

# Giving praise where praise is due: Australian Arabic Council Media Awards 1995

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## ***Our Media Portrayal***

One of the most insidious aspects of racism is the refusal to recognise the *other* as an individual, but as an amorphous stereotype - the avaricious Jew, the sneaky Chinese, the dumb Irishman, the lazy black person. Racism does not *see* the rich and complex nature of identity and renders individuals invisible within the stereotype.

Roland Jabbour, Chairman of the Australian Arabic Council, addressed these issues in his opening remarks when he launched its recent media awards. 'The increase of *Arabphobia* in the West seems to coincide with the need for a new enemy and the demise of the Soviet empire. The Arab world and Islam, the two being perceived as the same in Western popular media, are increasingly portrayed as the new threat to Western democracies and to the new world order.

'We cannot pretend there is no connection between media slogans and racist slogans. How long can media professionals plead ignorance to this?', Mr Jabbour asked.

The long-term effect of stereotyping is to shape attitudes and prejudices. Certainly the

premature accusations shortly after the Oklahoma bombing were perceived by many in the Australian community as unacceptable cultural stereotyping.

Stereotypical images are not just restricted to drama, cinema, video games and advertising, but are prevalent in news services, purporting to tell the truth. 'One should never underestimate the power of print. When something is etched in black and white, it carries with it a weight of authority. But how many journalists realise the ramifications and implications of their stories on real people in the wider community?' Roland Jabbour asked.

The Australian Arabic Council receives many calls from distressed people whenever such anti-Arab sentiments appear in the media. 'Inadvertently, these signal a green light for anyone who harbours ill-feelings against minority groups to vent their frustrations and create scapegoats. Cases of intimidation, harassment, vilification and taunting occur on the same day', he said.

In his address, Mr Jabbour quoted former Federal Minister and Jewish leader, Barry Cohen who, quoted in the Bulletin (1990) said, 'there seems to have been a media competition to see who can win the prize for being the most offensive to those of Arab descent. I am appalled at the lack of sensitivity of some Australian journalists. What we have witnessed... has been a mixture of arrogance, ignorance and outright racism.' Barry Cohen went on to suggest the media's role in *promoting* the kind of horror stories they report.

'Today', said Mr Jabbour, 'we look at a media competition to see who can win the prize for a different reason, we pay tribute to some

commendable efforts in the Australian media for promoting greater understanding of our culture. We have witnessed the positive effects of good journalism. We recognise that communities such as ours which are frequently the target of racist attacks have to be vocal not only when the media perpetuates racist stereotypes, but also when the media tries to reverse these.'

Stereotypical images of Arabs tend to be limited to either the threatening and amorphous villain or the victim. 'We are fed up with camera crews claiming that veiled women are the only images they are prepared to associate with Arabs, because anything else would "confuse" their audience', he said.

A particularly serious implication of such representations is that they often call into question an Arabic-Australian's allegiance to this country. 'During periods of international conflict our community feel they must repledge their commitment to Australia, and indeed are frequently asked to do so by the media.'

Mr Jabbour spoke about the origins of the Australian Arabic Council during a time of crisis for the community. The Council was 'founded in a period of pain, after the Gulf War. It has transformed this experience into a driving force to motivate and mobilise change by addressing the fundamental causes of racism in Australia. During that period, we learned that the first casualty of war is the truth. We learned about how essential it is for our diverse communities to have a voice on community relations issues', he said.

In this, the Year of Tolerance, Mr Jabbour called for a more proactive notion of tolerance in the Australian community. 'We reject the narrow and colloquial definition of tolerance because it represents a passive approach to diversity; it means putting up with people, and does not challenge the *us* and *them* mentality'.

The most effective way to create a culture of change is through community education, active dialogue and promoting understanding. 'The diversity of Council projects is testament to the

fact that we have many pasts but one future', he said.

'This month we celebrate our third anniversary as a Council. In three years we have not only enhanced the profile of the Australian Arabic Community, but have also provided many tangible results and tools to redress ignorance about Arabic cultures.

'Before we endeavour to explain our true respective histories, diversities and identities, we need to start by addressing the untrue, simplistic but popular public perceptions, such as: Arabic = Islam = fundamentalist = terrorist. Any positive reports on Muslims affect the public perception of Arabic Australians, which in turn affects the public image of Lebanese much as Egyptians and Christians as much as Muslims', he said.

And what better way to change the entrenched culture of Australian media - and consequently the Australian public - than by giving praise to those within the industry who have risen above the stereotype to portray the Arabic community in a more complex and real light. Certainly the diverse Australian community is ready for such representations.

## **Award offsets media trend toward 'Arabphobia'**

...In his audiovisual presentation at the Media Awards, Mr Joseph Wakim, Australian Arabic Council Secretary, interpreted images and stories ubiquitous in the print media. Of (a) striking, somewhat problematic, image from [Time Australia](#) he said 'the cover features silhouettes of a machine gun juxtaposed against a minaret, reinforcing the formula that Islam equals violence. The caption is: "Islam: should the world be afraid?" ... This epitomised the prominence of Arabphobia, and how subsequently all those resembling the "Hollywood Arab" were treated as the convenient scapegoat whenever atrocities occurred around the world.'...

As part of a broad strategy to address the

popular representation of the Arab community, the Australian Arabic Council conducts regular seminars entitled *The Arabic Community and the Media: How to change stereotypes*. These sessions address how the media works and how such images arise from ignorance, not conspiracy. Public affairs and media liaison skills are taught as well as an insight into the history of media representation of Arabs...