

# Baseline Knowledge of Islam and Muslims: A Study of Australian Government Crisis Communication Officials

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the level of knowledge Australian crisis communications officials had about Islam and Muslims. It did so at a time when the Commonwealth Government has warned in the current national security environment that a terrorist attack could be experienced at any time, and where the most serious threat emanated from those holding what the government described as a “deviant” view of Islam. The study identified that Media Liaison Officers (n=72) have low levels of knowledge about this religious faith, and that they were aware of their lack of understanding. These findings raise policy concerns about the extent to which Media Liaison Officers can differentiate between Islam and deviant interpretations of the faith. With the pivotal role that Media Liaison Officers play in crisis communication—including briefing and educating journalists when a terrorist event occurs—these findings present crisis managers with several challenges; including recruitment, training, and on-going professional development.

**Keywords:** Crisis communication, terrorism, violent extremism, Islam, Media Liaison Officers, Australia

## INTRODUCTION

Australia's contemporary security and emergency policy frameworks are centred on the all-hazards approach; but moreover, this doctrinal approach emphasises resilience (Commonwealth of Australia 2011, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). Nevertheless, human-induced disasters—such as acts of terrorism—pose unique challenges for political leaders and crisis communication practitioners, not the least of which is dealing with the public's heightened perceptions of risk, fear, uncertainty, panic, and their search for answers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2012; Commonwealth of Australia 2015d; Griffin-Padgett and Allison 2010; Kapucu and Van Wart 2006).

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These challenges arise because the roles of different levels of governments in crisis communications before, during and after disasters (e.g. terrorism) are “fundamentally different” than for more familiar crises and disasters (e.g. natural disasters) (Kapucu and Van Wart 2006: 280). Training and education of crisis communication officials, understanding and taking account of contextual factors, and effective engagement with the political leaders, and news media, are all critical success factors for effective crisis communications (Boin, Cadar, and Donnelley 2016; Commonwealth of Australia 2015e; Kapucu and Van Wart 2006; Palttala, Boano, Lund, and Vos 2012; Seeger 2006).

In the contemporary Australian security context, “...a terrorist attack is likely any time” (Commonwealth of Australia 2015b: iii). The principal terrorist threat facing Australia has been identified as individuals or groups that promote violent extremism, specifically those with “...a deviant interpretation of Islam” (Commonwealth of Australia 2015a: 2). Therefore, the ability of government officials responsible for crisis communications will be to differentiate Islam from its deviant interpretations.

The role crisis communication plays in disasters by government agencies has been the subject of scholarly inquiry for decades (Cheng 2013; Griffin-Padgett and Allison 2010). While studies have identified that communication is central to the four key phases of crisis management (prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery), less well documented are the so-called best-practice approaches for crises and disasters (Cheng 2013; Kapucu and Van Wart 2006). Moreover, those studies examining best-practice for political actors when communicating with the public, tend to focus on natural disasters (Ewart and McLean 2015a, 2015b; Ewart, McLean, and Ames 2015, 2016).

## LITERATURE AND CONTEXT

The four-phase cycle of crisis management encompassing prevention, preparedness, response and recovery has been well documented by researchers (Boin, et al. 2016). Central to effective crisis management across all four phases is accurate and timely communication with various publics (Boin et al. 2016). Yet, crisis communication raises an important dichotomy; that between the *push* pressures to lead and inform various publics with accurate and timely information, and the *pull* pressures to be guarded, to over-reassure and to deny blame (Venette 2006: 230). Finding this balance for governments and political leaders can be fraught with uncertainty, and various publics (including the news

media) can be unforgiving if the right balance is not found (Cheng 2013; Ewart and McLean 2015a; Ingham 2014; Kapucu and Van Wart 2006; Palttala et al. 2012).

In crises, the news media is an active rather than a passive actor providing an important conduit between responders and various publics (Palttala et al. 2012). The news media shapes public opinions and influences the actions of both the public and political leaders (Anthony and Sellnow 2011; Cheng 2013; Ewart and McLean 2015a; Palttala et al. 2012; Seeger 2006). The public and the news media can be harsh critics (Ewart and McLean 2015a; Kapucu and Van Wart 2006).

Best-practice crisis communications strategies continue to evolve, adapting to different scenarios, risks and threats, responder roles and expectations (Covello 2003; Griffin-Padgett and Allison 2010; Heath 2006; Seeger 2006; Venette 2006). Research focused specifically on the roles of political actors as responders identifies that while crises are inherently political events, at times politicians struggle to find the balance between the *push* pressures on them to act as leaders and the *pull* pressures on them to simultaneously step-back allowing operational managers to lead (McLean and Ewart 2015a, 2015b). Research has also found that in times of crises, political actors "...are both a help and hindrance in the provision of information to the public" (McLean and Ewart 2015b: 512).

In the immediate crisis response phase, political actors "walk a tightrope" when attempting to balance the potential political mileage from showing strong leadership from being "on the scene" with the needs of first responders to focus on preserving life and protecting property (Ewart et al. 2016). Pre-event planning including pre-messaging is critical, yet for human-induced crises and disasters, pre-event planning and the roles of governments remain under researched (Boin et al. 2016; Covello 2003; Griffin-Padgett and Allison 2010; Palttala et al. 2012; Seeger 2006). As Heath (2006: 245) points out, in the preparedness phase of a crisis "...creating teams, fact-finding protocols, messaging, and delivery are vital." The resultant crisis narratives are built on "pre-crisis conditions" including other contextual narratives (Heath 2006: 247).

Australia routinely experiences natural disasters, including flooding, tropical cyclones, and bushfires, with average annual insured losses estimated at A\$1 billion (Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Crompton and McAneney

2008). Australian interests are also not immune from acts of international and domestic terrorism. Since the early 1970s spurred on by the massacre of athletes and officials at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972, Australia's counter-terrorism efforts have been driven by international as well as domestic events, and the subsequent changes to the threats that emerged since (Finnane 2013, 2015; Wright-Neville 2006). At least twelve acts of terrorism have occurred on Australian soil since 1970 (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2016). The Australian government has reported that since 2001, policing and intelligence agencies have also disrupted at least four major terrorist plots, and in the past decade alone, more than 110 Australians have been killed overseas in terrorist events (Australian Government 2016a).

Over time the threats facing Australia have included those emanating from Armenian terrorism, violence by right-wing racist groups, and violence directed against Jewish and Islamic populations in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 1984: 17; 1990: 49; 2001: 4; 2002: 17). These shifting security threats would indicate that the requisite knowledge held by officials with responsibilities for responding to acts of acts of terrorism should also shift. Australia's National Terrorism Threat Level at the time of this writing was set at *probable* (Australian Government 2016b). This means "...that individuals or groups have developed both the intent and capability to conduct a terrorist attack in Australia" (Australian Government 2016b).

The principal terrorist threat facing Australian interests now has been identified by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) as individuals or groups that promote violent extremism, specifically those with "...a deviant interpretation of Islam" (Commonwealth of Australia 2015a: 2). Of the twenty organisations currently proscribed under Australia's Criminal Code as terrorist organisations, nineteen are groups that claim to act in the name of Islam (Australian Government 2016c). It is noteworthy that Australians are largely ignorant of Islam, with 70% of a random stratified sample acknowledging they know little to nothing about the faith and its adherents (Withheld, 2016).

Australian governments, police and officials have specific, yet complementary, roles to play in preparing for and responding to a range of natural and human-induced crises and disasters including acts of terrorism (Commonwealth of Australia 2011, 2012, 2015b, 2015e). This includes complementary roles in crisis communications as they relate to acts of terrorism (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e). Official guidance for Media Liaison

Officers in the context of an act of terrorism includes advice about “...the judicious and prudent use of language” (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e: 18). This advice extends to the potential intersection between terrorism and religious, national, and cultural communities (including Islam) (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e: 20). Strawson (2008: 9) identifies governments have sought to differentiate the Islamic faith from the acts of violent extremism committed by a small proportion of its adherents. The distinction between terrorism and Islam is crucial (Strawson 2008: 9). This is a highly-nuanced scholarship and policy area reliant on an understanding of Islam, its history, variants, and differences in its political goals and relationships with the West (Strawson 2008).

It is posited that this situation infers that government officials whose roles it is to brief political and policy elites as well as liaise with the media and inform various publics during a crisis should have a higher level of knowledge about Islam and its deviant interpretations than that of the general Australian population. To test this hypothesis, this study examined the knowledge held by crisis communications officials about the Islamic faith.

## METHOD

In May 2016, at the request of the Australia–New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee’s Public Information Sub-Committee, two of the authors designed and conducted along with a Muslim trainer, two ninety-minute workshops for officials involved in public messaging during times of crises. The focus of the sessions, which were conducted in two Australian capital cities, was multi-faceted: to brief participants about a broader project at the time being co-led by one of the authors focused on encouraging more informed reporting of Islam and Muslims by the Australian news media; to discuss key information about Islam and its religious practices (discussed below); and to begin to assess the information needs of participants who operate in counterterrorism policy.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants (a convenience sample of  $n=73$ ) were invited to (but were not required to) complete an ethical clearance form and a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants about their levels of education and work-related experiences, and asked twelve targeted questions.

To enable comparisons to be made to the Australian population, the first two questions were modelled on questions asked by Roy Morgan Research in their June 2003, *Attitudes Towards Islam Survey* (Dunn, 2004), and replicated in a recent study (Withheld, 2016). Participants were asked to describe their

knowledge of Islam and its followers using a four-point scale—1) I don't know anything about Islam and its followers; 2) I know a little about Islam and its followers; 3) I know a reasonable amount about Islam and its followers; 4) and, I know a lot about Islam and its followers. Participants were then asked to nominate whether they were Muslims themselves, and how many Muslims they knew.

To test participants' knowledge of basic facts about Islam, eight of the remaining ten multiple-choice questions replicated those about Islam and its religious practices administered in one stage of the broader project. The two remaining multiple-choice questions were tailored at another objective of this study, that was, to identify levels of knowledge about media practitioners' roles in reporting of acts of terrorism. These results are excluded from this paper. After each workshop, a questionnaire using the same ten multiple-choice questions was administered. Not all participants answered all questions, and this is reflected in the data.

During the workshops, the correct or incorrect answers to the questions were not identified. However, the part of the workshop that focused on Islam and Muslims, which was delivered by a Muslim trainer, was designed to cover the material in the questionnaires. It included a discussion about Islam as an Abrahamic religion, monotheism, the prophets of Islam, the five pillars of Islam, the branches of Islam, an explanation of key terms (including *jihad*, *halal*, and *sharia*, as well as terms relevant to veiling, such as *hijab* and *niqab*), and cultural practices and sensitivities.

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The pre-workshop test asked participants to rank their knowledge of Islam and Muslims using a four-point scale (table 1). There were 72 responses to this question. The study found that approximately 78% of participants considered they knew little to nothing about Islam and Muslims; approximately 22% considered they knew a reasonable amount; whereas, no respondent considered they know a lot (note: results have been rounded to one decimal place for clarity).

These data were analysed using linear regression under a Bayesian framework, with vague conjugate priors (Kass and Wasserman 1996). To test the participants' knowledge, both pre-workshop and post-workshop scores were modelled using linear regression to exam the effects of:

- 1 session attended;
- 2 if participants had been journalists in the past;
- 3 if participants had been involved in reporting on, or responding to, a terror event in the past;
- 4 participants' level of education (trichotomised as: no tertiary education; undergraduate; and postgraduate);
- 5 participants' self-reported knowledge (nothing; a little; a reasonable amount; and a lot); and
- 6 the number of Muslims participants knew (converted to a log scale for analysis).

Table 1: Participants' self-ranked knowledge of Islam and Muslims

<b>Participants' Self-Ranked Knowledge of Islam and Muslims</b>	<b>Participants (n=72)</b>
I don't know anything about Islam and its followers	8.3%
I know a little bit about Islam and its followers	69.4%
I know a reasonable amount about Islam and its followers	22.2%
I know a lot about Islam and its followers	0%

Initially, it was determined that neither participants' involvement in reporting or responding to past terror events or the participants' level of education were significant. These results however, may not reflect the effect of these factors in the wider community. For instance, there were only four participants who indicated they had reported on a terror event when they were journalists (three of whom attended the same workshop). As a result, it was not possible for the study to comment on the significance of this factor on pre-workshop knowledge.

In terms of education levels, the bulk of our participants had an undergraduate degree (n=51) as their highest level of education, with eight participants having a higher degree, and five having no tertiary qualifications. As a result, the possible effects of levels of education may be masked by the

more dominant features of the data. The coefficients from the resulting linear model (including only significant terms) are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Estimated coefficients for linear regression of effects on re-workshop test results

<b>Effect</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
Intercept	1.53 (0.78)
Course (location 2)	0.67 (0.47)
Previous work as journalist	0.85 (0.46)
Self-Reported Knowledge: A little	1.18 (0.80)
Self-Reported Knowledge: A reasonable amount	2.13 (0.93)
Number of Muslims known (log scale)	0.15 (0.12)

It is worth noting that the aim of the analysis is to describe differences between workshop participants and their baseline knowledge of Islam. In this context, linear regression is a modelling process used to detect factors that vary between baseline knowledge, rather than constructing a model to predict the baseline knowledge of other people who are not part of our sample (see Scmueli 2010 for further discussion). As this analysis was focussed on explaining differences, significance was determined using the posterior distributions of the parameter estimates based on the Monte Carlo Markov Chain simulations. If zero (0) was included in the 95% credible intervals, signifying the plausible range of parameter values, the result was deemed non-significant.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the pre-workshop test revealed that scores were impacted by the course location, with the overall mean in one capital city, location being 0.67 points lower than the overall mean in the other capital city location (table 2). Additionally, significant terms imply that pre-workshop test scores increase for current journalists (0.85), in line with self-reported knowledge (an additional 1.18 when reporting knowing a little, and an additional 2.13 for participants who reported knowing a lot).

Participants who reported knowing more Muslim people also achieved higher mean scores in the baseline knowledge test (shown in table 2 on a log

scale). Overall, the mean pre-test score was 1.53 (out of 8) and is displayed in table 2. This result would correspond to a participant at location 1, who was not a former journalist reporting that they knew nothing about Islam and knew no Muslims.

The results of the pre-workshop analysis (table 2) are shown graphically in figure 1, which provides model estimates for a participant reporting knowing no Muslims. Solid lines are modelled test means for location 1, dashed lines for location 2. Self-reported knowledge is none, a little and a reasonable amount. These estimates are for participants who report knowing no Muslims. Mean scores increase with the number of Muslims known to participants.

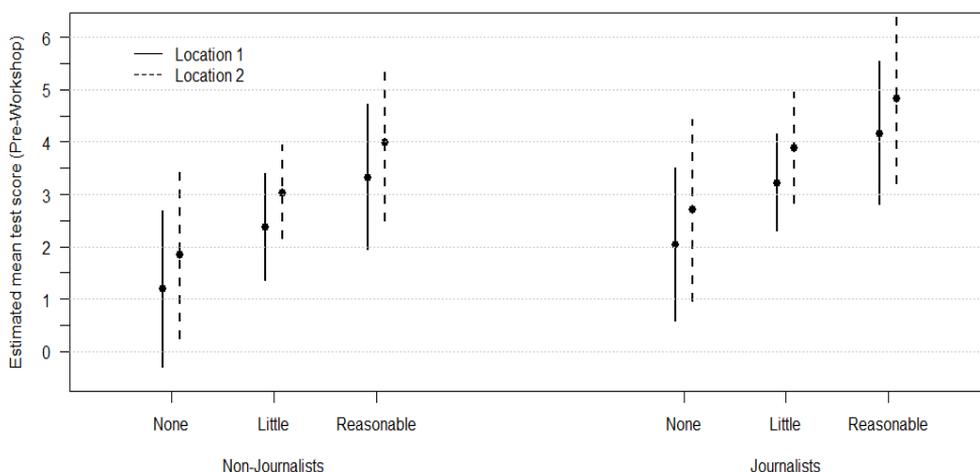


Figure 1: Posterior distributions of mean scores of pre-workshop test analysis.

Although the study would expect all test scores to be either *stable* or *improve* after the workshops because the same test was administered, the study has similarly analysed the post-workshop test scores to determine if these knowledge gaps between the various sub-groups were still evident. While the estimated posterior means were shown to be similar in direction for course, education, self-reported knowledge and journalist role, they were no longer significant at the 5% level. Education and journalist roles were marginally significant ( $p < 0.1$ ), and as such, they are not ruled out of requiring further research. Interesting, while education level has become a marginal effect influencing post-workshop scores, self-reported knowledge, which was significant at pre-workshop is no longer a significant variable, marginal, or otherwise.

The number of Muslims that the participants knew was significant at the 5% level, with the estimated effect on test mean being shown in figure 2. It shows the average rising from slightly fewer than 6 (for those who reported knowing no Muslims) to around 7.5 for participants who knew a larger number of Muslims (around 30). These results are likely to indicate that exposure to Muslims in everyday life is an important part to understanding Islam and Muslims.

In the regression analysis, the number of Muslims known to the participant was examined as a linear function of test score. In reality, the study expected some type of step function or threshold. For example, knowing fewer than 5 Muslims may result in a similar test score, and there may be some number over which knowledge may not increase greatly (or at all). However, as this study had a limited sampling frame, it used linear regression to show that having Muslim friends and acquaintances increases baseline knowledge.

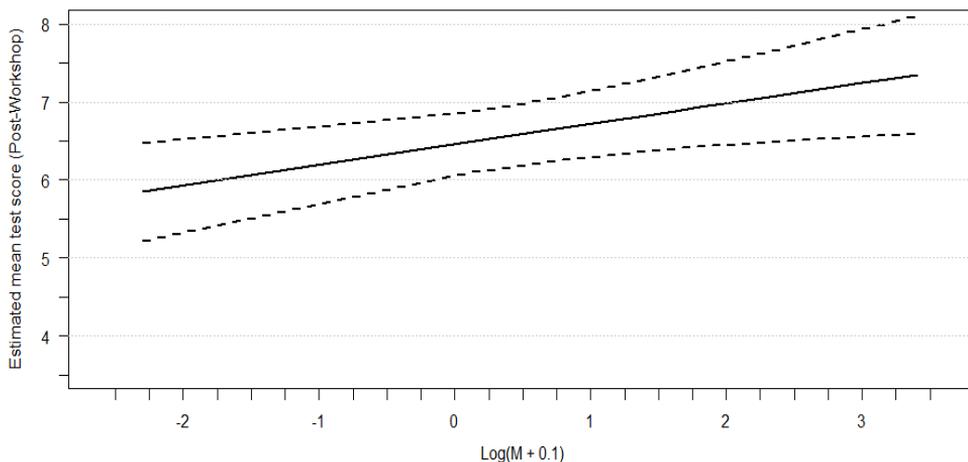


Figure 2: Estimated test mean post-training relationship with number of Muslims known to the participant (on log scale, note +0.1 due to zero's in data). Solid line is posterior mean and dashed lines represent 95% credible interval.

The results of this study show that in the threat situation that existed at the time of writing, not only do Media Liaison Officers have low levels of knowledge of even basic facts about Islam and Muslims, they are aware of this knowledge gap. This lack of understanding can be improved by participating in a relatively short workshop. This study has also highlighted that despite their

roles, Media Liaison Officers consider they know less about Islam and Muslims than do a random stratified sample of the Australian population (Withheld 2016).

Of note is that the participants' baseline knowledge of Islam and Muslims is impacted by relevant experiences in the field either in reporting on acts of terror or involvement in responding to them. While further research is needed to identify precise points, this study has done the initial identification of key non-demographic factors that influence baseline knowledge of the Islamic religion and those who practice it—workplace exposure to terror-related events (as either an advisor or journalist), and the number of Muslims people know. Media Liaison Officers' knowledge of reporting stories about Islam and Muslims remains, yet, untested.

This study highlights important short-term lessons and contextual considerations for policymakers. Media Liaison Officers play pivotal roles in public messaging when there are changes to Australia's terrorism threat level, and in both preparing for, responding to and recovering from acts of terrorism (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e). This includes building relationships with other agencies, industry, and the news media (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e). It assumes requisite levels of contextual knowledge and established relationships. Nevertheless, in their examination of the shifting relationships between counterterrorism agencies and the news media in Australia, O'Donnell and McLean (2015) pointed-out that since the late-1970s, mutual distrust and suspicion has never been far from the surface.

At the core of this distrust is the dichotomy between journalists' *need to report* the news and governments' *need to contain* certain elements of the news as it relates to counterterrorism efforts (O'Donnell and McLean 2015). Yet, despite this longstanding misgiving, suspicion and at times competing professional goals, in times of a suspected or confirmed act of terrorism Media Liaison Officers are expected to play a key role in liaising with and briefing the news media (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e: 14), and by extension, communicating with various publics.

Official guidance identifies such interactions are necessarily limited, drawing short of revealing information that could compromise either security or the integrity of any subsequent criminal investigations (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e). Adding a layer of complexity, Media Liaison Officers are encouraged to view journalists as active rather than passive actors who are

highly influential in how incidents play-out (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e: 14). This pre-supposes that as part of their liaison and briefing roles, Media Liaison Officers can and should play a role in educating the news media.

Against the backdrop is Australia's history of Islamophobia and the problematic nature of how the Australian news media reports stories about Islam and Muslims. It includes negative stereotyping, the portrayal of Muslims as backward and Islam as an anathema to Western values, and the conflation of Islam with terrorism (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005: 7; Aly 2007; Anderson 2015; Dunn 2001; Manning 2003, 2004; Rane, Ewart, and Martinkus 2014). Tahiri and Grossman (2013: 7) pointed-out that for parts of the Australian community, the Islamic faith and terrorism have been inextricably linked.

Through negative stereotyping, sensationalism and distortion, the news media have played a key role in this (Tahiri and Grossman 2013: 11). Media practitioners' lack of knowledge about Islam and its adherents is a contributing factor to inaccurate reporting (Smiles Persinger 2010). The findings of this study highlight that despite their pivotal and influential roles, this sample of Media Liaison Officers are not currently well placed to contribute to redressing this in the event of a terror event with actual or potential links to deviant interpretations of Islam.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reports on the findings of a study that sampled a selection of Australian government officials (n=73) who were involved in crisis communications; people whose roles, or potential roles, would be to engage with political and policy elites as well as liaise with the media and inform various publics in the event of a terrorist attack. Participants' knowledge of Islam and Muslims was assessed. This was done by identifying and comparing participants' self-ranked knowledge of Islam and Muslims with their actual knowledge about basic facts about the religion. This was done using a multiple-choice questionnaire.

The study then re-tested the participants' knowledge using the same questionnaire, but after they attended a ninety-minute workshop that was aimed at boosting the participants' knowledge of Islam and its adherents. The study stemmed from a broader research project that focused on encouraging more accurate reporting of Islam and Muslims by the Australian news media.

The study found that approximately 78% of participants considered that they knew little to nothing about Islam and Muslims; 22% considered they knew a reasonable amount; but none considered they knew a lot. The study also found that participants' perceptions of their knowledge of Islam was a reasonable indicator of their actual knowledge. Further, while additional research is needed, there were statistically significant shifts in participants' knowledge of Islam by the end of the workshop.

The study also found that participants who had either worked as journalists in the past or who have had a role in responding to a terror event had a higher baseline knowledge of Islam and Muslims than their other counterparts. While the highest level of tertiary education gained was not associated with baseline knowledge, the number of Muslims participants report knowing was an important factor.

The findings of this study have important implications for governments, the news media and Australian Muslim communities. This is because current government policy incorporates a focus on briefing political leaders, various publics and the news media as well as public messaging in the event of an act of terrorism (Commonwealth of Australia 2015e). In the context of the current threat environment, policy assumes officials' levels of knowledge are sufficient to understand, and can differentiate between highly nuanced religious and cultural concepts, and key terms in times of intense pressure. However, this study shows that this sample of officials involved in crisis communication have knowledge deficits, of which they are aware.

These findings are useful because along with more formal education programs, Media Liaison Officers may be able to play a role in educating their colleagues prior to a crisis occurring through discussions and other workplace based activities. Our analysis shows that the participants' perceptions of their knowledge of Islam and Muslims are a good indicator of their actual knowledge. For policymakers looking for ways to address knowledge gaps across the broader Media Liaison Officers cohort, Media Liaison Officers' self-assessment of their knowledge will be a valuable indicator.

While training is one possible approach to addressing the issues raised in this study, the question of how practitioners' baseline levels of knowledge about the Islamic faith can be boosted to facilitate detailed and contextually relevant multi-modal-communications with the news media, Australian publics and

Australian Muslim communities requires further research. Such research is vital because the types of knowledge gaps identified in this study have the potential to impact on the efficacy and quality of these practitioners' public communication activities.

Poor communication, which may result from a lack of knowledge, poses significant threats to social cohesion and has the potential to cause social isolation amongst vulnerable groups and that may ultimately feed into the desires of prescribed terrorist groups like Islamic State to further their own causes. Further research that may assist in improving the outcomes of communication with various publics at times of crisis could focus on gaining deeper understandings of the relationships between journalists and crisis communicators and how their interactions might be improved. It would also be instructive to know more about how public communication about the types of events discussed in this article impact on Australia's Muslim communities.

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