

# 'Political Parallelism' and the Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Australian Press: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** Recent 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' phenomenon in the editorial contents of the selected newspapers representing Islam and Muslims. The 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, highlighted 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/'centre-left' newspaper, criticized the 'far-rights' for appreciating and supporting the 'rightist/conservative' policies against Muslims, 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.

**Keywords:** Political parallelism, Representation, Islam, Muslims, Critical discourse analysis, ideological square, lexicalization.

## 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-left ideological lines of the newspapers. Since early 1970s, after the abandonment of the 'White Australian Policy' in 1972, the Australia is officially a multicultural country [1]. 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 [2]. 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 at hand 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. The researcher assumes 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 [3] 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%), [4]. 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 [5]. They have descended from more than 120 countries around the world, mainly from Lebanon and Turkey. A sizable Muslim population is from Asia

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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 [6].

Historically newspapers in Europe started off as ideological or political outlets [7 p XI] thus influenced by the 'political parallelism' [8 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 [2 p 40 also cited in 6 p XI, 9 p 65]. Stefan Mertens [8] 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 in his study, *European Media Coverage of Islam in a Globalizing World*, published in *Representations of Islam in the News* (2016) [9], 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 [9 p 65, 73].

Mertens and Smaele (2016) [7] 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 [7 p XI].

Considering this detailed literature review, it can be concluded that the representation, depiction and construction of Islam and Muslims in the Western and Australian media is problematic. Islam and Muslims are portrayed and constructed stereotypically by the media.

Studies conducted in America and in most of the European countries have evidenced latest trends in the representation of Islam and Muslims. Latest research suggests that the political ideology of the newspapers plays a key role in their coverage of Islam and Muslims.

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 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.

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?

*The Age* is considered as a left-leaning [10] or as a centre-left [11] newspaper which supports the left-wing politicians and political parties. The newspaper is owned by Fairfax Media, one of the largest public companies and media conglomerates in Australia, which criticizes the far-rights for conservative and anti-immigration policies. The newspaper supports The Labor Party and the Greens for their social democratic, leftist, progressive and liberal stance. The left-wing in Australia favors the 'Multiculturalism' and supports migration in Australia and *The Age* highlights their stance.

*The Australian* is considered as a rightist [10] or as a decisively right-wing [11] newspaper which supports the National Coalition/Liberal over the Green and Labor politicians and political parties [12]. The newspaper is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, the largest media conglomerates that owns majority of the media in Australia, is a news organization criticized widely for its conservative agenda and for its alignment with the US's Republican Party [13]. The newspaper supports The Liberal Party for their 'nationalist' and anti-immigration policies and criticizes the leftists and the

Greens for their liberal and pro-immigration stance. The right-wing in Australia favors the anti-immigration position and *The Australian* highlights and advocates their stance.

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) will be analyzed to determine 'political parallelism' discourse in Muslims' representation. Using the lenses of 'lexicalization' and 'ideological square', the editorial contents will be analyzed to identify 'violence', 'female underrepresentation', and 'collectivism' themes related to Islam and Muslims.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Data Collection and Sampling

Originally the study analyzed a sample size of 11 editorial from each 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 selected one editorial from each newspaper using 'Purposive Sampling' for the purpose of exploring the '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 [14, 15] '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 [16]. The present study however is based on the paradigm of social cognitive perspective as developed and advocated by Tuen A. van Dijk [17-21]. 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 [17].

### Ideological Square

The notion of ideology is fundamentally centered in the debates of critical discourse analysis. Ideology can be understood as some kind of ideas or belief systems that members of a society share collectively to create social representation of groups [20, 21]. As these ideologies are a function of socio-cognitive structures, they can be acquired and abandoned gradually by members of a society through everyday discursive process [22]. An important aspect that ideology represents is the social identity or self image of a group or individual which implies the political phenomenon of in-group and out-group polarization [22]. This simply means that ideologies sometimes have polarized nature when they belong to opposing groups- as the discourses of racial prejudice related to immigrants [14]. This usually creates the 'Us' versus 'Them' dichotomy where an individual or group members of the in-group portray the group in good terms by mentioning the positive elements or in other words they deploy positive self presentation. While they use negative 'other' presentation when discussing the members of the out-group. With the same concurrence they de emphasize or mitigate the negative aspects of their own group and highlight or intensify the negative things of their opponents [22]. Van Dijk calls this the 'Ideological Square' model. It basically has four moves which are as follows;

- Emphasize Our good things
- Emphasize Their bad things
- De-emphasize Our bad things
- De-emphasize Their good things [14, 15].

The 'Ideological Square', as proposed by Van Dijk [15], 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 [15 p. 33 also cited in 23]. 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' [23]. 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 [24].

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 [25]. According to Van Dijk (2004) [26] 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 [23 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 [15] 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.

### INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Following pages contain the interpretation and analysis of the editorial contents of *The Age*. The interpretation and analysis has been done using the ideological square and lexicalization within the paradigm of CDA.

Date	March 16, 2017
Headline	Australia must condemn atrocities in Myanmar

### Interpretation & Analysis

The headline and the rest of the text in this editorial contains explicitly critical opinion of *The Age* in opposition to the 'atrocities' in Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims and the 'timid' role of Australia in the whole scenario for not 'calling out' the 'abuses'. Lexical choices opted by the newspaper in the headline such as; *must, condemn, atrocities*, clearly express newspaper's stance on the situation in Myanmar. Structurally, the vitality of Australia's role and its responsibility is emphasized by its appearance in the title. Secondly, using 'must' *The Age* emphasizes the agency and responsibility of the Australian government in the situation. The situation is expressed in a lexical style through the use of 'atrocities' in Myanmar. So, overall, the headline expresses newspaper's favorable opinion for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and for Australia's role there.

The message in the headline is expanded coherently in the text underneath it. The first part of the lead paragraph explains 'atrocities' against Muslims (them) in terms lexical items such as; *Warned, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, military crackdown, increasingly urgent*. Second part of the lead paragraph contains criticism on Australian government for 'mealy-mouthed rhetoric' which is portrayed as 'succour to the generals' brutality' and for not joining 'unequivocally' in 'international demands' to 'halt the violence'. So, along with the counter discourse *i.e.* discourse contents in favor of Muslims (them), there is prominent discourse of 'political parallelism' in this lead paragraph. The criticism on Australian government and then the suggestion by *The Age* shows the newspaper's ideological line in the situation.

Ideologically, the newspaper portrays 'them' as victims as; The United Nations has warned that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity are "very likely" under way in the remote Rakhine state of Myanmar. On the other hand, 'our' bad is emphasized through political evaluations as; ...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 [28].

The start of the paragraph with the United Nation's warning is an attempt to authenticate the opinion through the use of factual statement by an undisputed authority.

The predominant discourse in next two paragraphs is 'political parallelism' that contains newspaper's recommendations and critical stance on Australian government's role in the crisis. Secondly, there is a counter discourse regarding Muslims that portrays 'them' as victims. The lexis opted by *The Age* here reflect its negative opinion for Myanmar government and the Australian government (us) and favorable opinion for Muslims (them). Lexical items such as; *persecution, denied basic rights, longstanding, desperate, challenges, doubtless complex, blatant abuses, atrocities*, portray Muslims (them) as victims. While Australian government (us) has been critically evaluated through lexis such as; *intemperate, champion, human rights, admit, deeply concerned, and refused*.

In terms of polarization strategy, the newspaper places 'them' in a favorable space by portraying them as victims as; The persecution of the Rohingya, a minority Muslim community that has been denied basic rights of citizenship in Myanmar, is longstanding. On the other hand, the critical stance of the newspaper on government's role in the situation reflects its political ideological line as; Tony Abbott delivered his intemperate "nope, nope, nope" remark in 2015, a signal that Australia had stepped back from efforts to champion respect for human rights in the region... The challenges in Myanmar are doubtless complex, yet complexity should not cloud Australia's view of blatant abuses... Australia refused to back an international investigation.

In next paragraph, using lexical items such as; *crackdown, military junta, iron fist, appalling acts of oppression, rigged, standing bloc, brazen attempt, intimidation*, reflect newspaper's negative opinion about

the issue and portray Muslims (them) as victims. While 'unconscionable' and 'credible inquiry' reflect political evaluation of the situation by the newspaper. The 'political parallelism' is evident from the critical stance of the newspaper as; *it is unconscionable to expect Myanmar will conduct a credible inquiry into the crackdown. The generals have ensured the country's constitution remains rigged to give the military a standing bloc in parliament* [28].

In last paragraph again there is a combination of counter discourse and political parallelism. The lexical items such as; *the plight, military abuses, atrocities*, reflect the portrayal of Muslims as victim. While, lexical choices opted by *The Age* to evaluate the situation politically and to comment on Australia's role in it, show a critical stance of the newspaper such as; *rightly criticized, indifference, forthright action, better supported, quick to take advantage, economic liberalization, timid, calling out abuses, complicit by silence*. Ideologically, Muslims (they) are portrayed as victims as; *Ms Suu Kyi has been rightly criticized for indifference to the plight of the Rohingya and not taking more forthright action in an attempt to stop the military abuses*. On the other hand, the political ideological line of the newspaper is evident from the comments such as; *...she would be better supported if nations such as Australia[...].were not so timid about calling out abuses... Australia must not be complicit by silence about the atrocities committed against the Rohingya* [28].

Overall, there is a prominent discourse of 'political parallelism' because there is a clear evidence of the newspaper's leftist/progressive/liberal approach regarding Muslims and refugees. The whole picture can be explained from this statement; 'Australia must not be complicit by silence about the atrocities committed against the Rohingya'.

Following pages contain the interpretation and analysis of the editorial contents of *The Australian*. The interpretation and analysis has been done using the ideological square and lexicalization within the paradigm of CDA.

Date	March 4, 2017
Headline	Radicalisation must be resisted

### Interpretation & Analysis

According to the Oxford dictionary 'radicalization' means to change people completely, to make them

extreme ones, and to make them radicals [27 p 1242]. And, 'resist' is to fight back forcefully (p.1291). The use of 'must' makes the statement and opinion of the newspaper 'imperative' and gives an impression about the newspaper's 'presupposition' that 'radicalization' is underway in Australia which must be 'resisted'. The imperative and presupposed nature of the statement by *The Australian* regarding issue under discussion makes it a biased approach.

From the very first sentence of the editorial the division between *us* and *them* is clear. The 'school' is excluded from 'us' because it 'shuns' 'basic Australian values'. The 'school' is referred to the 'schools with high number of Muslim students in Sydney'. So, 'our' good is emphasized in terms of 'basic Australian values' which are enlisted in the last sentence of the lead paragraph as; *equality of the sexes, respect for fellow citizens, renunciation of violence*. And, the Muslim schools (they) are associated with the 'recent problems' which portrays 'their' image as 'problematic other'. In a polarization strategy the 'other' (Muslim schools) have been depicted as *problematic other* in the form of comment such as; *Autonomy for state school principals in managing teaching and student behavior is an important part of education reform, but recent problems at schools with high numbers of Muslim students in Sydney*. Problematic in the sense 'they' do not respect values that 'bind Australia together'. This lexical style reporting and opinion by *The Australian* places Muslim schools (them/other) in a negative space. All the Muslim-students-majority schools have been generalized and collectivized to have such 'problems' and 'our' authority has been explicitly imposed by 'highlight the need for clear principles and guidelines to support school authorities in upholding the values that bind Australia together'.

In a lexical style, to 'reveal' the 'decline to shake hands' with females by male students in a 'Muslim school' under 'agreed protocol', the newspaper portrays the act as a violation or 'to shun' the 'basic Australian values'. Using this evaluative strategy, the newspaper has excluded 'the school' and the 'students' from 'us'.

In next paragraph, the newspaper using even more explicit presupposition and evaluative sequence marked the incident as 'controversy'. The act of not shaking hands with females by the Muslim students has been labeled as 'sexist'. By doing so, the 'other' have been placed into a socially and culturally 'different' and 'backward' space. In terms of

polarization strategy, the newspaper emphasizes 'their' bad as; *Mr. Stokes later described the protocol as "sexist", which it was*. The newspaper's rightist/conservative ideological line is evident from the comments such as; *after remaining silent about the controversy... insisting that schools should recognize and respect "the cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of all students" to promote "an open and tolerant attitude"*. So, the 'political parallelism' discourse 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 as; *insisting that schools should recognize and respect "the cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of all students" to promote "an open and tolerant attitude"*.

In terms of polarization strategy, serious questions are being asked about Punchbowl Boys High School... One issue raised in an investigation of the school was the exclusion of female teachers from official school events... students being allowed to behave in a way most Australians would regard as offensive - including refusing to shake hands with women, the newspaper emphasizes 'their' bad and produces an 'othering' discourse regarding Islam and Muslims. The comments such as; *But at a time when Islamic militants are unleashing terror around the world... No teacher, at any school, should have to endure verbal assaults and threats of beheading or violence by any students, portray Islam and Muslims in a 'securitized' way where 'they' are portrayed as a 'security threat'*. In a typical editorial-recommendation style, the newspaper expressing its rightist/conservative ideological line suggests; and politicians must find their voices and address voters' concerns about the problem. Hiding such emerging, dangerous trends behind bureaucratic walls or veneers of false cultural harmony will be counter-productive in the long run.

Overall, in this editorial the 'political parallelism' discourse is evident in the form of 'rightist' approach by the newspaper towards the issue.

## CONCLUSION

The study at hand was set to explore the 'political parallelism' discourse in the editorial contents of *The Age* and *The Australian* while covering Islam and Muslims. Inspired by the work of Stefan Mertens (2016)

[7], the study at hand focused on the impact of right-left ideological lines of the Australian newspapers on representation of Islam and Muslims during time period under study. 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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