THE CRONULLA RIOT: HOW ONE NEWSPAPER REPRESENTED THE EVENT

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ABSTRACT

The main body of this paper suggests that, in the course of reporting on the Cronulla riot of 2005, a leading Australian newspaper labelled a religious group, criticised Muslim heritage, and upheld white empowerment through its images and headlines. This paper concludes with a report on some positive steps taken by Lebanese-Australians and mainstream Australians since the Cronulla riot; but it questions whether these steps are sufficient to avoid further violence.

1 INTRODUCTION

When the Cronulla riot broke out in Sydney in December 2005, I was in Europe. I was shocked to see footage on television showing young Australians plunged into an apparent state of anarchy. Then I received an email from an American journalist in which she asked me to be interviewed about the incident. I told her I was not sufficiently informed about the incident to comment on it. However, when I returned to Australia in mid-January 2006, I set about gathering data on the riot from academic publications, police reports, Muslim youth interviews, and newspaper accounts, especially of The Australian, 12-18 December 2005. In this paper I offer an analysis of the data. I begin with a thumbnail sketch of the event, follow this with commentary on some Muslim youth views on media reporting derived from my research, and, finally, provide an account of the media representation of the riot, especially that of The Australian newspaper.
2 DISCUSSION

2.1 THE EVENT
On 4 December, 2005 a fight between three surf lifesavers and a group of four Lebanese-background young men occurred at Cronulla beach. According to Poynting (2006: 86), the lifesavers had insulted their assailants with public taunts ‘Lebs can’t swim’. Conversely, Barclay and West (2006: 77) reported that the conflict arose because Lebanese had come to the beach and verbally abused the local women with phrases such as ‘You’re a slut’, ‘you Aussie slut’, ‘you should be raped’. Following the fight, the popular commercial media, notably the tabloids and talkback radio, fanned the flames. On 11 December 2005 about 5,000 young Australians converged on Sydney’s Cronulla beach, many draped in Australian flags, singing Waltzing Matilda and Advance Australia Fair and chanting ‘Kill the Lebs’, ‘no more Lebs’, ‘get Lebs off the beach’, ‘F...k off, Lebs’ and ‘F...k off wogs’ (Overington and Warne-Smith 2005: 20). Some of the young men had stripped to the waist and painted obscene slogans about Allah [the Muslim God] and the Prophet Muhammad on themselves and attacked people of Middle Eastern appearance (Overington and Warne-Smith 2005: 20). Subsequently, on 12 December 2005 a group of Lebanese-Australians arrived at Punchbowl Park armed with guns, machetes, baseball bats, knives, chains and iron bars and launched a reprisal attack by smashing shops and cars and threatening people who got in their way (Poynting 2006: 90). Allegedly the Lebanese-Australians hit at least 4 people (Anonymous 2005: 4).
2.2 IMPACT ON MUSLIM YOUTH

From July 2006 to February 2007, I conducted 130 interviews of Australian Muslim students, 15-18 years in Sydney. I have worked up the responses to these interviews on different topics for other publications. For this paper, I have analysed 15 previously unused interviews of Lebanese-Australian male students from a School in South-Western Sydney that I conducted from 1-3 November 2006. I have used fictitious names for the interviewees. Five interviewees criticised both the mainstream Australians and the Lebanese-Australian boys over the incident and 10 interviewees were convinced that the media 'stirred up the event'. For example, Haneef, a 16-year-old student, stated:

It’s the media, that’s their job, that’s how they make money. So they go through whatever they have to go through and...but it affects everyone; it affects you. Because when you go say shopping, you know someone’s watching you, you’re like Lebanese, you know people have got an eye on you and they won’t treat you the same as they treat another Australian and it affects you because they’re judging you like, just from your look. They just look at you, ‘Lebanese, Oh forget him’.

And Pervez another 16-year student, commented:

We’re all born here; we should be treated the same way as everyone else gets treated. But the media’s obviously not on our side....Just don’t believe everything you hear in the media.

Some academics, such as Poynting (2006: 86; 2007: 158-170), also believe there was a media ‘beat-up’ mentioning, in particular, the tabloid newspaper the Daily Telegraph; he also singled out talkback radio Steve Price’s 2UE and Alan Jones’ 2GB for provoking anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiments during the riot. In 2006 a comprehensive New South Wales Police report, ‘Strike Force Neil’ confirmed that the 2GB talkback radio program between 5-9 December 2005 incited the Cronulla riots that occurred from 11-13 December 2005 through its sensational comments against Lebanese-Australians. ABC’s Media Watch (2006,
see also Poynting 2007) reported that 2GB talkback host Alan Jones on 7 December said on air:

It seems the police and the council are impotent here. All rhetoric, no action. My suggestion is to invite one of the biker gangs to be present in numbers at Cronulla railway station when these Lebanese thugs arrive...It’d be worth the price of admission to watch these cowards scurry back onto the train for the return trip to their lairs...Australians old and new shouldn’t have to put up with this scum.

Perera (2006) contends that the riots revealed white people's territorial claims. By draping Australian flags, summoned by radio and mobile phone and SMS text messaging to a ‘community day of Leb and wog bashing’, the white Australians asserted that it was their beach. Perera states:

A participant likens the day’s event to facing the Japanese invasion in World War 2. For others it stands for ANZAC day, for a beer-soaked memorial picnic at Gallipoli, for the turning away of the Tampa, for the streets of Iraq. It is the homeland.

On the other hand, Willis (2006) criticises the Cronulla riots as 'the UnAustralia war’, where the Australian print media reproduced the SMS messages and thereby articulated ‘historical, ambiguous, xenophobic, promotional’ and ‘self and other discourses’. Interestingly, Kabir (2007: 62-79) also found that some Australian Muslim youth had defined the Cronulla riots as ‘UnAustralian’. With all these elements in mind, I examined the news reporting and images published in The Australian from 12-18 December 2005.

2.3 ONE NEWSPAPER’S REPRESENTATION

Poynting et al. (2004: 210-211) observe that through their reporting, some media outlets often create ‘fears of cultural rift’ and ‘the politics of fear’ (see also Kabir 2006 a: Online; Kabir 2006 b: 313-328). When I examined the Australian’s reporting of the Cronulla riots from 12-18 December 2005, I noticed the

1 This section will be discussed at the conference through power point presentation.
newspaper’s depictions of mainstream Australians and Australians of Lebanese background, its use of images and links with headlines, and its patterns of discourse. I comment on these aspects in conjunction with the day-by-day accounts that follow.

2.3.1 12 DECEMBER 2005
The headline in the Australian (12/12/2005:1) ran, ‘Revenge attacks in race war * Lebanese bashed as mob rampages through beach suburb’. But note how the nomenclature is broadened from Lebanese to Muslim in the report that followed:

…..A man was stabbed near Cronulla and more than 100 cars in the eastern suburb of Maroubra had their windscreens smashed and tyres slashed in what police fear [were] signs of retaliation by members of Sydney’s Muslim community (p. 1).

Photos associated with this report denote Anglo triumphalism. One shows an Australian male posing in a fist fight against a Lebanese male who was being protected by the police, and the other white males in the photo were rejoicing. Another photo showed a train full of white males in an attacking and violent mood, with a policeman trying to save a man from an assault. And on page 6, the headline, ‘Violent beach mob “hides behind flag”’ was accompanied by a photo of young white Australian males showing victory signs.

2.3.2 13 DECEMBER 2005
The next day The Australian had one headline on the front page: ‘Gangs launch revenge raids * Muslims retaliate for riot * Shots fired, six arrested * Residents, cars attacked’ (p.1). So again Lebanese-Australians were labelled as ‘Muslims’.

The captions on the photos accompanying this report all referred to arrested persons as ‘Muslims’.
On page 4, the headline ran, ‘“We’re not a bunch of racists”, PM says’. Given the context of a riot between 5,000 mainstream Australians and some Lebanese-Australians, this endorsement from Prime Minister John Howard could be construed as a further incitement of the riotous behaviour – racist or otherwise. The headline also reported that Dr Mark Lopez, author of *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics*, said that locals in the Sutherland Shire in Sydney’s south, had taken ‘a lot of shit’ from Muslim youths (see also Poynting 2006 a). The report was associated with the photograph of a bruised mainstream Australian, clearly depicted as a victim.

In the same edition, the features column, ‘Hate in the beach’ (p. 11) had constructive comments from some academics; but it was juxtaposed with the following photographs showing Anglo-Australians at the beach rejoicing because they had ‘reclaimed’ their beach.

Image 1: An Australian male youth with: ‘WE GREW HERE! YOU FLEW HERE!’ written on his chest.

Image 2: A white male youth bashing a Middle Eastern youth

Image 3: An Australian teenage girl holding a poster: ‘AUSSIES FIGHTING BACK! Patriotic Youth League’.

Image 4: An Australian youth with ‘WOG FREE ZONE’ written on the back of his T-Shirt.

Image 5: Another male youth with this written on his singlet: ‘Mohammed [Muslim’s Prophet Muhammad] was a camel raping faggot’.
Bill Leak’s cartoon (13/12/2005: 12) also depicted white Australians in control, ‘WE WILL DECIDE WHO COMES TO CRONULLA AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES etc etc’. ‘MUSLIMS OUT!! BASH LEBS! KILL WOGS’ were written on the Australians’ shirts. The cartoon caption read: ‘Howard’s BATTLERS’.

The editorial, ‘Blood on the beach’ (13/12/2005: 13) took the side of the radio talk-back shows when it stated:

But the talk-back radio is abuzz with claims that youths from Middle Eastern backgrounds regularly harass women at the beach. It seems certain some do, and it is up to their community leaders to convince them they must stop.

This begs the question: Where are the leaders to convince the 5,000 Anglo-Australians (who converged on the Cronulla beach) to ‘stop’ as well? The comment by the Australian Prime Minister, reported above, seems particularly unhelpful in this context.

2.3.3 14-15 DECEMBER 2005

The Australian under the headline, ‘Digging in at the beach’ (p. 4) reported, ‘The main beach at the Cronulla was virtually deserted yesterday, except for a self-described “proud Aussie” who witnessed the race riots on Sunday and returned to protect the sand “from the hairy ape Muslim invasion”’. The features column, ‘Isolated and angry’ (p. 11) incorporated the director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at the Australian National University, James Jupp’s statement:

There is no doubt some of these young Lebanese guys have an aggressive attitude towards women. They get this from their parents: women in the Middle East are often seen as sisters, mothers or whores. The daughters are very tightly controlled but the blokes do what they like. When they see girls on the beach walking around virtually naked, they get very excited about it.

Jupp’s comment on Middle Eastern women and whores seems to be outrageous and out of context. In my research I have found that some Muslim families are
patriarchal in structure, but most Lebanese-Australian Muslim youth were born in Australia and have been seeing non-Muslim women in revealing clothes for many years. Many of them love the Sydney beaches, and have been going there since their childhood, so there would be very few who would equate women in swimsuits with ‘whores’. Therefore, I think we can conclude that Jupp’s statement, as reported, is also unhelpful.

The subsequent two cartoons of Middle Eastern youth depicted the violent nature of the Lebanese-Australians. The cartoon sketched a hotted-up car with two Lebanese men who had their heads out of the window, listening to a third person, standing outside and reading the list: ‘...BASEBALL BATS, GUNS, KNIVES, KNUCKLE-DUSTERS, MOLOTOV COCKTAILS –HANG ON – DID ANYONE REMEMBER THE SUN SCREEN’. The cartoon was captioned: ‘A NICE DAY AT THE BEACH’ (14/12/2005:12). A couple of days later (16/12/2005: 14) Bill Leak’s cartoon had a similar theme: a Lebanese Muslim mother was telling her son: ‘NOW, YOU BE HOME BY 10 O’CLOCK OR I’LL TAKE BACK ONE OF YOUR GUNS! Cartoon caption: MUMMY KNOWS BEST…’

On 15 December 2005 (p. 1) The Australian under the headings ‘Churches are new targets. *Race war turns religious * Lebanae leaders call for youth curfew’, reported on agreement between the Christian and Muslim Lebanese that they and white males ‘have often been at odds with one another’ in their use of suburban beaches. That is, Lebanese-Australian Christians, who normally do not socialise with their Muslim counterparts, on this occasion were sympathetic and sided with against the local Australians at the Cronulla beach.
2.3.4 16-18 DECEMBER 2005

Surprisingly both an opinion piece, ‘It’s not a race war, it’s a clash of cultures’ by Keith Windschuttle (16/12/2005: 14), and a report ‘Lebanese pushing kids to marry “in”’ by Tracy Ong published next day (The Weekend Australian, 17-18/12/2005: 6) referred to the study of Dr Bob Birrell conducted in 2000 in which Birrell found the already high level of in-marriage for the children of Lebanese migrants rose in the 1990s, with 61 per cent of grooms marrying a woman from Lebanon (or from Lebanese-Australian backgrounds) and 74 per cent of women marrying Lebanese (or from Lebanese-Australian backgrounds) men. Birrell’s study also found that a significant number of Lebanese-Australians were returning to their parent’s homeland to find a spouse. But it is interesting to note that in December 2005 when police found two Anglo-Australian Cronulla men possessed seven home-made bombs (see ‘Molotov cocktails land men in jail’, 17-18/12/2005: 6), there was no commentary in the press about their culture, religion or family structure.

Finally, in the Weekend Australian’s cover page (‘Lakemba youths trains for the surf as 200km of beachfront is locked down’, 17-8/12/2005: 1), there was a good-news story of harmony between Lebanese/Muslims and non-Muslims at the North Cronulla beach. However, this was overshadowed by a bigger headline: ‘Police taped terror plot to kill Howard’ (p.1) with a report on Muslim cleric Abdul Nacer Benbrika, 46, and Abdullah Merhi, 20 who allegedly conspired against Australian Prime Minister John Howard. The report highlighted the following conversation:

MURDER PLOT

Part of the conversation allegedly between Merhi and Benbrika recorded on September 24
MEHRI: For example, if John Howard kills innocent Muslim families do we...do we have to kill him and his family...his people, like at the football?

BENBRIKA: If they kill your kids we kill little kids.

MERHI: Innocent ones?

BENBRIKA: Innocent ones.

MERHI: We send a message back to them.

BENBRIKA: That’s it, an eye for an eye.

MERHI: I want in on everything.

BENBRIKA: Now they kill our kids, it is our right to take revenge.

To sum up: the message reverberating in the Australian during this period was clear: Muslim extremists pose a threat to Australian national security. In Kabir’s publications (2006 a; 2006b) the author noted that in juxtaposing any good news of moderate Muslims with news of Muslim extremists, the media contributes to the negative perception of mainstream Muslims in the wider community.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Some academic publications have confirmed that media, such as the Daily Telegraph and Alan Jones talkback radio 2GB, incited the Cronulla riot. Some academics have condemned the riot as ‘unAustralian’, whereas others have depicted it as a ‘white male empowerment and territorial claim’ in Australian society. My reading of The Australian, 12-18 December 2005, is that was generally an occasion to cast aspersions on ‘Muslim Australians’ rather than confining it to a squabble between Lebanese-Australians and local Cronulla boys.

Since then measures have been taken to improve the majority-minority relations in the area. In October 2006, Muslim youth leader Fadi Rahman established a liaison team to develop communication channels between Sydney’s Lebanese-
Australian and Cronulla youth (Kerbaj 2006: 4). In February 2007 the first Muslim surf lifesaver group was formed for the Cronulla beach (Bryant 2007). And there was reconciliation with the 16-year old Lebanese-Australian, Ali Ammar, who at the time of the riot had climbed the local RSL club’s flagpole and thrown the Australian flag down whereupon his mates spat and urinated on it before setting it ablaze (ABC Compass). Ali was charged and penalised for his actions, but later apologised. When the Returned and Services League’s State President Don Rowe invited him to carry a flag at the ANZAC Day² march in 2006 there were serious objections from some local Australians, and some RSL members were outraged, so the offer was withdrawn. But in 2007 Ali was taken for a walk along the Kokoda Trail,³ which gave him the chance to experience first-hand why the Australian flag is so important for many people. This was reported in a television program as a positive and enlightening step for Ali in reasserting his Australian national identity (ABC Compass). However, 10 out of the 15 Lebanese-Australian Muslim students were distressed over the Cronulla riot and some have stopped going to the Cronulla beach. Five of these interviewees thought that the tension between the Lebanese-Australians and local Cronulla boys was still simmering and that another Cronulla riot was likely in the future (interviews, Sydney, 1-3 November 2006).

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² ANZAC Day - 25 April - is Australia’s most important national occasion. It marks the anniversary of the first major military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces during the First World War. ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. The soldiers in those forces quickly became known as ANZACs, and the pride they soon took in that name endures to this day.

³ The Kokoda Track campaign was part of the Pacific War of World War II. The campaign consisted of a series of battles fought from July 1942 to January 1943 between Japanese and Allied – primarily Australian – forces in what was then the Australian territory of New Guinea.
Measures have been taken after the Cronulla riots, such as the afore-mentioned employment of Muslim surf lifesavers at the beach, and public awareness has been raised through the police reports condemning media incitement. But are these measures sufficient to obviate future riots at Cronulla or elsewhere? Surely more research is needed on race relations, on the socio-economic and cultural circumstances of ethnic minorities, and on media reporting in this country. And surely it is time for Australians to realise that national security has more to do with social cohesion than it does with anti-terrorist legislation and strict migration policies.

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5 REFERENCES


