because Muslims are Australia’s largest non-Christian, monotheistic religious group.<sup>1</sup> Islam is currently the second-largest religion in the world and expected to become the most followed religion on the planet by the latter half of this century.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia has received extensive scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> “Religious Affiliation in Australia,” Australian Bureau of Statistics, July 4, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World,” Pew Research Center, August 9, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

attention.<sup>3</sup> Islamophobia is defined as “an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or people who practice Islam.”<sup>4</sup>

A 2021 study found that 13% of Australians are ‘Islamophobic’ with another 24% holding “some concern about Muslims.”<sup>5</sup> A 2021 report by the Council on American Islamic Relations found a 27-year high of civil rights complaints by Muslims concerning issues such as travel, immigration, workplace discrimination and hate/bias incidents.<sup>6</sup> An April 2017 Pew Center study found that 50% of people surveyed in the United States stated Islam is not part of “mainstream American society,” with 44% believing there is a natural conflict between Islam and democracy.<sup>7</sup> However, this is not a view shared by Muslims globally nor in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

Australians have long been divided on issues of immigration and border protection.<sup>9</sup> Australian academic Richard Devetak lamented this divide, asking: why is the transborder people movement a ‘problem’ for states? The author argues that “the general reason may be that people movement threatens to disrupt the international order that the system of territorial states is supposed to engender.”<sup>10</sup> This notion is useful because it speaks to the role of identity in shaping public perceptions of key social issues and the people at the centre of these issues. Significant literature has explored the role of conservative right-wing media and politics and anti-immigration rhetoric, particularly in relation to Muslim immigrants, that exists within this space.<sup>11</sup> Giotis explains “the fusion of refugee movements, terrorism, and Islamophobia in

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<sup>3</sup> Val Colic-Peisker and Mikola Mass, “Mediated Islamophobia and Local Coexistence: A Case Study of Two Muslim-Concentration Suburbs in Melbourne, Australia,” *Sociological Inquiry* 92 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12423>; Timothy B. Gravelle, “Explaining Islamophobia in Australia: Partisanship, Intergroup Contact, and Local Context,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2021.1884645>; Derya Iner and Sean McManus, “Islamophobia in Australia: Racialising the Muslim Subject in Public, Media, and Political Discourse in the War on Terror era,” in *The Rise of Global Islamophobia in the War on Terror*, ed. Naved Bakali and Farid Hafez (Manchester University Press, 2022); Derya Iner, Gail Mason and Nicole L. Asquith, “Expected but Not Accepted: Victimisation, Gender, and Islamophobia in Australia,” *International Review of Victimology* 28, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580221084115>.

<sup>4</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online, s.v. “Islamophobia,” May 18, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Islamophobia>.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin M. Dunn, Thierno M. O. Diallo and Rachel Sharples, “Segmenting Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia: Insights for the Diverse Project of Countering Islamophobia,” *Ethnicities* 21, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796821989819>.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent F Biondo III, “Council on American-Islamic Relations,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. John Barton (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.836>.

<sup>7</sup> Shannon Greenwood, “7. How the U.S. General Public Views Muslims and Islam,” Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/how-the-u-s-general-public-views-muslims-and-islam/>.

<sup>8</sup> Halim Rane et al., “Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents,” *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11080419>.

<sup>9</sup> “Attitudes to Immigration,” Lowy Institute, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/charts/attitudes-to-immigration/>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Devetak, “In Fear of Refugees: The Politics of Border Protection in Australia,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (2004): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364298042000212565>.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Diamond, “Right-Wing Politics and the Anti-Immigration Cause,” *Social Justice* 23, no. 3 (1996); Jackie Hogan and Kristin Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders, and Parasites: Immigration Threat Narratives and Right-Wing Populism in the USA, UK and Australia,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36, no. 5 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2015.1072907>; Faizullah Jan and Sayyed Fawad Ali Shah, “‘Invaders’: U.S. Right Wing Media’s Framing of Muslim Immigrants,” *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 14, no.2

public discourse impacts the citizenship status of Muslim minorities in Western countries.”<sup>12</sup> Far-right ideology is described in literature as aiming “to defend the ‘traditional’ bases of society centred around race, gender and sexual hierarchies from the ongoing disruptions and dislocations of liberal capitalist modernity.”<sup>13</sup> This research looks to build on this literature through further exploring the role of ideology in shaping perceptions of the journalistic concept of ‘the truth’ regarding Islam and Muslims, and their place in Australian society.

### ***Purveyors of Truth: The Unshackled***

Public expectations of the news media include a role as the Fourth Estate – a watchdog on society’s institutions of authority and power. There is an expectation that the information conveyed by news media is accurate and truthful. This present study replicates a 2021 study by journalism and mass communication scholar Dawn Gilpin, which examined the National Rifle Association of America and its role in spreading misinformation, positioning itself as purveyors of truth. The study found the National Rifle Association of America’s media sphere “represents a form of alternative media, established in opposition to legacy outlets and to serve constituencies who may in turn feel alienated from mainstream media.”<sup>14</sup> The author of this study argues that the research approach:

makes it possible to tease out epistemological and ontological principles by examining the ways communicative processes and agents interact...One advantage of envisioning communication as a wave form, rather than, for instance, a series of binary oppositions, is that it permits us to notice continuities as well as contrasts.<sup>15</sup>

Dawn’s research found that, according to the National Rifle Association of America, mainstream media are liberal-leftist tools of the Democratic Party.

This study aims to discover if alternative right-wing news outlets in Australia possess similar ideals to the National Rifle Association of America in terms of positioning themselves as “purveyors of truth” and if this title is reasonable or deserved. The Australian right-wing conservative news outlet *The Unshackled* is used as a case study for analysis. The Unshackled describes itself as “covering topics and story angles that the mainstream media usually chooses to ignore,”<sup>16</sup> positioning itself as an outlet that sits apart from mainstream media. Earlier studies have explored the role of alternative news outlets in the spread of misinformation, particularly

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(2020); Greg Philo, Emma Briant and Pauline Donald, “The Role of the Press in the War on Asylum,” *Race and Class* 55 (2013); Samuel Parker, “‘Unwanted Invaders’: The Representation of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK and Australian Print Media,” *eSharp* 23, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Chrisanthi Giotis, “Dismantling the Deadlock: Australian Muslim Women’s Fightback against the Rise of Right-Wing Media,” *Social Sciences* 10, no.2 (2021): 1.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Anievas and Richard Saull, “The Far-right in World Politics/World Politics in the Far-right,” *Globalizations* 20, no. 5 (2023): 717.

<sup>14</sup> Dawn R. Gilpin, “The Second Amendment vs. the First: The NRA’s Constitutional Bias Perspective on Fake News” in *Fake News: Understanding Media Misinformation in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew McLeod (MIT Press, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “About,” *The Unshackled*, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.theunshackled.net/about/>.

in light of the coronavirus,<sup>17</sup> finding that distribution of information that had an ideological spin caused societal confusion and was often potentially dangerous.

In their 2021 study on Australian far-right media, Sharpe et al. examine content produced by The Unshackled, arguing the outlet's

discernible engagements with far-right politics in Australia are demonstrated by their platforming of actors who express neo-Nazi views, and their production of anti-Semitic, racist, and other discriminatory open-access media content, further to their more politically violent expressions on closed and covert platforms.<sup>18</sup>

The Unshackled was previously verified as a *news outlet* by search engine Google despite its promotion of far-right propaganda.<sup>19</sup> This verification makes the outlet a useful choice for analysis because it has ethical journalistic responsibilities to provide accurate, fair and honest news content that is true and answers to the MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics. This idea is operationalised in the opening statement of the code: “report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness, and disclosure of all essential facts.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Far-right Discourse and Social Media***

Several studies have explored the role of far-right discourse on social media,<sup>21</sup> finding that the internet's “elimination of spatial boundaries” enables easier recruitment, assisting the far right in achieving extensive dissemination.<sup>22</sup> Sharpe et al. examine the notion of “far-right activists” expanding away from their tight knit echo chambers, arguing they

work to facilitate the entry of far-right discourse into more mainstream political venues – including racist (in particular anti-Semitic and Islamophobic), heterosexist, and ableist

<sup>17</sup> Svenja Boberg et al., “Pandemic Populism: Facebook Pages of Alternative News Media and the Corona Crisis – A Computational Content Analysis,” *arXiv* (2020); Lena Frischlich et al., “Alternative Counter-news use and Fake News Recall during the Covid-19 Crisis,” *Digital Journalism* 11, no. 1 (2023); Matthew Sharpe et al., “Political Philosophy and Australian Far-Right Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Unshackled and XYZ,” *Thesis Eleven* 163, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136211008605>.

<sup>18</sup> Sharpe et al., “Political Philosophy.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics,” Media Entertainment Arts Alliance, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://www.maaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/>.

<sup>21</sup> Caterina Froio and Bharath Ganesh, “The Transnationalisation of Far-Right Discourse on Twitter: Issues and Actors that Cross Borders in Western European Democracies,” *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494295>; Ofra Klein and Jasper Muis, “Online Discontent: Comparing Western European Far-Right Groups on Facebook,” *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293>; Pam Nilan, *Young People and the Far Right. Alternatives and Futures: Cultures, Practices, Activism and Utopias* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Mario Peucker and Debra Smith, “Far-right Movements in Contemporary Australia: An Introduction,” in *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia*, ed. Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Aaron Winter, “Online Hate: From the Far-right to the ‘Alt-right’ and from the Margins to the Mainstream,” in *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web*, ed. Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

discourse, while also contributing to an ideological environment within Australia and internationally conducive to far-right political violence.<sup>23</sup>

A 2021 study investigated the role that the far-right space on social media has on the dynamics of violent and dehumanising rhetoric, finding “the use of dehumanizing and inhumanizing expressions both legitimises political violence and spurs negative emotions that may increase motivation for violent action.”<sup>24</sup> The real-world effects of far-right rhetoric being circulated on social media cannot be underestimated, as the internet “is a powerful tool by which people can be influenced to act in a certain way and manner.”<sup>25</sup>

This research laments this influence that social media (particularly Facebook) has on the distribution of far-right content, examining the changing media landscape particularly in relation to free speech and misinformation. Amnesty International defines free speech as “the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, by any means.”<sup>26</sup> Social media has enabled a new wave of “citizen journalists”<sup>27</sup> and alternative producers of news that pose significant threats to information quality and ethical reporting.<sup>28</sup> Assessing the role of social media in facilitating the free flow of information (from legitimate and illegitimate sources) is paramount to identifying how misinformation and hate speech spread.

Far-right groups in Australia have gained a level of media and public visibility that has been described as unprecedented.<sup>29</sup> The importance, then, of assessing the effect this presence has on the distribution of harmful content cannot be underestimated. When discussing the far-right presence in Australia, Hutchinson argues that “newer far-right groups are increasingly heterogeneous, anti-Muslim and understand the influential power of media to further their narratives.”<sup>30</sup>

### ***Free Speech and Othering***

This research explores the role and influence of free speech on the way audiences understand Muslims and the religion of Islam in Australia. Previously explained ‘othering’ of Muslims in Australia has a significant influence on the way the media covers the religion and its

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<sup>23</sup> Sharpe et al., “Political Philosophy.”

<sup>24</sup> Mattias Wahlström, Anton Törnberg and Hans Ekbrand, “Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-Right Social Media,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820952795>.

<sup>25</sup> Imran Awan, “Islamophobia on Social Media: A Qualitative Analysis of the Facebook’s Walls of Hate,” *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 10, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>26</sup> “What is Free Speech?,” Amnesty International, accessed June 5, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/free-speech-freedom-expression-human-right>.

<sup>27</sup> Jessica Roberts, “The Erosion of Ethics: From Citizen Journalism to Social Media,” *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 17, no. 4 (2019).

<sup>28</sup> John A. Bargh and Katelyn Y. A. McKenna, “The Internet and Social Life,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 55, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Peucker and Smith, “Far-right Movements.”

<sup>30</sup> Jade Hutchinson, “The New-Far-Right Movement in Australia,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 7 (2021).

followers.<sup>31</sup> Harmer and Lumsden lament the relationship between ‘othering,’ free speech and social media, arguing:

the concept of ‘online othering’ encapsulates the myriad power contestations and abusive behaviours which are manifested on/through online...and which are resisted and challenged by various social actors and groups.<sup>32</sup>

This research builds on this literature by exploring how free speech is understood in relation to Islamophobia and anti-Islam rhetoric on social media. The question of free speech is complex and consistently developing in the contemporary digital media age.<sup>33</sup> In Australia, a prevalence of anti-Islam and right-wing commentators (such as Australian politicians Pauline Hanson and Fraser Anning) have been found to use their right to free speech to spread racist and intolerant rhetoric.<sup>34</sup>

This rhetoric has often focused on the construction Islam and Muslims as “Others who pose an existential threat to Australia’s security and ‘culture.’”<sup>35</sup> This has been demonstrated through a consistent campaign by Senator Pauline Hanson against multiculturalism, which manifested in the politician describing Islam as “a disease that needs to be vaccinated against”<sup>36</sup> alongside the iconic 1996 maiden speech to parliament where the Senator stated “I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians...they have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.”<sup>37</sup> These comments, along with a documented history of anti-immigration, nationalistic and nativist commentary by Hanson and other well-known anti-immigration, racially divisive Australian politicians, require scholarly attention to assess the influence and effect this rhetoric has on Australians’ public perceptions of Muslims, immigration and race.

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<sup>31</sup> Jacqui Ewart, Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy, “News Media Coverage of Islam and Muslims in Australia: An Opinion Survey among Australian Muslims,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2017.1339496>; Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart and Mohamad Abdalla, *Islam and the Australian News Media*, Islamic Studies Series 4 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2010); Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart and John Martinkus, *Media Framing of the Muslim World: Conflicts, Crises and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>32</sup> Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer, *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Carolyn Evans and Adrienne Stone, *Open Minds: Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech of Australia* (Collingwood: Schwartz Publishing Pty. Limited, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Adam Sengul, “Performing Islamophobia in the Australian Parliament: The Role of Populism and Performance in Pauline Hanson’s ‘Burqa Stunt,’” *Media International Australia* 184, no.1 (2022); Enqi Weng and Fethi Mansouri, “‘Swamped by Muslims’ and Facing an ‘African Gang’ Problem: Racialized and Religious Media Representations in Australia,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 35, no. 3 (2021).

<sup>35</sup> Kurt Adam Sengul, “‘Swamped’: The Populist Construction of Fear, Crisis and Dangerous Others in Pauline Hanson’s Senate Speeches,” *Communication in Research and Practice* 6, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>36</sup> “‘Islam is a Disease’: Hanson,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/queensland/islam-is-a-disease-hanson-20170324-4s51j.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Pauline Hanson, “Maiden speech,” *Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives Official Hansard, 38th Parliament (1st Session-2nd Period), No. 8, Tuesday 10 September (1996)*.

This rhetoric concerning immigration, Islam and Muslims creates a social divide and legitimises Islamophobic sentiment in Australia. Bloul considers this divide between anti-Islam hate speech and free speech, arguing:

The real problem has to do with words: incitement to hatred, vilification, and blasphemy are all in the category of verbal hate crimes, what has come to be known in the USA as ‘hate speech.’ Racial anti-vilification laws in the West are recent and led to vigorous debates about free speech.<sup>38</sup>

Considering this question of free speech, this research explores the influence it has on the distribution of objective, ethical and ‘true’ information. Significant literature has explored this issue,<sup>39</sup> finding that the audience’s consistent exposure to false information, particularly hate speech content, is of serious concern and often enabled by social media.

## METHODOLOGY

Researchers have found that social media can “act as a propagation mechanism between online messages and violent crime” with social media allowing users to “self-select” preferred viewpoints and topics of interest.<sup>40</sup> This has been found to create echo chambers that continuously reinforce and repeat these viewpoints.<sup>41</sup> The role that social media, specifically alternative social media, plays in the distribution of misinformation is of serious concern to health of democracy in Australia<sup>42</sup> and is a key focus of this study.

This research identifies key issues present in anti-Muslim immigration rhetoric in alternative media and identifies how this rhetoric is presented as a form of truth telling, rendering mainstream media as incompetent, unreliable and deceitful. This study assists in understanding alternative media’s role in spreading anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric, in particular regarding immigration and border protection.

This study analyses videos posted on Facebook by The Unshackled that discuss Islam by searching for the term ‘Islam’ in videos published on the site during 2019. This search found 35 pieces of content shared during this time – an average of almost one every 10 days. This

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<sup>38</sup> Rachel Bloul, “Anti-Discrimination Laws, Islamophobia, and Ethnicization of Muslim Identities in Europe and Australia,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000802011036>.

<sup>39</sup> Ryan Calo et al., “How do you Solve a Problem like Misinformation?” *Science advances* 7, no. 50 (2021); Marco Visentin, “Fake News or True Lies? Reflections About Problematic Contents in Marketing,” *International Journal of Market Research* 62, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470785320934719>; Giandomenico Di Domenico et al., “Free but Fake Speech: When Giving Primacy to the Source Decreases Misinformation Sharing on Social Media,” *Psychology & Marketing* 38, no. 10 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21479>; Emily Saltz et al., “Misinformation Interventions are Common, Divisive, and Poorly Understood,” *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, October 27, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-81>.

<sup>40</sup> Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz, “Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19, no. 4 (2021): 1.

<sup>41</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, # *Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Carson and Scott Wright, “Fake News and Democracy: Definitions, Impact and Response,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2022).



steady stream of ‘information’ about Islam varied from direct video links, polls and images to website links and full length articles. An inductive frame analysis<sup>43</sup> was applied to this sample of posts to assess how key frames were constructed and analyse how key terminologies were used in relation to the coverage of Islam. Specifically, this research engaged with the notion of free speech, assessing how The Unshackled framed this issue, in terms of how it used the phrase, who they interviewed and quoted, and what language was used to discuss the issue.

A coding sheet was developed to assess each article, determining tone,<sup>44</sup> framing context,<sup>45</sup> identification of the aggressor/victim dichotomy<sup>46</sup> and audience engagement. The decision to conduct the research in this way is important because it reinforces the power of media influence, and in this instance social media influence, to inform audiences about issues. Studies on media influence suggest that news media not only instruct audiences *what* to think about, by way of agenda setting, but also how audiences *ought to* think about the content being reported, by way of how news reports are framed.<sup>47</sup>

As previously discussed, the general population acquire most of their information about Islam from the media,<sup>48</sup> so it is important to manage, monitor and understand what kind of information is being presented. This research was able to, through inductive frame analysis, understand what audiences are finding when they search explicitly for information about Islam and assess how this has the capacity to contribute to knowledge and understanding of the religion and its adherents.

## FINDINGS

### *Framing Free Speech*

This research found that 25% of all posts explicitly refer to *free speech*. The discussion between free speech and the potential spread of misinformation is important as it highlights the controversial and complex arguments pertaining to free speech and hate speech. The Unshackled describes its work as a fight to expose the truth and “protect free thinking and free markets.” The outlet states it “will not just expose the various arms of the left” but aims to “tackle the corrupt ideologies within the right-wing that have led to parasitic institutions.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Dror Walter and Yotam Ophir, “News Frame Analysis: An Inductive Mixed-method Computational Approach,” *Communication Methods and Measures* 13, no. 4 (2019).

<sup>44</sup> Erik Bleich and A. Maurits van der Veen, *Covering Muslims: American Newspapers in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” in *McQuail's Reader in Mass Communication Theory*, ed. Denis McQuail (Sage, 1993), 397.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Downing, “Blurring European and Islamic Values or Brightening the Good–Bad Muslim Dichotomy? A Critical Analysis of French Muslim Victims of Jihadi Terror Online on Twitter and in Le Monde Newspaper,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>47</sup> Adam Simon and Michael Xenos, “Media Framing and Effective Public Deliberation,” *Political Communication* 17, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>48</sup> Rane, Ewart and Martinkus, *Media Framing*.

<sup>49</sup> The Unshackled, “About.”

To assess the relationship between free speech and misinformation, it is important to unpack and understand how *The Unshackled* aligns itself, politically and ideologically, and acknowledges the influential effect these views have on the way it produces and covers news. Discussions pertaining to free speech were identified in several of the posts that quoted or covered social and political commentators that had been ‘censored’ by mainstream media. This was seen in the coverage of the alleged ‘restriction of free speech’ by several well-known far-right commentators.

A post titled “Tommy Robinson Almost Completely Banned from YouTube” published on 2 April 2019, and reposted on 3 April 2019, covers the decision by YouTube to ban British far-right, anti-Islam activist Stephen Christopher Yaxley-Lennon (known as Tommy Robinson) from publishing his content. *The Unshackled*’s support for Robinson is of particular interest as it aligns the outlet with a well-known, far-right commentator, bringing its objectivity into question and setting a clear agenda for its readers.

Another post, titled “Westpac Closes Blair Cottrell’s Bank Account” published on 19 June 2019, and reposted on 27 July 2019, forces the issue of giving voice and authority to the far-right, in this case, neo-Nazis, into the forefront of the discussion. Cottrell describes himself as a neo-Nazi, which the European Centre for Populism Studies finds to be an ideology that seeks to “revive and implement the ideology of Nazism,” finding that followers “seek to employ their ideology to promote hatred and attack minorities, or in some cases to create a fascist state.”<sup>50</sup>

The article attached to the post states:

The corporate deplatforming movement made another encroachment in Australia with Westpac Banking Corporation sending a letter to patriot activist Blair Cottrell informing him that they were closing his personal bank account for ‘commercial’ reasons.

The use of the word ‘patriot’ for a man who is described as a neo-Nazi, far-right extremist is questionable, alongside the decision to post this article twice, is noteworthy as it reinforces the desire of *The Unshackled* to disseminate this story into the public sphere. The conspiratorial tone of the article is supported by a screenshot of a post made by Cottrell after his accounts were closed that states:

But we already know why, don’t we. It’s because I know the truth about the international ethnic-genocide of white people, I know who’s doing it and why. I know the truth about recent history, I know why they’re pushing your kids to be gay and transgender, I know the real purpose of feminism. I just know too much.

The decision to publish these quotes and give airtime to Cottrell is worthy of analysis and assessment. The spread of conspiratorial content of this nature is problematic and concerning, particularly regarding the spread of misinformation. Understanding how *The Unshackled* frames free speech requires analysis of who they defend, support or continually reference.

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<sup>50</sup> “Neo-Nazism,” European Center for Populism Studies, December 28, 2020, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/neo-nazism/>.

### ***News Values and Framing Islam***

This research found overwhelming reliance on the news value of *conflict*, finding that 54% of all posts were framed by this notion. The operational definition of conflict for this research was drawn from the work of Roberts,<sup>51</sup> who finds that stories whose conflict value is the primary driver in gaining the attention of audiences should be categorised as such. These stories include power struggles, war, crime and social discord that are considered newsworthy “because their conflict spurs negative interest.”<sup>52</sup>

This lack of positive stories related to Islam is detrimental to successful cross-cultural understanding and social cohesion. The repetitive association of Islam with negativity and conflict (that being incidents of power struggles, war, crime, etc.) is a problem that sits at the centre of this research. This sense of Islam rarely (if ever) being normalised<sup>53</sup> sees a distinct lack of stories that showcase Islam and Muslims simply existing in Australian society.

Again, the fact that most non-Muslims are getting most of their information about Islam from the media<sup>54</sup> must be reiterated, meaning the consistent association of Islam with conflict shapes reality for audiences. It is important to begin the analysis here, understanding how the entire idea of Islam is framed for audiences to identify how public opinion and perception are generated.

### ***Framing Immigration***

The research found that 25% of the posts discussed the perceived connection between Muslim immigration and terrorism. These posts were categorised as such after being coded and identified as explicitly connecting Muslim immigration to terrorism in the form of interviews, general reporting, editorials or opinion pieces. A post titled “Interview with Senator Anning in the Wake of New Zealand Massacre” published on 18 March 2019 is a useful example of this. First, the decision to give a significant chunk of airtime to Anning is noteworthy, particularly in light of his comments the previous day when he tweeted:

Does anyone still dispute the link between Muslim immigration and violence? As always, left-wing politicians and the media will rush to claim that the causes of today’s shootings lie with gun laws or those who hold nationalist views, but this is all cliched nonsense. The real cause of bloodshed on New Zealand streets today is the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place.<sup>55</sup>

The decision to bring Anning in for an interview, at this point in time, is worthy of investigation. The language used throughout the article, such as “left-wing media love to turn

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<sup>51</sup> Jasmine Roberts, *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries* (Ohio State University, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Kate O’Donnell, Jacqui Ewart and Shannon Walding, “Perceptions and Realities: The Main Sources of Information for Non-Muslim Australians about the Religion of Islam and Muslim People,” *Journalism* 22, no. 4 (2021).

<sup>54</sup> Rane, Ewart and Martinkus, *Media Framing*.

<sup>55</sup> Press Association, “Fury as Australian Senator Blames Christchurch Attack on Muslim Immigration,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/15/australian-senator-fraser-anning-criticised-blaming-new-zealand-attack-on-muslim-immigration>.

things around,” positions Anning and subsequently The Unshackled as purveyors of truth who are “telling it straight.” This interview sees Anning count the Islamist terrorist incidents that have occurred in the past year and has the senator saying:

We don’t hear the same outcry from these people who are all outraged now...we are used to Islamic terrorists slaughtering us on our streets and beaches...it becomes so mundane.

The interviewer then reinforces Anning’s position as a purveyor of truth, stating:

A lot of what you [Anning] are saying is the common-sense view of the previous generation. Why are you being so marginalised, like it’s some kind of like radical, when it seems like the opinions you have are really the voice of the silent majority in this country?

Anning then speaks to the topic of immigration in Australia, a key issue at the crux of this research that becomes intertwined with the notion of truth telling, stating:

These successive governments bringing in Muslims and black Africans – it’s been a disaster...The further a community or country strays from the truth the more they hate somebody who tells the truth. When you bring people in here, we are attacked... We’re going to be in trouble with terrorist attacks and then thugs, brutal thugs like these Sudanese. Why haven’t we learnt and why hasn’t our government done what they are supposed to do and that is protect the people of Australia?...The best way to protect them now is start moving them back to where they came from.

The interview ends with the interviewer stating:

I hope you enjoyed today’s discussion and supporting free speech no matter what politics you are of.

A pattern in the discussions pertains to Muslim immigration that relates directly to a fear of the establishment of Sharia law (Islamic law). Sharia is described as a law that:

represents a divinely ordained path of conduct that guides Muslims towards a practical expression of religious conviction in this world and the goal of divine favour in the world to come.<sup>56</sup>

A post titled “The Push for Shariah Law in Australia is Real” published on 7 April 2019, and reposted on 5 June, 17 June, 27 June and 27 August, explores this fear through the repetition of a “threatening message,” being the article’s title. The article attached to the post was the most shared of all the posts analysed for this study. The article states:

Leftists who respond to critics of Islam in Australia appear to believe we are only concerned with the Islamic terror threat. This is why they always dig up statistics to downplay the likelihood of being killed by terrorism, such as you are more likely to die from falling out of bed in the morning. Of course, critics of Islam are not just concerned about the increased risk of terrorism in the West. They are concerned about the much more insidious trend of the Islamization of our society, which includes increased crime and sexual assaults and of course Islamic sharia law being practiced in parts of our society.

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<sup>56</sup> Ahmed El Shamsy and Noel James Coulson, “Sharia,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, May 29, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shariah>.

This notion of the “insidious trend of Islamisation” is worthy of discussion, particularly in relation to the description of “increased crime and sexual assaults.” This inaccurate, sweeping declaration is incredibly damaging and of serious concern to ethical, objective and most importantly true information. The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research currently does not collect information on the ethnic background of offenders in Australia but, according to data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2021, 82% of prisoners incarcerated in Australian prisons were born in Australia, followed by New Zealand (3%), Vietnam (2%) and the United Kingdom (1%).<sup>57</sup> According to Melbourne’s Crime Statistics Agency, no link exists between ethnicity and repeat offenders: 84% of chronic criminals were born in Australia.<sup>58</sup> The decision by The Unshackled to repost this article five times speaks to the outlet’s agenda, tapping into their audience’s concerns and fears regarding Islam and immigration.

Another post titled “Kirallie Smith and Halal Choices” published on 4 September 2019 speaks to another key issue in the discussion about Islam in Australia – halal (permissible) certification. The interview attached to this story suggests that halal certifiers give their profits to Islamic charities who then give the money to terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram. A similar sentiment was echoed by One Nation leader Pauline Hanson.<sup>59</sup> This damaging false idea has been spread in discussions about Islam in Australia. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation fact-checked this argument, finding that “while the proceeds of Halal certification do fund Islamic organisations, Fact Check could find no evidence that this money has ever flowed to terrorist groups.”<sup>60</sup>

Kirallie Smith, the subject of the interview, has also been a spokesperson for Q Society of Australia, a far-right Islamophobic and homophobic organisation, as well as a candidate for the Australian Liberty Alliance, a right-wing, far-right political party, now known as Yellow Vest Australia. The Unshackled’s article regarding the interview with Smith begins with:

Many Australians are concerned about the continued Muslim immigration to our nation. Given that Australia already has a significant Muslim minority we have already seen the effects Islamism has had here. This includes child marriage, female genital mutilation and forms of sharia law being practiced. One area of Islamisation that has been heavily scrutinised is that of Halal certification with a large Halal certification industry emerging with many Muslims becoming rich and the profits funding some questionable Islamic projects.

This initial framing of the story as general consensus that “Australians are concerned about the continued Muslim immigration to our nation” sets the tone for the duration of the piece.

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<sup>57</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Prisoners in Australia, 2022,” February 24, 2023, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/prisoners-australia/latest-release>.

<sup>58</sup> “New CSA Study Finds Chronic Offenders Responsible for Large Proportion of Crime in Victoria,” Crime Statistics Agency, April 19, 2018, <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/new-csa-study-finds-chronic-offenders-responsible-for-large-proportion>.

<sup>59</sup> “Pauline Hanson’s Controversial Claims on Halal Certification Reignite Debate on Issue,” 9News, April 7, 2015, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/pauline-hanson-claims-halal-certification-funds-terrorism/83f6ee69-193d-40f6-b1a6-c9c5c0651e70>.

<sup>60</sup> “Fact Check: Does Halal Certification Fund Terrorism?” ABC News, April 21, 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-14/fact-check-does-halal-certification-fund-terrorism/6383238>.

The agenda being set relating to key issues with Muslim immigration is problematic and, as we continue to read on, untrue.

Explicitly linking Muslim immigration and terrorism is a thread that is continuously seen throughout this research. An article titled “Islam is a Feminist Religion,” published on 3 June 2019, speaks to this line of thought in a noteworthy way. The first paragraph states:

Feminism is an ideology characterised by various fads that have risen and fallen over time, from universal suffrage to lipstick feminism. Its most recent fad is an amusingly perverse tryst with Islam, with many feminists stating that Islam is a feminist religion. This has not only encouraged many Western feminists to embrace and convert to Islam, it has also seduced them towards supporting an open borders policy in favour of Islamic refugees, and ultimately terrorists.

### *Framing Islam*

In this research, The Unshackled’s coverage of Islam was found to be repetitively negative, which included inflammatory language, conflict-fuelled reporting and a consistently negative tone. Tone was defined in this research by drawing on the work of Bleich and van der Veen,<sup>61</sup> focusing on neutrality of a text (as an expected starting point), which they argue “makes the degree of positivity and negativity of a text easier to interpret, and produces an easily applicable pair of calibration parameters for the lexicon used.”<sup>62</sup> This research found a complete lack of neutral stories concerning Islam, meaning every article used language that was either inflammatory or sanguine when discussing Islam and approached each story with an unquestionable agenda/perspective.

This research found that 37% of the posts included inflammatory language (extreme, radical, jihad (struggle), militant, terrorist). The repetitive use of inflammatory language associates Islam and Muslims consistently with violence, extremism and often terrorism. This is noteworthy because the use of a frame of conflict influences the way the story is told and received by audiences. Inflammatory language is defined in this research through drawing on the work of Youngblood,<sup>63</sup> who associates this language with imprecise, emotive and divisive reporting that has a negative impact on the peace building potential of ethical, objective reporting.

This research also explored tone, finding that 94% of all posts published had a *negative* tone. This meant that 6% of all the posts (two articles) had a *positive* tone, of this one was a positive review of a book titled “Mohammed’s Koran” about “Islam’s bloodthirsty quest for global domination” and the other was of a photograph of a woman holding a sign that says “atheists for Islam.” Although the post is a positive photograph, it can be inferred that the post’s intention

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<sup>61</sup> Bleich and van der Veen, *Covering Muslims*.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Steven Youngblood, *Peace Journalism Principles and Practices: Responsibly Reporting Conflicts, Reconciliation, and Solutions* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2016), <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4732532>.

was negative because the publishers were eliciting a certain response (that being outrage, shock, etc.).

This study found that 14% of all posts were framed through the context of *violence*. This consistent association influences the way Islam and Muslims are understood. This research also found that 14% of all posts were framed through the context of *terrorism*. This association of terrorism with Islam fuels and reinforces negative stereotypes associated with the Islamic community. Again, it is vital to note that this research aims to understand what kind of information audiences are getting when they search for the term ‘Islam.’ In this case, the consistent association of Islam with terrorism, conflict and inflammatory language is of serious concern to cross-cultural communication and social cohesion.<sup>64</sup>

This research found that 51% of the posts explicitly frame Muslims as *aggressors*. The positioning of Muslims as threatening and aggressive and non-Muslims as victims of the behaviours of Muslims causes severe damage to the way the religion and its adherents are understood within society. A post titled “Radical Islam and Rising Extremism to Blame for Increase in Worldwide Persecution of Christians” published on 19 January 2018, and reposted on 15 January and 7 May 2019, directly blames the “worldwide persecution of Christians” on Muslims. The article attached to the post states:

According to a recent report by Open Doors USA, more than 215 million Christians are persecuted worldwide. The report cites the rise of radical Islam and religious extremism as the primary drivers of violent acts towards Christians.

First, what is important to note is that this article was initially published in 2018 then reposted twice in 2019, reinforcing the presented idea that Christians are threatened by Islam (Muslims as the aggressors and Christians [or non-Muslims] as the victims). This line of thought suits the agenda of The Unshackled. Second, it is useful to ask: Why was this story written? What angle does it reinforce and support? The context of this story is interesting also as it is framed in a way that lacks nuance, context and critical consideration of the global picture, across countries and cultures.

Understanding the type of information audiences are receiving about Islam is crucial to understand how negative social perceptions develop. When searching for the term ‘Islam’ it would be expected to find information relating to the religion.<sup>65</sup> This would likely include information regarding the Islamic culture and/or history plus references to the Qur’ān. This research found that 63% of all posts do not reference Islamic culture and/or history, meaning vital information about the faith is not being covered. The version of Islam that is being presented by The Unshackled is removed from understandings of the faith. This also is expressed in the context of the coverage. This research found that 43% of all posts are framed through context of national or international politics meaning Islam is again being associated

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<sup>64</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and Bianca Smith, “The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media,” *School of Political and Social Inquiry* 4 (2005).

<sup>65</sup> Jade McGarry, Halim Rane and Kasun Ubayasiri, “Framing Islam and Islamism in the Australian News Media: A Content Analysis of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and The Australian,” *Australian Journalism Review* 45, no. 2 (2023).

with key themes and ideas that are removed from its core teaching and values. On this same line of thought, this research found that 34% of all posts reference or discuss the Qur'ān. Although this feels more related to the core ideas and elements of Islam, the issue then relates to the voice being used to discuss these issues and how this voice has authority over the narrative being told.

### ***Voice and Authority over Narrative***

This study found that 77% of the posts did not quote Muslims and “the absence of a Muslim voice is a lost opportunity to reframe national discussions about Muslims and terrorism.”<sup>66</sup> Understanding who has authority and power over the public discussion about Islam and Muslims is paramount to understanding how perceptions are developed. This study also found that, of the seven posts (23%) that quote Muslims, one was a dictator and one was a protester advocating for the murder of homosexuals. The inclusion of these extreme viewpoints further reinforces negative stereotypes by giving authority to individuals who hold a view of Islam that sits at the radical or fundamental end of the spectrum of belief.

An article titled “Shariah Law is coming to Canada, Muslim Al Quds Day protester in Toronto” published on 10 June 2019 has a video attached by Rebel Media that interviews a protester. The interview (and The Unshackled’s decision to publish the video) gives a large, loud and dominant voice to one person (who holds an extreme, conservative view of Islam), allowing this individual to represent an entire religious group without alternative opinions or comments from other Muslims. The framing of this story is a key area to focus on. The content (that is, the comments being made by the person being interviewed) is evidently disturbing, offensive and paints an image of what Muslims want and believe.

Regarding voice and authority over narrative, this research found that 20% of the posts quote far-right activists and commentators. The Unshackled’s alignment with these far-right individuals is a consistent thread throughout this research. The Unshackled repeatedly gives a platform and voice to these fringe commentators who hold strong anti-Islam sentiments. The content being shared about Islam, including these individuals, has a high chance of being damaging and problematic. This finding was discussed by Sharpe et al. in their research, titled “Political Philosophy and Australian Far-right Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of The Unshackled and XYZ,” where they describe The Unshackled as engaging with far-right politics by platforming “actors who express neo-Nazi views.”<sup>67</sup>

Alongside the issue of far-right commentators holding authority over many stories being told about Muslims and Islam, the omission of experts or academics relevant to the subject being covered is a key issue. This research unveiled that an academic or expert was only quoted in 17% of all posts. This neglects some of the most fundamental aspects of ethical and responsible journalism that are rudimentary to upholding the fourth estate, contributing to the consistent pursuit of truth and fact. Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt discusses the notion of truth,

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<sup>66</sup> Rane, Ewart and Martinkus, *Media Framing*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> Sharpe et al., “Political Philosophy.”



arguing that “depending on one’s position in the field, truth as a theoretical concept has become obsolete, impertinent, banned, self-evident or too explosive to handle. When used, it is commonly put in quotation marks, to indicate irony or the author’s recognition of its unattainability.”<sup>68</sup>

News stories often include the voice of a politician to give a level of credibility and insight into the content they are covering. This research found that 34% of the posts published quoted politicians, and of these posts 33% quoted Fraser Anning, who is known for holding anti-Muslim, far-right, nativist views. Anning has been the focus of literature concerning the presence of far-right politics in Australia.<sup>69</sup> A 2019 study<sup>70</sup> describes the senator:

Anning holds anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant anti-democratic views due to which he is severely criticized all over the world. According to Anning, Muslims should not be allowed to enter the Australian soils and environment. In his view, the Muslims are fanatics and extremists who create trouble for the people of Australia.

This research found that 11% of all posts published by The Unshackled in 2019, when searching for the term ‘Islam,’ quote Anning, a notoriously problematic and conservative politician. The influence this has on the way the religion and its adherents are discussed and presented is significant as it legitimises these extreme points of view, particularly when it is coming from a figure who holds a genuine position of authority, influence and power (such as a politician).

### ***Framing and Repetition***

The way this research was conducted, that is, analysis of content posted on Facebook, enables us to identify how often content is published. The Unshackled tends to repost its content several times to keep their feed looking ‘busier.’ This research found that ten out of the 35 articles were published more than once and, of these, eight were framed primarily by the news value of conflict. This means that 80% of all the posts that were reposted were framed by conflict. Not only is the issue of framing Islam through conflict prominent in The Unshackled’s coverage, but the repetition of these articles further contributes to this damaging cycle. The key issue with framing news about Islam repetitively through conflict is that this framing shapes reality for audiences. This is important as most Australians get their information about Islam from the news media,<sup>71</sup> meaning the consistent association and connection of Islam and Muslims with conflict makes cross-cultural communication between Muslims and non-Muslims difficult as a comprehensive, objective understanding of the reality of the religion and its adherents is difficult to attain.

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<sup>68</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *The Changing Faces of Journalism: Tabloidization, Technology and Truthiness* (Routledge, 2009), 32.

<sup>69</sup> Jordan McSwiney, “Organising Australian Far-right Parties: Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and Fraser Anning’s Conservative National Party,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>70</sup> Wasim Hassan et al., “An Application of Fairclough’s Three Dimensional CDA Approach to Fraser Anning’s Speech in Australian Senate,” *Linguistic Forum—A Journal of Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>71</sup> Rane, Ewart and Martinkus, *Media Framing*.

## DISCUSSION

### *Free Speech and Truth*

Mass media is fundamental to how the West understands and thinks about the Muslim world, “for many Westerners, what is ‘known’ about Islam and Muslims is minimal, inaccurate and misrepresentative.”<sup>72</sup> This notion is rudimentary to understanding the ethical responsibility the news media must remain objective and truthful. The key objective of this research was to assess how right-wing, alternative news outlets engage with the notion of free speech and how this affects the way they report on the religion of Islam. This research found that The Unshackled consistently positions itself as a “purveyor of truth,” standing defiantly apart from mainstream news media. This truth sentiment has been repeatedly called into question in this research because consistent inaccuracies in reporting were found.

Key issues such as Sharia, halal and terrorism were consistently covered by The Unshackled, but often through “insights” from unreliable sources. Interviews with people such as Fraser Anning and Kirralie Smith, and quotes from commentators such as Blair Cottrell and Neil Eriksson, influence the way stories about these issues are covered. Sweeping declarations with no basis in fact often drive the structure and narrative of the stories being published and consequently devalued The Unshackled’s journalistic integrity. Giving power and authority over the ‘Islam narrative’ to right-wing commentators and self-described anti-Islam activists places doubt on the reliability and purpose of The Unshackled’s journalistic agenda.

### *Muslim Immigration: Accuracy in Reporting*

The national discussion about immigration and border protection in Australia has been significant and dividing.<sup>73</sup> This research explores the intersection between right-wing conservative reporting and the culmination of public knowledge about Islam, through identifying the way in which Muslim immigration is covered and discussed. This research found a sentiment that permeates The Unshackled’s coverage of Islam that directly relates Muslim immigration with terrorism. This relationship is not reflected in statistical data relating to crime and home-grown terrorism. The Australian Federal Police discusses the “increasing threat of home-grown terrorism...that can occur anywhere in Australia.”<sup>74</sup>

Understanding the importance of accurate reporting on such significant issues like immigration and terrorism is paramount to executing ethical journalism. In their 2020 work titled “Restoring Trust in Journalism: An Education Perspective,” Reed et al. spoke to the idea of truth, arguing:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Muhammad Ridho Inzaghi Putra Afira, “The Role and Impact of Australian Refugee Policy in Asia-Pacific Region: From Australia-Cambodia Agreement to Rohingya Crisis,” *Mandala: Jurnal Ilmu Hubungan Internasional* 4, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>74</sup> “Fighting Home Grown Terrorism,” Australian Federal Police, June 5, 2023, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.afp.gov.au/what-we-do/crime-types/fighting-terrorism/fighting-home-grown-terrorism>.

The stakes are high because of journalism's importance in informing the public—the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. Journalism education, therefore, has an enormous responsibility to prepare strong critical thinkers on the frontlines of the battle to help restore the public's trust in actual—not 'alternative'—facts.<sup>75</sup>

Assessing the way that alternative news outlets conduct their journalism is important as it has a significant impact on public awareness, knowledge and education. Michailidou and Trenz speak to expectations of journalists arguing that they stick to “rules of impartiality and fairness,” enabling them to “support public reasoning by allowing for the expression of plural voices (governmental and oppositional, mainstream and marginal)” and arriving at an objective, balanced account of a variety of versions of the truth. The authors argue that this includes the tough task of “critically putting to the test the validity claims raised by these plural voices in a way that informs public opinion.”<sup>76</sup>

### ***News Values and Reporting on Islam***

This research found The Unshackled consistently frames stories about Islam negatively, which includes tone, language, conflict fuelled reporting and the portrayal of Muslims as aggressors. These findings are particularly relevant as several posts discuss topics that are not inherently negative. The continuous lack of positive stories about Islam can severely damage the way society understands the religion and its adherents. The consistent association of conflict, violence and bizarreness positions Islam and Muslims as ‘others’ within Australian society.

The format of The Unshackled as an online news outlet, presenting its content to its audience via social media, means that analytics and engagement come into significant consideration when assessing dissemination and production. The speed with which content is shared within the social media sphere generates a form of pressure to adhere to production styles that are likely to receive traction and engagement.<sup>77</sup> This research found this social media environment affects the way stories are covered, with the bizarre or negative aspects of stories prioritised. This means the way the religion and its adherents are covered is based on the predicted engagement of a post rather than prioritising the fourth estate role of keeping the public informed and providing fact-based, informed narratives. Although this is applicable to a variety of topics being covered by news media, it is of particular concern in relation to Islam because the news media is where the vast majority of Australians are getting their information about the religion and its adherents.

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<sup>75</sup> Katherine Reed et al., “Restoring Trust in Journalism: An Education Prescription.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 75, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>76</sup> Asimina Michailidou and Hans-Jörg Trenz, “Rethinking Journalism Standards in the Era of Post-truth Politics: From Truth Keepers to Truth Mediators,” *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 7 (2021): 1343.

<sup>77</sup> Joëlle Swart, “Experiencing Algorithms: How Young People Understand, Feel About, and Engage with Algorithmic News Selection on Social Media,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211008>.

## CONCLUSION

This research explored the role of right-wing conservative news outlets in the distribution of information regarding Islam, in particular concerning Muslim immigration. The work found that, through the frame of free speech, The Unshackled gave voice and authority to unreliable commentators who hold anti-Islam, nativist views. This action led to the distribution of information that lacked credibility, nuance, context and truth, presenting an image of Islam that contributes to negative sentiment and subsequently a lack of cross-cultural communication between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia. The research assessed the role of social media in assisting the distribution of conflict fuelled content that paints an image of Islam and Muslims as the other. The Unshackled failed to provide balanced, objective content when covering stories pertaining to Islam, leaving stories riddled with misinformation and authorised by far-right, anti-Islam commentators.

The findings of this paper are significant because they identify key issues present in right-wing, alternative media's reporting on Islam and Muslims. The nature of this reporting disregards key journalistic expectations upheld by organisations such as the Media, Entertainment and Art Alliance. This form of reporting is highly problematic given the high rates of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments present in Australia and the prevalence of Islamophobic incidents. These problems have been found to fester and strengthen in relation to fears surrounding Muslim immigration and terrorism, in particular. The Unshackled's coverage of Islam undermines the news media's capacity to encourage democratic discourse through contextual, fact-based and nuanced narratives. What is lost through this failure is the news media's public service role as a responsible reporter of complex social issues in support of an informed population.

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**APPENDIX**

#	TITLE	DATE POSTED	FORMAT
1	Radical Islam and Rising Extremism to Blame for Increase in Worldwide Persecution of Christians	<b>15.1.19</b> on FB 19.1.18 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 7.5.19</b>	Article
2	Tommy Robinson Purge and Persecution Continues	<b>8.3.19</b> on FB 8.3.19 on website	Article
3	Interview with Senator Anning in the Wake of New Zealand Massacre	<b>18.3.19</b> on FB	Video post
4	Erdogan's Monstrous Death Threats to Australians	<b>20.3.19</b> on FB 20.3.19 on website	Article
5	FAKE "Liberal" Jim Jeffries EXPOSED- DRAWS Picture of Prophet Muhammad INSULTS ISLAM	<b>21.3.19</b> on FB 21.3.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 27.3.19</b>	Article
6	Tommy Robinson Almost Completely Banned from YouTube	<b>2.4.19</b> on FB 3.3.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 3.4.19</b>	Article
7	Islam Continues its Clash with the LGBT West	<b>2.4.19</b> on FB 2.4.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 21.4.19 + 25.8.19</b>	Article
8	What do you think of this photo? "Atheists for Islam"	<b>6.4.19</b> on FB	Post
9	The Push for Shariah Law in Australia is Real	<b>7.4.19</b> on FB 24.7.17 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 6.5.19 + 17.5.19 + 27.5.19 + 27.8.19</b>	Article
10	Mohammed's Koran: Why Muslims Kill for Islam (Review)	<b>9.4.19</b> on FB 24.12.17 on website	Article
11	Breaking: Australian Senator Fraser Anning Speaks on the Upcoming Election	<b>9.4.19</b> on FB	Video post
12	Kirallie Smith and Halal Choices	<b>9.4.19</b> on FB 9.4.19 on website	Article
13	Friday Peaceful Prayers Islamic Community Melbourne	<b>12.4.19</b>	Video post
14	Breaking: Notre Dame Cathedral on Fire! More as it comes in!	<b>16.4.19</b> on FB	Post
15	Australian Greens Victoria—Where did your "understanding_islam" website page go?	<b>18.4.19</b> on FB 18.4.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 22.4.19</b>	Article
16	Breaking: Australian Senator Fraser Anning on Immigration and United Nations	<b>20.4.19</b> on FB	Video post
17	Breaking Banjo – How the Curriculum is Killing our Icons	<b>5.5.19</b> on FB 3.5.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON: 3.5.19</b>	Article
18	What do you Think of this Photo? "Gays against Shariah"	<b>6.5.19</b> on FB	Post

#	TITLE	DATE POSTED	FORMAT
19	Which was Worse? (ISIS or Soviet Union)	12.5.19 on FB	Facebook poll
20	Which Ideology is More Destructive? (Islam or Communism)	23.5.19 on FB	Facebook poll
21	UK Army Sends Out Internal “Extreme Right Wing” Warning	30.5.19 on FB 30.5.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON:</b> 31.5.19	Article
22	Do you think Islam is becoming too Powerful in Australia?	1.6.19 on FB	Facebook poll
23	Do you think Finland Should Require Illegal Immigrants to Wear Electronic Ankle Monitors	2.6.19	Facebook poll
24	Islam is not a Feminist Religion, Obviously	3.6.19 on FB 17.2.17 on website	Article
25	What is More Dangerous to Australia? (Islam or China)	9.6.19 on FB	Facebook poll
26	Austria Continues Push Back against Islam – Confirms Ban Elementary School Girls from Wearing Headscarves	10.6.19 on FB 10.6.19 on website	Article
27	“Shariah Law is Coming to Canada” Muslim Al Quds Day Protester in Toronto	10.6.19 on FB 10.6.19 on website	Article
28	Westpac Closes Blair Cottrell’s Bank Account	19.6.19 on FB 19.6.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON:</b> 27.7.19	Article
29	Report: Islam Extremists have Infiltrated French Public Services	25.6.19 on FB 25.6.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON:</b> 27.8.19	Article
30	Tommy Robinson Sentenced to Nine Months in Prison	11.7.19 on FB 11.7.19 on website	Article
31	Patriot Activist to be Charged for Protesting Islamic Event in Melbourne’s CBD	25.7.19 on FB 25.7.19 on website	Article
32	MAGA (Make Ardern Go Away)	19.8.19 on FB	Post
33	Imams Call for Australia to Outlaw Islamophobia	20.8.19 on FB 20.8.19 on website <b>REPEATED ON:</b> 25.8.19 + 17.11.19	Article
34	Waleed Aly’s Wife Susan Carland Writes a Book on Islamic Feminism	26.8.19 on FB 15.1.17 on website	Article
35	Climate Change & Islam: Australia’s Leaders Still Submit to Globalism	29.9.17 on FB 5.6.17 on website	Article