Silence as a Discourse in the Public Sphere: Media Representations of Australians *Joining the Fight* in Syria

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Literature on media representations of Islamic terrorism predominantly employs discourse analysis as a methodological tool to unpack concepts of power in texts. There is scant literature focused on the operation of silence as a discursive practice in the public sphere. This paper employs Huckin's (2002) notion of manipulative silences to demonstrate how textual media representations of Australians Joining the Fight *in Syria are dominated by identity debates, particularly evident in the media's act of defining Muslims who engage in the Syrian conflict as bad Australians. We use* Joining the Fight *on Insight, an Australian opinion-based television program on Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), as the centrepiece of our argument to demonstrate how media representations use manipulative silences. These silences skew dialogue in the public sphere away from the core issue, the role of ISIS in the Syrian conflict, and towards internal politics and nationalistic concerns.*

Setting the Scene

Syria is experiencing a catastrophic civil war. Since 2011, government backed and anti-government forces led by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have committed human right violations and crimes (IICISAR 2012) against citizens. Despite approximately 12 million Syrians becoming internally displaced or forced out of their country (UNHCR 2015) most Western nations, including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, have stood by and done little other than launch air-strikes against ISIS.

News reporting in Australia has focused on the increasing involvement of Australian citizens travelling to Iraq and Syria to participate in the conflict (Welch and Rubinsztein-Dunlop 2014a, 2014b; Rubinsztein-Dunlop and Welch 2014; SBS 2014). Reports tend to highlight the *danger* of radicalisation of Australian Muslims and the increasing concerns of security agencies over the number of Australians joining ISIS. The then Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, was reported to categorise ISIS variously as the 'apocalyptic death cult' (Hurst 2014) and *murderous zealots* (Halliday 2013). Despite estimates of 60 Australians joining the fight in mid-2014 (Welch 2014), predominant constructions by news media and politicians centred on the danger these extremist fanatics posed to Australia and more broadly the security of Syria and Iraq.

The literature analyses media representations of Australian Muslims from a number of standpoints, including moral panic theory (Collins et al. 2000; Poynting 2002-03), citizenship and belonging (Aly 2007), white nationalism (Hage 2003), and multiculturalism (Turner 2003). Researchers argue that since September 2001, it has become commonplace to frame debates about Australian Muslims through the lens of values, loyalty and patriotism. White nationalist constructions emphasise the cultural incommensurability of Australian Muslims and, significantly, the harmfulness of abolishing boundaries between the self and the other (Patil 2014). Mainstream media representations are filled with references to Australian Muslims 'as a potential threat to national security' (Abdalla 2010: 26). This has the effect of conflating national interest with the terrorist frames (Hirst and Schultz cited in Aly 2007).

Collins et al. (2000) and Poynting (2002-03) assert that media discourse is framed to create racialised moral panics where the terms Middle Eastern, criminals, terrorists, fundamentalist and Muslim become synonymous. Collapsing these terms creates a hegemonic discursive field that silences minority voices. Turner (2003: 413) makes similar arguments using issues of nationalism and belonging to demonstrate that Australia is 'now overwhelmingly defined by the necessity of exclusion and increasingly marked by the revival of a nostalgic, even sentimental refutation of pluralism that informed the ethics of multiculturalism'. Hage (2003) argues that multiculturalism was an offer of tolerance that white nationalists could withdraw at any time because it was based on unequal relations of power.

Focused on the Australian context, Dunn (2005) examines how contestations over mosques in Sydney

are intertwined in debates over Australian values, rights and citizenship. He argues that Australian Muslims are considered noisy minorities. Through this labelling they fall outside the purview of trustworthy citizenship. Pejorative categorising of Australian Muslims, therefore, couches them within the paranoid aspects of white nationalism (Hage 2003). Perara (2006), in a similar manner to Dunn, commenting on the Cronulla riots, argues that media representations act as spatial mediators of discursive relations of power in which Muslims are represented in categories of biological racism, discourses of white supremacy and iconographies of exclusion. Whilst acknowledging the racialised connotations in which Australian Muslims are represented, Mummery and Rodan (2007) warn against the predominant binary constructions of Australian Muslims in print media discourse as disingenuous. This is because they reproduce the politics of fear and foreclose possibilities to accept difference in ways that resist engagement in negotiation and discussion.

Whilst a majority of the research on media discourse analyses the discursive construction of Muslims, there are studies that analyse how Australian Muslims respond to these characterisations. Aly (2007) notes that overwhelmingly Australian Muslims feel that the media represents Australian and Muslim as mutually exclusive modes of being. However, Muslims are pushing back against this narrative by disengaging with the victim identity and reengaging with the broader community as equal citizens. Consistent with Aly's (2007) work, Kabir (2008) argues that Australian youth feel there is media bias in reporting. As a result, Muslim youth are renegotiating their identity by engaging in Arabic and Western music in the public sphere to assert their own bicultural identities.

There is broad agreement among scholars, despite the different theoretical frameworks used to analyse media, that Australian Muslims are predominantly constructed within the discourse of othering. Aly (2007) notes how the media discourse has shifted from representing Muslims as culturally incompatible to a culture of threat. Using an episode of *Insight*, an opinion-based program on *Joining the Fight* in Syria, we locate how manipulative silences were created in the 'framing' of topics and subtopics by the moderator. Through our analysis we suggest that identifying manipulative silences in the production of talk and text provides an alternative approach to further analyse the construction of Australian Muslims.

The remainder of the article is presented in two parts. We discuss Huckin's (2002) methodology and how it influenced our choice of the data sample. We then discuss our analysis, organised into two themes, namely connection to Australian values and the opinion of so-called *moderate* Australian Muslims. We discuss the implications of the findings in relation to Huckin's (2002) notion of manipulative silences as well as the current scholarship on media discourse surrounding Australian Muslims.

Huckin's Methodology and the Selection of the Text

Huckin (2002: 348) defines silences as the 'omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand' and goes on to categorise various silences into taxonomies. Huckin (2002) notes that what is not said and/or written is discursive and equally powerful because of the ideological role it plays. Within this paper we discuss manipulative silences in texts by applying the concepts of contextuality, intentionality and deception. Contextuality refers to the producers of text who develop an idea based on the topics and subtopics that are located within overarching fields of discourse in which interpretation and meaning happen. Huckin (2002) argues that intentionality of the silences can be identified by unpacking the topics and subtopics that were chosen and comparing others that were omitted, based on the genre. Such an intentionality is deceptive because it is dependent on the listener/reader not noticing what has been omitted.

An application of Huckin's (2002) schema involves the following stages:

1. Contextuality suggests that the moderator and the programme producer select a set of themes and sub-themes to manage the discussion on the programme.

2. The selection of certain topics and subtopics to the omission of others suggest that the moderator in the selection of themes and sub-themes are 'representing thematic streams that run across the corpus and constitute the public discourse' (Huckin 2002: 356).

3. Analysis of the instantiations in the text discussion produced by the moderator and locate them within the broader socio-political context of discourse analysis.

We acknowledge that various production processes, such as programme editing and the role of the moderator in managing alternative/counterpoints, are not value-free. Our focus is on the socio-political dimensions of the discourse used in the topics and subtopics formulated by the moderator, and the manipulative silences in their application. Our intention is not to analyse contextuality, intentionality and deception as cognitive manifestations nor the reactions and responses of the audience. Rather it is to find manipulative silences in the *framing* of the topics and subtopics as produced, managed and controlled by the moderator.

The selection of the program

The text we analyse is drawn from an opinion-based program, I*nsight*, that broadcasts weekly discussion and is moderated by a well-respected journalist, Jenny Brockie. The episode *Joining the Fight* was broadcast on 12 August 2014. The episode was recorded and originally broadcast in the context of increasing media reporting on Australian Muslims travelling to Syria to join ISIS. The programme included experts and special guests who were Australian Muslims. They were purportedly sympathetic to ISIS and/or currently in Syria or Iraq. The studio audience consisted of lay participants, including Australian Muslims.

The process of analysis involved viewing the broadcast, reviewing it at a later date and downloading the complete transcript from the broadcaster's website prior to each researcher independently coding it using Huckin's (2002) methodology. Dominant hand-coded topics were compared and a process of consensus engaged, which assisted achieving inter-rater reliability (Pope et al. 2000). This process is below.

Describing the Episode

In describing the episode, we focus on how the producers of the talk and text set up the programme and managed and controlled the discussion between the lay participants, experts and special guests. We break up the discussion into themes, namely connection to Australian values and the opinion of so-called 'moderate' Australian Muslims.

Connection to Australian values

The moderator begins the programme by stating that there are a number of special guests who are sympathetic to ISIS and other rival organisations, such as Jabhat-al-Nursa (the official affiliate of Al-Qaeda). Addressing one of the guests, she asks, 'Abdul Salam Mahmoud in Syria, you're an Australian citizen … why did you want to go to Syria?' He notes that he chose to go to Syria to do humanitarian aid work and assist with medical treatment of families and children. Then the moderator asks him further questions about his background in Australia, which group he supports in the Syrian conflict and which group he thinks wants to establish justice in Syria. Abdul Mahmoud states that there are a number of groups working in Syria but names Jabhat-al-Nursa, the branch of *Al Qaeda* in Syria, as the most effective in providing education, medical aid and food to families. The moderator then asks, 'So you support them? So it sounds like you support them?' to which Mahmoud answers, 'I don't, I don't support them. I don't have a group that I belong to'.

The moderator uses the same structure as above, asking other invited guests why they want to go to Syria and what is their background in Australia. Mohamed Zubhi, introduced as a dual Australian-Syrian citizen, is questioned about what made him leave Australia and who he supports in the Syrian conflict. The moderator raised doubt about Mohamed Zubhi's own personal values by prefacing it with questions on why he supports an Australian listed terrorist organisation. This pattern was repeated when the moderator turned to an invited guest in the audience and introduced him by saying, 'Okay Abu Bakr, you're 19, you were born here, you grew up in Sydney, what do you think of Australians going over to fight with ISIS and I see you're wearing the ISIS flag on your shirt?'. The moderator further asks what connection Abu Bakr feels with the flag and Iraq. And then, 'do you feel connected to the values here in Australia?'.

The moderator discursively shifts the debate by introducing the subtopic of the values Islam espouses and, more significantly, what it says about Australian Muslims and their connection to Australian values. The question to Abu Bakar is followed by video footage of ISIS fighters randomly shooting and killing people. Since Abu Bakr makes no comment, the moderator throws the discussion open to lay participants and shifts the discussion to examining the nature of Islam. One of the participants argues, 'If they (ISIS) are so concerned about human rights … why is it that the only people that they're talking about are Muslims? … they are killing non-conforming Sunni Muslims that doesn't agree with their belief?' To this response Abu-Bakar retorts, 'Firstly, it says in the Koran, yeah, if you kill an innocent life it is like you have killed the whole humanity'. To which one of the participant says, 'You cannot say that they are following the Koran'. One of the participants who introduced himself as a spokesperson for the Australian Muslim Youth argued that 'Christians in Iraq are slaughtered' and questioned what kind of values the Koran espouses when it is 'kicking people out of their houses'. The moderator, referencing Greg Barton as an expert on terrorism, asked him to reflect on the views expressed on the programme. He noted there is growing 'concern about young Australians … getting caught up in that [fight and] their families back here in Australia risk being hurt'. Another expert agreed and said family and community help should be at the forefront in preventing young Australian Muslims going to join the fight in Iraq and Syria.

The moderator introduced another subtopic by introducing the issue of radicalisation and the hatred and anger it elicits among Australian Muslims joining the fight in Syria. One of the members of the studio audience, Mohamed Tabaa, noted that Muslims feel the 'discourse is not always about Muslims; it's always about Muslims as a problem ... How do we manage Muslim anger? How do we control them?' The moderator asked the representative of the Imam Council to comment. He said that they are working with the government and working with the youth to stop the radicalisation.

The moderator couched the discussion on connection to Australian values by focusing on subtopics namely, whether Australian Muslims feel connected to Australian values; what values does Islam espouse; and, Islam's links to radicalisation. In couching the debate in these themes, the moderator set up the discourse that tacitly suggests that these people (Australian Muslims) are not like us (Australians). And more insidiously, the religion they follow is dangerous, incompatible and radicalises its youth.

So-called, 'moderate' Muslims

The moderator interspersed questions posed to participants who were sympathisers of ISIS by eliciting opinion of representatives of the Imam Council and/or other Muslim organisations. Aimed to elicit a moderate opinion, this was tainted due to many invited guests being radical. An example was when the moderator opened the discussion about radicalisation of Australian Muslims. Mohamad Saleem, a representative of the Imams Council, was asked to respond to some of the opinions expressed by the participants sympathetic to ISIS. Mohamad Saleem said they wanted to 'open a dialogue with the government … while at the same time they have a duty to Australians Muslims'.

Another technique the moderator employed was to invite members of the audience who formerly lived in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Basset Safi, an audience member, noted, 'So what you see in Iraq today, it was basically the same thing there. We lived under the Taliban movement for six year[s] doing the same thing'. Dianna, another audience member, added, 'The acts that are happening in Iraq and in Syria. There is nothing Islamic about it whatsoever and, especially, I'm an Australian Muslim youth myself. I've come here with my team because we're here to promote that. We're here to promote the peace that Islam teaches us'. To further extend the binaries between so-called 'radical Australian Muslims' and 'moderate Australian Muslims', the moderator applied a discursive tactic by throwing at one of the invited (ISIS supportive) guests, 'Where do you get your views from?' and, 'Who do you listen to?' 'If you don't listen to the Imams, and if you go to an Islamic centre what do they do there and how are they different from the mosques then?'. As the discussion unfolds the moderator returns to the Imams and other voices that counteract the views expressed by the invited guests. The Imam criticised Australian Muslims travelling to fight in Iraq and Syria and said wistfully, 'in the Day of Judgment probably they will ask, "Why did you do this?" … I'm not judgmental on that but at the same time for people in Australia, help them … That is also Jihad'.

The moderator further questioned the Imam council representative, 'Why aren't young people listening to what they are saying?'. The representative argued 'I have no idea. There is a very small number of people, if you would appreciate, who are not listening'. Continuing with contrasting moderate Muslims in Australia from the so-called *radical* Muslims who do not espouse Australian values, the moderator asked Dina (who migrated to Australia) to comment. Dina agreed with the view of the Imam and said they are preaching humanitarian acts, but that a lack of education of some Muslim youth is causing them to go to Iraq and Syria.

To summarise, the moderator framed the main topics by eliciting opinion from so-called '*moderate' Muslims* and/or of experts who critiqued the values espoused by some of the invited *radical* guests. This discursive tactic helped in juxtaposing the so-called radical, un-Australian Muslims, from the moderate, peace loving Australian Muslim migrants. Paradoxically this contributed to so-called moderate Australian Muslims distancing themselves from those few Australian Muslims who are not like *good* Australians, Muslim or otherwise.

Analysis and Discussion

Using Huckin's (2002) model of contextuality, intentionality and deception, we divide the implications of the findings into three categories:

1. Contextuality: the role of SBS in the national imagination
2. Intentionality: Muslims don't belong here (in Australia)
3. Deception: don't treat all Muslims as one – radicals are a small minority.

Contextuality: the role of Insight in Australian imagination

The role of SBS as a public broadcaster with a special mandate to 'reflect Australia's multicultural society' and 'increase awareness of the contribution of a diversity of cultures to the continuing development of Australian society' has come under severe strain (Roose and Akbarzadeh 2013). Scholars including Hage (2003) and Turner (2003) have argued that there has been a retreat from the core values of multiculturalism, which is acute in the way issues around Islam and Australian communities are covered by *Insight* on SBS. The findings, as Huckin (2002) notes, are framed 'in a general, standardised, predefined structure which allows re-cognition and guides perception' (Donati Year?, cited in Huckin 2002: 354). The moderator shaped the public discourse by including two main topics or themes – Australian Muslims' connection to Australian values and the values Islam espouses on how radicalisation of Australian Muslims can be managed in Australia.

Using these dominant themes, the moderator ignored other aspects of the topics, such as the role of the international community in the rise of ISIS, anti-terrorism laws introduced in Australia, and the humanitarian context of the conflict. In setting this context, the discussion between the moderator, the invited guests, experts and the studio audience had what Huckin (2002: 354) calls 'a certain slant'. Most of the discussion centred on invited guests being questioned about their values, if they feel a connection to Australia, what prompted them to leave Australia, and if they are radicals. This slant, scholars (Morsi 2014) have argued, is predominant in the way topics concerning Australian Muslims are presented in broader media discourses. Hussein (2014) notes that the media pretends to conduct mainstream rational debate by featuring, 'Muslim psychos' in heated debate. This was predominant in the *Insight* discussion, and part of what Huckin (2002) terms deception in the use of manipulative silences by the moderator of the programme.

Intentionality: Muslims don't belong in Australia

The aforementioned analysis suggests how the moderator used contextuality in maintaining silences. The moderator used a number of strategic manoeuvres to reinforce these silences by using intentionality, evident in the way the discussion topics and subtopics were selected, presented and managed during the programme. The main topics centred on whether the invited guests professed Australian values and their feelings of connection to Australia. In choosing to frame the debate predominantly around values, the moderator 'deliberately created textual silences that serve to manipulate the casual reader' (Huckin 2002: 367). The way the topics were presented focused the debate on the un-Australianness (Mummery and Rodan 2007) of the participants and invited guests. The questions stoked fear and demanded loyalty to Australian values (Morsi 2014) and emphasised the cultural incompatibility of Islam (Aly 2007).

Our analysis suggests that the moderator used other discursive tactics to position Australian Muslims, particularly the invited guests, by juxtaposing their views with responses from terrorism experts. The moderator used what Mummery and Rodan (2007) call the '*not being Australian*' technique by purportedly asking experts on terrorism what they thought about the views expressed by some Muslim others. This strategic manoeuvre in shaping the discourse aimed to make clear the identity parameters of being, or not being, Australian. That is, they were not radicalised, they did not feel sympathy for the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq and they expressly did not articulate their faith in Islam.

The next strategic manoeuvre in the way the *Insight* moderator framed the discussion was to highlight the cultural incommensurability (Aly 2007) of Islam with Western values. The moderator pressed invited guests to articulate their vision of Islam, how they defined *jihad* and what they thought about ISIS and other organisations using Islam to further their causes. The intentionality of the moderator is laid bare when a respected political analyst, Yasir Morsi (SBS 2014) who was part of the studio audience, noted the focus should not be on Islam and the Koran but on the role played by the international community in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict. However, this opinion was not further explored and was largely ignored by the moderator. Other topics pertinent to *Joining the Fight*, such as anti-terrorism laws introduced by the Howard and Abbott Governments, were not discussed.

The other discursive manoeuvre employed by the moderator was to show highly emotive and provocative images of ISIS activities in Syria and Iraq to raise the spectre of radicalisation of Australian Muslims. This, Huckin (2002) notes, is intentional because it privileged a construction of deviancy that is primarily represented in media constrictions of Australian Muslims. Scholars (Dunn 2005; Perera 2006) using localised and/or everyday contexts analyse how space and power is used effectively to label Australian Muslims as noisy and radical. In juxtaposing evocative images with purportedly 'radical Australian Muslims views' it is discursively possible to label minorities as unworthy of trustworthy citizenship at best (Dunn 2005) and to categorise them through the lens of iconographies of exclusion at worst.

The moderator combined this strategy with seeking the opinion of experts, perceptibly of Caucasian background. The analysis revealed that the experts disagreed with the views expressed by many invited guests who were purportedly sympathetic to ISIS. The experts argued that radicalisation of young Muslims is a major issue for the Islamic community, the families and security agencies. Morsi (2014, cited in Hussein 2014) labels this strategy as indicative of positioning 'white people as experts and the brown Muslims as the problematic warring mass'. This suggests the moderator framed the topic within the Australian context with no attempt to discuss the more complex and fraught nature of international radicalisation. This strategy, Jalbert (1994) suggests, is intentional because in many instances, 'the *unsaid* … involves many factors which influence information purveyors' tacit 'decisions to report on this or that matter in this or that manner'.

Deception: the moderate Muslim as model migrant

The discussion reveals a number of discursive manoeuvres used by the moderator to allow for the 'model Muslim migrant' discourse to emerge. The representative from the Imam council, a representative from the youth organisation

and other Australian Muslim migrants who are grateful to be in Australia are used as discursive mediators. This discourse of 'distancing' from the 'few' radical Australian Muslims is a form of covert binarisation (Patil 2014). This is analogous to the discursive constructions made by many conservative columnists (Bolt 2012), as well as those advocating for Australian Muslims to assimilate and become model migrants; that is, just like *us* but with some exotic recipes and an occasional festival to share.

The moderator, by concurrently juxtaposing provocative video images and opinions from invited guests with those from representatives from various Muslim organisations, allowed the discourse to be centred on differentiation of the so-called radical Muslim from the moderate Muslim Australian. Kolig (2003: 40) argues that Muslims feel the need to project Islam as a 'moderate, tolerant and rational faith, disinclined towards flamboyant, specular and extraordinary forms of belief' and this perhaps explains the enthusiastic distancing by senior Australian Muslims as well as those migrants who lived previously in the Middle East or Afghanistan. While the role of the moderator in constructing these manipulative silences might be deceptive (Huckin 2002), ultimately and significantly, Australian Muslims in their keenness to project a moderate view of Islam are paradoxically denying recognition and agency of other voices.

Through applying Huckin's (2002) idea of contextuality, deception and intentionality, we argued that the moderator framed the debate about Australian Muslims fighting in Syria and Iraq within two main topics; whether Australian Muslims connect with Australian values and the so called 'moderate' Muslims. In using only these topics the moderator created a 'certain slant' that can be labelled as manipulative silence. Other counter-arguments or subtopics, including the role of the international community in Iraq and Syria and the humanitarian crisis in Syria were completely ignored. Consequently, this created intentional manipulative silences. Our analysis presents an alternative approach as well as the potential to look more critically at 'silences in discourse' rather than only what is said.

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Yokozuna

A magician referee in persimmon robes, black hat,
conjures them through the centuries,
his reedy voice
nuzzling the raked stadium:
Hakuuho…., Asashooryuu…

Baby giants, the Mongols are birthed
from their stables, surprised, indifferent.
They face each other
across the pounded clay of the dohyo,
throw salt, for purity and the ancestors,
crouch, glower,
bound together for the moment
until one falls to the ground
or outside the thick rice rope.

Hakuho, tall, boyish, seems an unlikely hero,
caught up in dreams of fatherhood,
against the troll-like, disgraced Asa,
filmed playing soccer back in Mongolia
while supposedly unfit to play anything.

Suddenly they are leaning together, breathing heavily,
wandering islands momently stalled
in an ebbing Sargasso.
Hakuho's long reach grips his rival's belt
but Asa, wily, lifts the younger wrestler
two feet in the air,
says the bilingual newspaper,
like a tree or a tooth pulled out slowly by the roots.
But Hakuho twists, bends, tipping the heavier
rougher man
off-balance
cartwheeling him to a new defeat

David Gilbey,
Wagga Wagga, NSW