

Muslim Community's Media Dilemma - to engage or not to engage?

...continued from CCN

It is important to note that the journalist who did this story was constantly hammered with emails and calls from a group called "Hands off Syria" run by a lady called Hannadi Assoud. She not only kept on sending countless emails but edited the video blog to ensure that it can be used out of context to convince James Thomas on doing a story on Today Tonight. To his credit, James tried his best to contact Yehya El Khalid but like any young man who goes through so much sudden attention, he withdrew and decided not to defend himself on TV.

For the first time, some Muslim leaders like Ismail Cajee, the president of Holland Park Mosque, and Jamal Khalid of Logan Mosque, who is also the father Yehya El Khalid, decided to tackle the issue head on instead of shying away from it. I – Ali Kadri - was appointed to deal with the media and Yehya agreed for me to represent him on this issue. One of the first journalists to contact me was James Thomas, who did the story on Yehya the first time. From the first conversation I had with James, I felt very suspicious of his intention to do a follow up story on Yehya, mainly because of the reputation Today Tonight has built over the years, especially when it came to reporting Muslim issues.

Our first line of action was to get the true message out through every media outlet available to us. First journalist to come forward was Gary Hardgrave from 4BC Radio station in Brisbane. Gary is not only a career politician but also a much respected radio host and an honest friend of the Muslim community. Yehya and I prepared for this first interview, rehearsing over and over again. The interview went very well and Yehya was able to speak his side of the story without any problems. Same evening, Yehya and I went to the airport to pick James Thomas up to do a TV interview. At this stage, James was convinced that Yehya had something to hide and the drive from the airport to his hotel was very uncomfortable for all of us. However, after we fixed the interview time for the next day, James seemed to have understood that his first story was not accurate and that Yehya is no threat to Australia.

As it is a normal procedure used by many organisations, we requested the questions in advance from James, to avoid any misrepresentations or out of context questions. The interview next day went smooth with two camera men recording, Yehya doing normal things like praying in the mosque, going to uni, playing with his kids, having lunch etc. James did his interview with Yehya and after which I dropped him off to the airport, all the way discussing the need for the Muslim community to engage with the media. James assured me that the story will reflect the truth on Yehya's work in Syria. The [second story](#) was aired and it turned out to be a victory for the media engagement strategy.

There is no denying that media in its various forms is the best tool of mass communication and free publicity. Therefore, I strongly believe that Muslims need to engage with the media to get the true image of Islam and Muslims out to the general public through professional channels. Most of the Western governments and non-governmental organisations have a media strategy but Muslim organisations run million miles away from any media attention. The only Muslims who seem to be happy to engage with media are people on the fringe with lunatic world views. Many times they not only make a joke of themselves but the whole Muslim community. In fact, most of the editors don't have to use their advanced editing skills to feed into the negative views about Islam and Muslims. I hope the positive experience we had with Yehya's story will motivate Muslim organisations to have a sound media strategy and will bring the true voice of Islam out to the public. I serve as a spokesperson for Islamic Society of Holland Park with support from Kuraby Mosque, Logan Mosque and ICQ and I extend my support to any organisation which needs help with media engagement.

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