

Exploring the Political Parallelism discourse on Representation of Islam and Muslims in the  
Australian Press

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### **Abstract**

Recent research has revealed a prominent ‘political parallelism’ discourse in the coverage of Islam and Muslims by international media. The studies have evidenced that the coverage of Islam and Muslims is widely influenced by the ideological leanings of the newspapers. This paper is set to explore whether the ideological differences of the Australian newspapers are reflected in the coverage of Islam and Muslims during January 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017. Employing Van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square and lexicalization approaches within the CDA paradigm this study examined editorials from two leading Australian newspapers. The findings have validated the existence of the ‘political parallelism’ discourse in the editorial contents of the selected newspapers representing Islam and Muslims.

**Keywords:** Political Parallelism, Representation, Islam, Muslims, ideological square, lexicalization

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**Introduction**

Recent studies conducted in the UK, US, and few European countries have revealed a prominent ‘political parallelism’ phenomenon in the coverage of Islam and Muslims. The studies have evidenced that the coverage of Islam and Muslims is widely influenced by the ideological leanings of the newspapers. So, a significant aspect of this study is to explore ‘political parallelism’ in the Australian press i.e. to scrutinize the Muslims’ representation within the right-lift ideological lines of the newspapers. Since early 1970s, after the abandonment of the ‘White Australian Policy’ in 1972, Australia is officially a multicultural country (Peisker, Mikola and Dekker, 2016). But the popular public support for the multicultural policies and ideology has been waxed and waned significantly since then due to the varied stance and role of the national political leadership. So, the role of current political leadership in this regard and the stance of the national press on it is a significant angle to be studied.

Studies conducted in the US, France, Germany, and Spain have revealed that the perceptions about Muslims have been connected to the political leanings. Results have shown that the Muslims have been perceived more negatively by the conservatives than the liberals (Ogan, Wilnat, Pennington, and Bashir, 2014). So, it is interesting to investigate and explore negative indicators in the Muslims’ representation by the Australian newspapers with different ideological lines and whether these ideological differences are reflected in the coverage of Muslims during the time period under study.

The study is set to identify the differences in the Muslims' representations by the newspapers on the basis of their right-left ideological lines during January 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017.

Therefore, the study mainly focuses on a key research question;

- Whether the ideological differences of the newspapers have any impact on the coverage of Islam and Muslims?

This study considers *The Age* and *The Australian* as representative sample of the 'Australian Media' for the desired objective. These newspapers are selected because both of them are very candid, outspoken and clear in their ideological lines whereby the former represents the left-wing political ideology and the latter one advocates the right-wing explicitly. This study is part of the researcher's PhD research endeavor which is devoted to explore discourses regarding Islam and Muslims in the Australian press during period under study.

### **Conceptualization & Operationalization**

The 'political parallelism' is a concept that scrutinizes representation of Islam and Muslims on the basis of left-right ideological lines. The coverage of Islam and Muslims in European newspapers is influenced by the political parallelism. The conservative press (right-wing) focuses more on 'violence', 'female underrepresentation', and 'collectivism' while covering Islam and Muslims as compared to the progressive/liberal press (left-wing).

The editorial contents of two Australian newspapers; *The Age* (Centre-Left/Liberal/Progressive) and *The Australian* (Right-wing/Conservative) were analyzed to determine 'political parallelism' discourse in Muslims' representation. Using the lenses of 'lexicalization' and 'ideological square', the editorial contents were analyzed to identify

‘violence’, ‘female underrepresentation’, and ‘collectivism’ themes related to Islam and Muslims.

The study at hand explored that whether the ideological differences of the Australian newspapers were reflected in the coverage of Islam and Muslims during January 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017. The researcher assumed that the identification and exploration of the impact of political ideologies of the Australian newspapers on the editorial representation of Islam and Muslims will be a useful addition to the existing body of knowledge because of the fact that Australia is a migrant-friendly country (Alharbi, 2017) and Muslim communities have been offered all the available facilities and benefits for years without any discrimination. Muslims community in Australia is as diverse as in many other countries. According to a media release on June 27, 2017 regarding census 2016, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveals that Islam has become the second largest religion in Australia with 2.6% population after Christianity (52%) and took over Buddhism (2.4%), (Australian Bureau of Statistics-Census, 2016). Recent statistics show that Muslim population in Australia has increased over 604,000 (2.6%) from 300,000 in 2006 (2%) with a 77% increase in the Muslims population since last decade (Tolj, B. 2017). They have descended from more than 120 countries around the world, mainly from Lebanon and Turkey. A sizable Muslim population is from Asia including; Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Arab countries, and also from America and Europe. Converts are a very small population in Australia. Muslims migrate to Australia for variety of reasons including; family joining, to seek shelter from war and conflict in their home countries, employment and advancement etc (IDa, 2007).

News media perform a central function in producing and then upholding a particular discourse that affects our daily life and creates an environment where we make our perceptions

about ourselves and the world around us. Therefore, the mass media reflect, manifest and corroborate (Karin, 2008) different contending political and societal discourses, which have impact on the meaning construction and the evolution of the society as a whole. A discourse is a set of successive statements that offers a language to stand for a specific form of knowledge about a topic (Hall, 1992). Within a particular discourse when statements are made about a specific theme, the discourse helps to construct the theme in a specific way limiting any other possible ways to construct the theme (Hall 1992, 291-292).

The Western media is continuously labeling Islam as a religion that breeds terrorism and violence and Muslims as terrorists. Any terrorist incident around the world is immediately attributed to the Muslims by media. For example, consider the media coverage of Oklahoma City terrorist incident and Norway terrorist attacks in 2011 where media immediately blamed Muslims for the attacks while both the claims turned out to be false. After investigations two fundamentalist Christians were convicted for Oklahoma attacks and a 32 year old Norwegian for the Oslo incident. As a consequence of such hurried and unauthentic media coverage and malicious propaganda against Muslims, violent and racial attacks and offences have been increased against Muslims living in Western world (Alghamdi, 2015).

Historically newspapers in Europe started off as ideological or political outlets (Mertens, 2016 p.xi) thus influenced by the 'political parallelism' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004 p.212-213). Earlier studies have evidenced that political ideological leanings do have impact on coverage of Islam and Muslims. The conservative ideology (right-wing) press portrayed Islam and Muslims more negatively than the liberal/progressive (left-wing) press (Ogan, Wilnat, Pennington, and Bashir 2014 p.40 also cited in Mertens, 2016 p.xi, 65). Stefan Mertens (2016) found out that progressive newspapers (left-wing) in Europe focused less on violence than the conservative

press (right-wing) did (p.68). The conservative newspapers gave more coverage to female underrepresentation and opted for institutional angle (collectivization) more than the liberal press did (p.69).

Stefan Mertens (2016) in his study, *European Media Coverage of Islam in a Globalizing World*, published in *Representations of Islam in the News*, investigated the influence of the 'ideological biases' (left versus right) in the coverage of Islam and Muslims by the western European press. He claims that various studies have revealed that 'politically conservative' newspapers viewed Muslims in a more negative way as compared to the 'liberals'. He found out a clear thematic distinction between the coverage of external and internal Islam. Foreign Islam was more conflated with female underrepresentation and violence as compared to the national Islam. Secondly, the findings evidenced that the left-wing press showed less violence as compared to the newspapers of right-wing and the right-wing press remained more institutional (Mertens 2016, in Mertens and Smaele, 2016 p. 65, 73).

Mertens and Smaele (2016) argue that the ideological differences are evident in the national contexts. Mostly there is a clear distinction between the coverage of national and foreign Islam with the latter encircling the negative representation (Mertens and Smaele, 2016 p. xi).

Overall, detailed and careful review of the existing literature on the topic suggests that there are latest trends in the representation of Islam and Muslims in the American and majority of the European print media. However, the existence of such representational strategies and trends, including the impact of 'political parallelism', in the Australian media has not been established yet. The study at hand is an attempt to explore whether the impact of ideological

lines of the newspapers in the representation of Islam and Muslims, that appeared in the US and European print media, is also visible in the Australian media during period under study.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection and Sampling**

Originally the study analyzed a sample size of 11 editorials from each selected newspaper published regarding Islam and Muslims during period understudy. All the 22 editorials were selected using ‘Census sampling’ and ‘data cleansing’. For this paper the researcher has employed the ‘ideological square’ and the ‘lexicalization’ approaches from the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm to identify prominent themes that evidence the existence of ‘political parallelism’ discourse in the editorial coverage of *The Age* and *The Australian* regarding Islam and Muslims during period under study.

### **Data Analysis**

Van Dijk’s (1998) ‘ideological square’ and ‘lexicalization’ approaches within the CDA paradigm have been employed as data analysis tools.

There are various approaches and offshoots of CDA as developed by the major proponents based on different theoretical aspects like; Ron Scollon who described CDA from microsociological perspectives, while Siegfried Jager, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak developed their stances from the theories on society and power closely premised in Faucauldian school of thought (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The present study however is based on the paradigm of social cognitive perspective as developed and advocated by Tuen A. van Dijk (Van Dijk, 1993; 1995; 2000). This approach assumes that power is exercised by manipulating and



influencing the minds. In other words, dominance and discourses have a direct social cognitive connection which deems it imperative to critically analyze the (re)production of texts and also the way they are perceived and interpreted (Dijk, 1993).

### **Ideological Square**

The 'Ideological Square', as proposed by Van Dijk (1998b), is a theoretical and methodological approach that incorporates positive in-group and negative out-group strategies. Both these strategies of taking binary positions are manifested through lexical choices and various other linguistic facets in a discourse (Dijk, 1998b, p. 33 also cited in Shojaei, Youssefi & Hosseini, 2013). Van Dijk argues that many group ideologies seem to be polarized in representing Self and Other i.e. Us and Them in terms of 'We are good and They are bad' (Shojaei, Youssefi & Hosseini, 2013). The 'ideological square' operates to present a polarized image of in-group and out-group by portraying 'Us' in a favorable way and 'them' in an unfavorable way (Kuo & Nakamura, 2005).

The 'Ideological Square' is a theoretical model that emphasizes on examining media texts to determine ideological strategies that ascertain eminent descriptions of different social groups (Philo, 2007). According to Van Dijk (2004) there are hundreds of analytical strategies within the 'ideological square'. Lexicalization and Polarization (US-THEM Categorization) are two of them. Lexicalization belongs to the 'style' and Polarization belongs to the 'meaning' domain of discourse analysis.

### **Lexicalization**

The 'ideological polarization' is manifested in a discourse through various forms such as in terms of 'Lexical Choices' wherein positive and negative evaluations are employed (Shojaei,

Youssefi & Hosseini, 2013, p. 859). The strategy of employing binary opposition in a discourse is manifested through 'Lexical items' to portray in-group (us) positively and out-group (them/Other) negatively. The strategy is one of many categories of 'ideological square' analysis and is called as 'Lexicalization'. Van Dijk (1998b) argues that in the ideological and linguistic studies the best known (p. 31) method is the analysis of 'Lexical Items'. He maintains that the words, generally or contextually, are used in terms of 'value judgments', 'opinion', and 'factually/evaluatively'.

So, considering the relevance and appropriate nature of the 'Ideological Square' and 'Lexicalization' this study has employed these two approaches within the premises of CDA paradigm to analyze the editorial contents of *The Age* and *The Australian* to determine the nature of Muslims' representation during January 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017.

### **'Political Parallelism' in the Australian Press**

Main objective that was set at the outset of this study was to identify the differences in the Muslims' representations by the newspapers on the basis of the right-left ideological lines. The findings have validated the existence of the 'political parallelism' discourse in the editorial contents of the selected newspapers representing Islam and Muslims. The newspapers with 'rightist' ideological line commented opposite to the 'leftist' newspaper on Islam and Muslims, immigration policies, refugees, terrorism, and on political, societal and religious upheavals in Muslim countries and in rest of the world. For instance, findings showed that *The Australian*, which is a 'rightist/conservative' newspaper, toed the line of 'right-wing' political parties and politicians such as Ms. Pauline and Mr. Turnbull, portrayed Islam and Muslims in an overwhelmingly negative way, appreciated anti-immigration policies, criticized those who

support accepting refugees, focused on violence in Muslims countries, and collectivized Muslims while commenting on terrorist attacks in the West. On the other hand, *The Age*, which is a 'leftist' or a 'centre-left' newspaper, criticized the 'far-rights' for the same reasons the 'rightist' newspaper appreciated, advocated the 'leftist/progressive/liberal' stance, portrayed Islam and Muslims in a positive, supportive and balanced way, and advocated 'understanding', 'harmony' and 'cohesion' in Australia.

The findings from *The Age's* editorial contents validate the 'political parallelism' phenomenon as;

The editorial entitled; 'Australia must condemn atrocities in Myanmar', published on March 16, 2017, was the first one in the selected sample to be studied. The editorial contained following 'Political parallelism' themes;

...yet the Turnbull government has chosen to emphasize the "scale and complexity" of the challenges as the country makes... Such mealy-mouthed rhetoric from Australia only gives succour to the generals' brutality at a time Australia should instead join unequivocally in international demands to halt the violence and bring the perpetrators to justice... (The Age, March 16, 2017).

The criticism by *The Age* on the 'right-wing' and sitting PM's policies, and criticism on Tony Abbott, a 'conservative' party leader and former Australian PM, for his 'intemperate remark' against immigration, highlights newspaper's 'leftist' and 'progressive' ideological line. The 'rightist' approach of the newspaper is also evident from the recommendation it made to the Australian government for a role in Myanmar.

In next editorial entitled; 'PM's cowardly stance on Trump shames us all', published on January 31, 2017, the newspaper produced following 'Political parallelism' themes;

And so it is more than disappointing that Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop are cravenly endorsing such a stupid,

unfounded policy... the refugees who have been cruelly languishing in Australia's disgraceful mandatory offshore detention centers... The solution is to bring the refugees to Australia (The Age, January 31, 2017).

The newspaper's antigovernment comments and its criticism on current government's policies highlight its 'leftist' ideological line. The newspaper criticizes the government for its anti-immigration and anti-refugees policy.

The editorial entitled; 'Restraint is right call after bank tragedy', published on November 22, 2016, contained following 'Political parallelism' themes;

Premier Daniel Andrews was right to make a measured call for calm in the aftermath of Friday's alleged arson attack... But tensions will be needlessly raised by efforts to seize on a tragedy of this type to make political arguments... the rabble-rousing far right to cast further aspersions on migrants... This is rank opportunism... Australia's hardline policy towards refugees... But, regrettably, his comments are in keeping with the federal Liberal Party's willingness to flirt with prejudice to win political backing (The Age, November 22, 2016).

In these comments, the way the newspaper appreciated Mr. Andrew for his 'restraint call', criticized the 'hardline policy' of the government labeling it 'particular political agenda' and 'danger for community cohesion', and the way the newspaper highlighted 'prejudice', shows the impact of 'leftist' approach of the newspaper.

In next editorial entitled; 'US refugee deal could quickly come unstuck', published on November 17, 2016, the newspaper produced following 'Political parallelism' themes wherein the newspaper criticized the government for 'stubbornly and mistakenly insisted that harsh treatment, in refusing people entry to Australia, is needed as a deterrent for smugglers';

Mr. Trump has displayed a capricious attitude towards immigrants, making a base appeal to prejudice throughout the US election... Whether he will honor a commitment by his predecessor to resettle refugees on behalf of Australia... The Age has long maintained the simplest and speediest way to end what still remains a policy of island detention - and the practice remains detention, despite the open gates of the camps - is to bring the refugees to Australia... The government has stubbornly and mistakenly insisted that harsh treatment, in refusing people entry

to Australia, is needed as a deterrent for smugglers... (The Age, November 17, 2016).

The editorial entitled; 'Syrian conflict a damned dilemma', published on September 22, 2016, contained following 'Political parallelism' themes wherein the newspaper criticizes and questions its government for its role in Syrian conflict; But the support of the Australian public for military operations undertaken in their name deserves a greater display of trust from political leaders... Mr Turnbull's brazen lecturing (The Age, September 22, 2016).

In next editorial entitled; 'One Nation should be heard - and rebutted', published on July 6, 2016, the newspaper produced following 'Political parallelism' themes wherein the newspaper rejects Ms. Hanson's policies and advocates refugees as;

...this nation's history is steeped in immigration... fundamental to our internationally feted economic, social and cultural strength and diversity... Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party is fundamentally anti-immigration... cut the net inflow of people from offshore to zero, we disagree... widespread majority support for multiculturalism... Ms Hanson's policies do not stand up to scrutiny and would be detrimental to the nation and many innocent individuals... They should be politely rejected by Mr Turnbull, Mr Shorten and all those who actually do believe in tolerance and equality (The Age, July 6, 2016).

The editorial entitled; 'Real voices that must be heard', published on April 21, 2016, contained following 'Political parallelism' themes;

The Age agrees...

This is a very bold declaration, 'The Age agrees', by the newspaper to agree with a statement that admires Osama Bin Laden and his 'abhorrence of Western ideals', and that it must be discussed 'why some people are so enamoured of terrorist groups'. On the other hand, the newspaper has criticized 'opportunist' political leaders as; *...some political leaders have ruthlessly exploited in the name of national security.*

In next editorial entitled; ‘Trump has none of a president's qualities’, published on February 23, 2016, the newspaper produced following ‘Political parallelism’ themes wherein the newspaper clearly and overtly criticizes the ‘conservatives’ as;

...buoyed by the support of disaffected conservative voters, who perceive their grievances - as valid or bogus as they might be... There is no consistency in Mr. Trump's policies, merely reactive jabs at populist grievances, and that is what his followers seem to find so appealing... The people of the United States do not deserve Mr. Trump being foisted on them (The Age, February 23, 2016).

The findings from *The Australian* editorial contents validate the ‘political parallelism’

phenomenon as; The editorial entitled; ‘Radicalisation must be resisted’, published on March 4, 2017, was the first one in the selected sample to be studied. The editorial contained following ‘Political parallelism’ themes;

*...insisting that schools should recognize and respect "the cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of all students" to promote "an open and tolerant attitude"* (The Australian, March 4, 2017).

The ‘political parallelism’ phenomenon appears in the form of criticism by *The Australian* on Education Minister’s ‘silence’ on the ‘controversy’ and for ‘insisting’ on ‘understanding’ and ‘tolerance’. Mr. Stokes’ description of the ‘agreed protocol’ as ‘sexist’ has been endorsed by *The Australian* but his approach of understanding diversity and tolerance has been criticized in a polarized way.

In next editorial entitled; ‘Bordering on hysteria’, published on January 31, 2017, the newspaper produced following ‘Political parallelism’ themes;

The hysteria - and plain untruths - that have emanated from Donald Trump's executive order... What has widely been reported as a "Muslim ban" is, of course, nothing of the sort... The temporary immigration bans applied to nationals from seven nations and the US refugee program do not single out Muslims or apply to

the overwhelming majority of mainly Muslim countries... This is not to say the backlash was all unwarranted... The executive order was a blunt instrument tackling a complex problem and the chaos at airports was unfortunate, to say the least... Global leaders and political rivals have joined commentators in criticizing the measures, from sensible concerns about dual citizens to erroneous claims about a "Muslim" ban. In Australia the Greens took the chance to push their irresponsible calls for an end to the US alliance. Treasurer Scott Morrison was closer to the mark, saying from Europe to the US, the world is "catching up" on the need for orderly border security (The Australian, January 31, 2017).

These comments clearly express the impact of the newspaper's political ideology wherein it supported, justified and appreciated the 'anti-immigration' moves including 'Muslims ban', and criticized those who opposed such policies. The newspaper's support for Mr. Trump, appraisal for current government's minister and criticism on the 'progressive' The Greens demonstrate newspaper's 'rightist' approach.

The editorial entitled; 'Jihadist's deadly hit on liberty, equality, fraternity' published on July 16, 2016, was the third one in the selected sample that contained relevant themes. The editorial contained following 'Political parallelism' themes;

Malcolm Turnbull struck the right tone yesterday condemning the "murderous act of terror"... However, the Greens' statement - which did not mention terror, jihad or Islamists and called for "respect for diversity and building cohesion in our global community" - showed many in the West remain in denial about the menace threatening freedom and civilization (The Australian, July 16, 2016).

Malcolm Turnbull, who is a 'right-wing' politician and opposes 'Muslim-immigration' and refugees in Australia, has been appreciated by the newspaper. On the other hand, those who call for *respect for diversity and building cohesion in our global community* are categorized as the ones who live in 'denial'. So, these comments clearly represent the newspaper's 'conservative' and 'rightist' political ideological line.

Overall, findings showed that the right-left ideological lines did have impact on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims by the selected newspapers. Wherein, the ‘rightist’ and ‘conservative’ newspaper portrayed Islam and Muslims in an overwhelmingly negative way.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study present an explicit evidence of the ‘political parallelism’ concept in the Australian press. The newspapers with ‘rightist’ ideological line commented opposite to the ‘leftist’ newspaper on Islam and Muslims, immigration policies, refugees, terrorism, and on political, societal and religious upheavals in Muslim countries and in rest of the world. For instance, findings showed that *The Australian*, which is a ‘rightist/conservative’ newspaper, toed the line of ‘right-wing’ political parties and politicians such as Ms. Pauline and Mr. Turnbull, portrayed Islam and Muslims in an overwhelmingly negative way, appreciated anti-immigration policies, criticized those who support accepting refugees, focused on violence in Muslims countries, and collectivized Muslims while commenting on terrorist attacks in the West. On the other hand, *The Age*, which is a ‘leftist’ or a ‘Centre-left’ newspaper, criticized the ‘far-rights’ for the same reasons the ‘rightist’ newspaper appreciated, advocated the ‘leftist/progressive/liberal’ stance, portrayed Islam and Muslims in a positive, supportive and balanced way, and advocated ‘understanding’, ‘harmony’ and ‘cohesion’ in Australia.

So, the findings have evidenced that the impact of right–left ideological lines was visible in the Australian press wherein the rightist newspaper reflected the right-wing and conservative political ideology and portrayed Islam and Muslims negatively. On the other hand, the leftist newspaper advocated left-wing and progressive political ideology and portrayed Islam and Muslims in a positive way.



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