Talking about 9/11

The influence of media images on Australian Muslims’ and non-Muslims’ recollections of 9/11

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ABSTRACT: Media coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks presented significant challenges to the way media audiences responded to and made sense of, and subsequently talked about, those events. Using data from four focus groups with Brisbane media audiences including Muslims and non-Muslims, this paper examines how some Australian news media audiences recollected the media coverage of the events of 9/11 and how that impacted on their perceptions and identity. We found that the media coverage continued to have an impact on the way study participants recollected 9/11, their perceptions of those events, the way they talked about them, and also on their identity.

Introduction

‘9/11, what’s that?’

This question was put to one of the authors of this paper by a nine-year-old boy. It was part of a conversation at an early morning garage sale held during a chilly Brisbane winter. He wanted to know what research one of the authors was undertaking and when the author explained she was just about to begin a study of how people remember 9/11, she was stunned at his response—‘9/11, what’s that?’ An explanation about the events of 9/11 was provided, which elicited the following response: ‘I didn’t know that happened. I didn’t know people did that’. His comments prompted the authors of this paper to reflect on the question of whether and how people talk about 9/11 a little more than...
a decade after 11 September 2001. Exploring how people talk about this event, what influences that talk, and what impacts that talk has is important in understanding the consequences that a disaster can have even more than a decade later.

11 September 2001 was a disaster not only for those involved and those directly affected by the events, but for many watching the collapse of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon burning via the world’s news media. It can also be considered a disaster in relation to the World Health Organisation’s classification, whereby disaster is defined as

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a \text{serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources (ISDR).}
\]

http://www.who.int/hac/about/definitions/en/index.html

In the case of 9/11 there was widespread loss of human lives and the events stretched the US government’s capacities to respond, requiring external assistance. News media and US government agencies often refer to 9/11 as a disaster both in their coverage of the original event and subsequent anniversaries.

While much is already known about how various media covered 9/11 and subsequent events, and the influences of that coverage on cultural memory making, there has been very little research into the response of the news media audience to 9/11 (see, for instance, Adams & Burke, 2006; Banaji & Al-Ghabban, 2006; Matar, 2006). Adams and Burke looked at how individuals in three English villages used talk in relation to 9/11 and found it was for making sense of those events and to provide emotional release. The way their study participants talked about 9/11 was inherently tied up with identity making processes. Adams and Burke’s work, undertaken six months after 11 September 2001, also inspired us to explore how some Australian media audiences talked about 9/11 more than a decade later.

In this paper we focus on how our study participants recollected 9/11, primarily through memories of media coverage of it and the impact of that on their perceptions of those events and what followed. We also examine the impact of media coverage on their perceptions of identity and how they talked about 9/11. Our paper draws data from a small project involving four focus groups with Brisbane news media audiences. This project was a pilot for a proposed broader study of the
impacts of media coverage of terrorism events on non-Muslim and Muslim audiences.

We recognise that there are many different approaches to research about and definitions of ‘talk’. Researchers have approached ‘talk’ as storytelling, as narrative, as interpersonal exchange, and as conversation (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006). For the purposes of this paper, we approach ‘talk’ as conversation that is situated, constructed, and action-oriented (Edwards & Potter, 2001) and that has a purpose or intended purpose. Like Adams and Burke (2006), we found that study participants used talk as a way of sense-making in relation to the scale of the events of 9/11 and as a form of emotional release. Unlike Adams and Burke, we included Muslims in our study. While all participants in our study talked about how those events impacted on their sense of identity, 9/11 had significant impacts on how non-Muslims construed and understood their identity and those of Muslims. The Muslim participants in our study reported that media coverage of 9/11 led to non-Muslims challenging the identity of Muslims and that a decade later tensions around their identity continue, but not to the same extent.

Media audiences’ responses to 9/11
Most of the literature about how people talk about disasters takes a psychological approach. Individuals and communities affected by disasters experience extreme trauma during such events. Hobfoll and colleagues (1995, p. 34) explain the impact of disasters:

*Disasters are traumatic events that are so extreme or severe, so powerful, harmful or threatening that they demand extraordinary coping efforts. They may take the form of an usual event, or a series of continuous events, that subject people to extreme, intensive, overwhelming bombardment of perceived threats to themselves, or to significant others. Such traumatic events may overwhelm a person’s or a community’s sense of safety and security… Disasters present salient, powerful, highly emotionally threatening, critical events that are not easily accounted for or assimilated by the victims/survivors.*

Rather than examining news media audience members’ recollections of 9/11 from a psychological perspective, we wanted to see whether and to what extent media coverage of those events impacted on their perceptions of 9/11 and their identity a decade later. We were surprised that there were relatively few identifiable studies of news
media audiences and their responses to media coverage of 9/11 and no longitudinal studies of a similar nature.

As mentioned earlier, our study was inspired by Adams and Burke’s (2006) research into individuals’ responses to media coverage of 9/11. Their interviews with families in English villages six months after 9/11 revealed ‘how news narratives focalise and set up particular kinds of identification which audiences engage with in an ongoing process of making sense not only of the events but also of “self” in relation to “others”’ (Adams & Burke, 2006, p. 984-985). Adams and Burke identified that the ‘process of remembering the media images of September 11 generated what appeared to be profound anxieties connected to understandings of self and others in the world’ and our study revealed that for some participants this was also the case. However, we identified some significant differences in the ways Muslims and non-Muslims responded to and talked about the events of 9/11 and the ensuing decade.

Adams and Burke’s study also focused on the participants’ perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Their participants were from ‘white’ ethnic backgrounds and the interviews took place four to six months after 9/11. In exploring how the participants engaged emotionally with the victims of 9/11 they found that ‘competing discourses of belonging and difference demonstrated the complex and active processes of identifications present in recollections of responses to the media coverage of those tragic events’ (Adams & Burke, 2006, p. 1001). Study participants engaged in a very complex negotiation of identification with the victims of 9/11. While it centered on white ethnicity and/or national belonging, it also involved processes of ambiguity, qualification, contradictions, and criticism. Adams and Burke (2006) suggest that ‘Audiences actively engage with media narrations, such as news coverage of September 11, in a broader context of domestic and social relationships’ (2006, p. 1002). They also identified there was a ‘strong perception among our informants that the British media and the Labor government are tightly constrained by discourses of political correctness in the study participants’ own accounts of 9/11’ (Adams & Burke, 2006, p. 983). Adams and Burke’s study was relatively small, with a limited sample of non-Muslims only.

Other research involving news media audiences has focused on media audience members’ perceptions of bias in television news programs during and after 9/11 (Banaji & Al-Ghabban, 2006). Banaji and Al-Ghabban interviewed Indian television viewers in Bombay
and British-Asian television viewers in South-East England between December 2001 and March 2002, and discovered that international news coverage, focusing on the key themes of ‘blame, evidence and retribution with regard to the Twin Tower and Pentagon attacks’ had a significant impact on participants’ levels of dislike for Muslims, while also cementing animosities towards Muslim communities internationally (2006, p. 1005). Banaji and Al-Ghabban found that there was considerable concern for relatives and friends abroad. Additionally, they identified that their participants were critical of some aspects of the television news coverage of 9/11, particularly over what some believed to be the misuse of images of Palestinians that purported to show them cheering at the news of the attacks, but which were actually associated with events in 1992. Their study participants expressed frustration at the news media’s presentation of western events such as 9/11 as ‘more tragic and significant than troubles in non-Western nations’ (2006, p. 1014). Banaji and Al-Ghabban did not undertake a corresponding study with Muslims, which would have provided a rich comparison regarding the impacts of television coverage of 9/11 on different audiences.

Matar examined how the reportage of 9/11 in British and Arab/Muslim news media impacted on the ways Palestinians living in Britain engaged with issues around ‘identity and difference, exclusion and inclusion, memory and belonging’ (2006, p. 1027). She used individual interviews and focus groups to investigate these issues between November 2001 and March 2002. Muslim participants in her study reported feeling closer to their religion and defensive about their identity. Some of her study participants felt vindicated when they heard the news about 9/11 while others felt sympathy for those Americans killed in the attacks. A longitudinal study with these audiences would have identified the long-term impact of the coverage and that of subsequent anniversaries on this group.

**Methodology**

We hosted four focus groups of news media audiences, two for non-Muslims and two for Muslims, in Brisbane in May 2012. Separate focus groups were held for these cohorts so that non-Muslims and Muslims would feel free to express their feelings without fear of having to censor their opinions or language. The non-Muslim participants were recruited following the distribution of a press release about the project to news media organisations in Brisbane. An Email address and a local phone number were provided so that potential participants
could register their interest in attending and from this, we recruited 13 non-Muslim participants. Because we did not have enough participants to represent a broad range of ages and genders, we engaged a market research company to recruit an additional nine non-Muslim participants to ensure that our two non-Muslim focus groups were representative of a range of ages and gender. We provided the script that the company used to recruit these participants.

Recruitment of Muslim participants for the focus groups sessions was undertaken by issuing a press release and invitation that was published on the Crescents of Brisbane online community news website (CCN). CCN has a predominantly Muslim viewership/readership. Participants were invited to register their name and contact details with the authors via Email or phone if they wished to participate in the focus group sessions. Because of the difficulties associated with recruiting people to participate in focus groups, we applied for and received ethical clearance from our university to offer participants in the focus groups an $80 incentive payment.

We wanted to ensure that we had a sample of participants who had followed the events of 11 September 2001 via various media and who were willing to discuss their recollection of that coverage and its impacts on them. The focus groups enabled us to drill down to a level of in-depth discussion and to see how participants engaged with each other, and in that process how they built discussion through their exchanges (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, pp. 4-5). We primarily aimed to bring together a group where conversations could be created that would allow the building of thought on an issue (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). While we recognise that self-nomination to focus groups

Table 1. Number of Participants by age and gender

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<th>Age</th>
<th>Non-Muslims</th>
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can be problematic, it can also be useful as participants tend to be more actively engaged with and interested in the research topic. The two project chief investigators co-facilitated each of the groups. A set of themes was developed and participants were encouraged to engage in a conversation about those themes.

The purpose of talk in relation to 9/11
Participants’ talk in relation to recollections of media coverage of about 9/11 had two purposes—attempted sense-making and emotional release, more than a decade after the events. The former was related to the scale of the events and trying to come to terms with the extent of death and destruction involved. The latter was about participants recalling emotional responses to the media coverage of the events and the ensuing anniversaries of them, as well as exploring residual emotional reactions. These two types of talk led to discussion about identity (independent of specific questions from the facilitators) revealing that, as Adams and Burke found, recollections of 9/11 are inherently tied up with the issues around identity, generating ‘what appeared to be profound anxieties connected to understandings of self and others in the world’ (2006, p. 986).

Non-Muslim and Muslim participants talked about their responses to the news of 9/11 using emotional terms such as ‘shock’, ‘disbelief’, ‘devastating’, ‘disturbing’, ‘unbelievable’, ‘scary’, ‘uncomprehendable’, and ‘life-changing’. Many participants thought they were watching a movie when they saw the footage of the plane flying into the Twin Towers. For example:

I said ‘well this is an interesting movie’. Then I realised that it’s, hang on, this is happening now…. And sort of, so, holy cow! … It was surreal. (Non-Muslim)

The sense of disbelief at the events was consistent across the focus groups. The following comment is indicative of this:

I remember at the time, I was coming into the school, it was sort of a normal work day and somebody I knew pulled me up and said to me ‘did you hear about this 9/11 and all of these things’ and I just said ‘come on stop telling lies’ it is fake there is just no way something like that could happen, it is just so unbelievable. So, it probably took me about a minute to realise that he wasn’t joking, and this is in the newspaper and that this really did happen, those things. It just seemed like an April fool’s type thing, that it was a stunt by the media. (Muslim)
For some participants, attempts to make sense of the events were also closely connected to their emotional responses to media coverage of 9/11 as the phrase ‘stunned at the horror and the scale of the thing’ shows in the following comment from a non-Muslim:

_The scale of it astounded me, that sort of thing... You know, I was stunned at the horror and the scale of the thing just like everybody else, thinking how lucky we were to be over here._

Responses among non-Muslims, which were part of their attempted sense-making of the events, included researching the faith and turning to the study of international relations (particularly for the younger participants in the groups). However, some focus group members simply could not make sense of the events and they felt there were unanswered questions about 9/11. For example:

_... once it’s sunk in and you’ve actually seen some footage and understood, you sort of come out your bubble just being bewildered by it all to have the question of how and why. There’s never an adequate explanation to allow anyone to accept it as a full thing._

The search for answers to questions raised by 9/11 was also part of a sense-making process for Muslims, as the following comment demonstrates:

_Even though I was pretty ignorant, I thought this has happened, it is totally wrong of course, but there must be stuff that is making people have this kind of hatred. It made me look into it more..._

For Muslim participants, emotional talk about 9/11 involved discussing their compassion for the victims, while attempted sense-making of the events was in the context of discussions about media coverage of 9/11 and what these participants perceived as a corresponding lack of coverage of events in Palestine, as the following comment demonstrates:

_I am sitting in bed thinking, I feel for these people (victims of 9/11), my heart goes out to them, regardless of whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim and I am thinking this projection of these non-Muslims had died. Nothing was mentioned about Muslims who had died, or you know any other faith or culture, it was just these white American people, that was all that was projected and that you kept on getting. And I am thinking you_
know, everything that has happened around the world, especially in Palestine, it was nothing like this, we never were bombarded constantly, bombarded by images, women screaming.

While most study participants recalled their initial reactions to 9/11 in emotive terms, many recollected that their search for answers to and understanding of the events began in the weeks after. Discussions in the focus groups then turned to the impact of media coverage of 9/11 on participants’ views of Islam and Muslims. We now examine their recollections of 9/11 and how they were inherently tied up with issues of identity.

**Media coverage, identity, and 9/11**

Adams and Burke (2006) point out that the media have a powerful role in shaping narratives about events, and that impacts on identity construction. There were significant differences in the impact 9/11 and associated media coverage had on issues of identity for our non-Muslim and Muslim participants. This talk arose in the context of questions we asked about the impact 9/11 had on people’s perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Some Muslim participants who were previously non-Muslims were prompted by 9/11 to explore Islam and they eventually converted to that faith. Muslims also talked at length about the negative responses they received from non-Muslims post 9/11.

For non-Muslims, 9/11 gave rise to a number of issues and questions associated with identity that remained salient for them a decade later. This included the problematising of Muslims, but it is important to note that not all non-Muslims agreed with this.

**Non-Muslims and identity**

For some non-Muslim participants the presence of Muslims in Australia after 9/11 presented significant challenges to their concepts of Australian identity. For example:

*As the wars dragged on, as more Muslim refugees came to Australia and this was seen as a threat to our national identity and all this was linked back to September 11. So yeah I think that, and I think that it is still happening today, that our views [of Islam and Muslims] are so closely linked to that event.*  
(non-Muslim)

Some non-Muslim participants found both Muslims and the ‘culture’ of Muslims to be problematic in the Australian context. They engaged
in a processing of ‘othering’ Muslims by talking about the problems that they perceived were caused by Muslims. The following exchange between study participants demonstrates this point:

P4: I grew up in my teens and early 20s surrounded by many Muslims. Like I say the women, they are fine, most of them. The men I can understand totally because most of their families as soon as they hit 17, 18 are sent back to Lebanon, Israel whatever, to join, to do their service in the Army and they come back here and they are changed people. All they want to do is fight. That’s all they want to do when they come back to Australia.

P3: It’s part of their actual ingrained

P4: Yeah, it’s drummed into them from an early age. You know, this is who are you. This is what you do.

Facilitator: So can I just ask people how do you feel about Muslims and Islam now, ten years later?

P4: There’s good and bad in every race.

P4: Mine’s more against the culture, like what sort of culture would allow to have people blow themselves up and blow other people up? Like not so much the people because each person has their own thoughts, and feelings and the way they want to do things, but it’s a culture that has been ingrained in them that finds it acceptable. So it’s the culture more that I have trouble accepting than the actual people from that country.

P2: I think it’s important to remember, you know we class them all as Muslim, but there’s certain factions and extremists and I grew up in Sydney and the Middle Eastern community is huge in Auburn, Lakemba… all those places… sometimes the extremists are the ones who do take it a bit too far and you know if they just looked at the essence of their religion, it is quite a peaceful religion. You know you have someone who just takes it that a notch further.

Another participant in the same focus group responded to this discussion by calling it an ‘over-simplification’ of a complex situation. He also pointed out the contributions Muslims had made to Australia, specifically mentioning the role of Afghan cameleers. There was significant tension between participants in one non-Muslim group.
One participant called for a rational approach to laying blame for 9/11 with the comment that

_\textit{I don’t think you should blame a race just because a couple of people have got together and done this bad thing. It’s like if some Australian did something then why should they blame all of us? … I think you should treat everyone the same and just the people who have done the bad things, that’s who you should blame.}_

This was met with the following response from another participant:

_\textit{I find myself more suspicious now since all that because you sort of [wonder] how they infiltrated America to do this huge thing... And I’m just more suspicious of people. You know where I work we will get a whole heap of Arab people all coming in and I think hmm they could be plotting something, you know.}_

For some of the older non-Muslim participants, sense-making involved positioning Islam as a threat to the Australian way of life. For example, an exchange took place in one of the non-Muslim groups in which several elderly participants talked about Muslims using all the resources, having too many babies, causing famines through over-population and failing to integrate into Australian society. Several of the younger participants in this group responded by saying that Catholics were accused of similar 50 years ago, and that Irish and English settlers in Australia in the 1950s also lived in their own communities.

On a much more serious note, the Muslim focus group participants talked about the impacts of 9/11 on Muslims in Australia and how that had led to them questioning Islamic fundamentalism and their identity, but also having their own identity questioned by non-Muslims. The Muslim participants who were in Australia at the time reported having their identity challenged in the months after 9/11, but it was the female Muslim participants and female relatives of male study participants who experienced the most negativity. Participants talked about challenges to their identity being made on the streets and in workplaces. A Muslim study participant explained how these challenges manifested during a visit to a doctor:

_\textit{… all of a sudden all of these people are standing up, checking the TV and you see these buildings falling and people going ‘oh my God’ and people in shock and some were crying and I am thinking oh my god where did I walk into? So I am walking in}_
and I had no idea what was going on, I didn’t know what was happening, so then I stopped and asked someone and she just looked at me, really, I am quite friendly I smile at people, I don’t tend to get people abusive towards me, but that day I felt this tension towards me.

Some participants experienced feelings of insecurity when their identity was challenged by non-Muslims; for example:

I would hear people, students make remarks, like you know ‘these refugees what are they doing here, they need to get out, this is not their country’ that sort of stuff. So it was quite difficult.

Muslim participants in our study recollected their responses to these challenges in a variety of ways recalling using humour to cope with uncomfortable situations, by working harder, by focusing on being good citizens, and by turning to Brisbane’s Muslim communities for support. A participant provided an example of the situational use of humour explaining she told people at the university she attended that she wasn’t Bin Laden’s wife and that she didn’t have a gun under her hijab. In this instance she used humour as a way of putting non-Muslims at ease about her faith. Others felt they had to prove that they were hard working, good Australian citizens as is evidenced by the following comment:

On a quick note I felt, I had to become a better Australian to prove that I am worthy of this country, or to prove that you know that I am okay in this country.

However, for one male Muslim study participant who was in his early twenties in late 2001, 9/11 presented a different kind of challenge. This participant described the responses of his contemporaries very frankly, saying they had openly discussed radical plans such as taking up arms against America and fighting:

I was about 20 years old when it all happened… I think the confusing part for an adolescent, a young guy I was 20-years-old with a lot of fire in my belly, is that you didn’t know whether to support it or disagree with it because although people were saying that it was Muslim terrorists, you knew that, you know when you are younger, you are a little bit more volatile, you start to, and fight and all those sorts of things, but of course 11 years down the track that is not always the best solution… Yes… You know I think that most youth were going through that
emotion at that time. You become very defensive; you become very offensive as well, so those were the things that crossed you.

However, Muslim study participants acknowledged that the negative reactions they experienced in the months after 9/11 had, more than ten years later, dissipated although when the media raised the issue of asylum seekers some experienced the same types of reactions from non-Muslims that they had post 9/11.

Discussion/Conclusion
The question at the start of the paper posed by an inquisitive nine-year-old ‘9/11, what’s that?’ led us to consider, a decade later, how people talk about those events. We primarily focused on how study participants recollected the media coverage of the events of 9/11 and how they talked about that because the media mediated the event for our study participants. We found that for participants there were two reasons for discussing 9/11: emotional release and attempted sense-making. A decade on, participants had strong memories and recollections of their emotional responses to the media coverage in the days following 9/11 and they recollected engaging in attempted sense-making about what they saw and heard in the media in the weeks that followed them. We identified, as did Adams and Burke (2006), that study participants’ talk about 9/11 was inherently tied up with issues of identity. For some study participants 9/11 raised significant issues about their identity, namely whether Muslims belonged in Australia and whether their religion was compatible with Australian values.

While the issue of race arose in the context of this discussion, those making such comments primarily focused on the incompatibility of the culture of Muslims and Islam with Australian values. However, other non-Muslim participants did not find the presence of Muslims in Australia problematic. For some of our participants the intervening decade since 9/11 had not changed the way they talked about Australian Muslims and they continued to question the place of Muslims in Australia. Whereas Adams and Burke (2006) found that what their respondents did not say was just as important as what they did say particularly in relation to implied racism, we identified that in the non-Muslim focus groups some participants freely expressed sentiments that others found problematic. It is important to note that other participants in this group challenged those statements.
For Muslim participants in our study, 9/11 presented a significant challenge, because their identity and place in Australia was repeatedly called into question post 9/11 and that caused high levels of fear and anxiety for some of them. This meant these participants had to verify and validate their identity to themselves and to others. Other studies of Muslim responses to 9/11 have identified similar responses as our Muslim participants experienced, namely the heightening of fear and anxiety levels post 9/11 (Muedini, 2009; Peek, 2003). The calling into question of Muslims’ identity by some non-Muslims in the months after 9/11 has, according to our study participants abated, but not entirely ceased, more than a decade later. The continued politicisation and associated media coverage of issues such as the war on terror and the conflation of asylum seekers with terrorism were identified as contributing to this by our Muslim study participants.

The findings of our study suggest that, more than ten years after 9/11, media images and associated emotional responses continue to resonate with non-Muslim and Muslim participants. Our study revealed that the news media was for our focus group participants a crucial element in their construction of their responses to the events of 9/11 and to how they subsequently recollected and talked about them. It also provided an avenue through which they attempted to make sense of those events. While some participants have sought to and achieved sense-making of the events through study and research, there remained an ongoing inability to make sense of 9/11 for others, which for some manifested in suspicion of Muslims and questions about their identity. The ways Muslims talked about media coverage of 9/11 and its impacts on their perceptions and identities were very different than the responses of non-Muslims in our study. A number of factors contribute to that, including that many Muslim study participants perceived that media coverage of Muslims was primarily negative and stereotyped, that many were abused verbally and physically post 9/11, and that they saw an imbalance in the amount of media coverage devoted to 9/11 compared with the Palestine conflict. We acknowledge that this is a small study, but it is distinct because of its inclusion of Muslim and non-Muslim participants and because it concerns recollections of an event that occurred some time ago. It highlights the longer term impact of a significant event and the role of media in keeping an event current, an area that warrants further research.
References


