

Terrorism and crime played a huge part in the Victorian state election campaign leading up to polling day on November 24.

The Liberal-National opposition has been campaigning on it all year, helped along by its colleagues in the federal government. At one point, federal Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton said people in Melbourne were so terrified of the crime wave that they were [frightened to go out to dinner](#).

His targets were gangs of young men, singled out as African.

Read more: [Australian media are playing a dangerous game using racism as currency](#)

Then three events occurred during the election campaign itself that gave impetus to the law and order issue.

On November 9, a widely loved café owner, Sisto Malaspina, was [stabbed to death](#) in Bourke Street and two other men received serious knife injuries before police shot their assailant, Hassan Khalif Shire Ali.

On November 13, James Gargasoulas [was convicted](#) on six counts of murder arising from his running down pedestrians by driving a stolen car along the footpath in Bourke Street in January 2017.

And on November 20, [three men were arrested and later charged](#) with planning a terrorist attack in Melbourne, after widely publicised police raids across the city's northern and western

suburbs.

Media reporting on all these incidents raises a difficult question: in what circumstances is it ethically justifiable to include information about a perpetrator's ethnicity or religion?

Australia's only national code of ethics for journalists is [that promulgated by](#) the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). Clause 2 of that code says:

Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.

The key word, of course, is "unnecessary". This raises the question: What constitutes necessity?

The standard ethical answer is based on a test of relevance: How relevant to the story is someone's personal characteristics?

The rationale is that unnecessary references to these personal attributes can incite unjustified prejudice against whole groups of people, as well as individuals.

In the three high-profile cases mentioned here, much was made of Shire Ali's ethnicity and religion, and of the ethnicity of the three men arrested on terrorism charges. By contrast, very little was made of the ethnicity or religion of Gargasoulas.

Yet all committed – or were alleged to be preparing for – acts of extreme violence against innocent people. Material on the ethnicity of all of them was available to the media. So were the proclaimed religious beliefs of Shire Ali and Gargasoulas.

Gargasoulas [had claimed to be “the saviour”](#); and in one of his early court hearings spoke about the Bible and the Koran, yelling that Aboriginal law was identical to Muslim law.

It was reported that he had posted on Facebook a series of rantings about God, Satan, heaven and hell, and [claimed to be](#) “Greek Islamic Kurdish”.

Yet [media characterisations](#) of him centred on his history of drug abuse, violence and psychological instability.

By contrast, the characterisation of Shire Ali centred on his religion and ethnicity. For example, The Weekend Australian’s report of the Bourke Street attacks stated that police would investigate whether Shire Ali had links to Islamic extremism and radicalised members of the Somali community.

Without waiting for the outcome of that investigation, however, the newspaper put a [headline on the story](#) saying it was an attack by “violent Islam”.

A week later, The Weekend Australian also [carried an interview](#) with Shire Ali’s father-in-law, who said he would never have allowed his daughter to marry a jihadist. He was quoted as saying:

We hate extremists. Islam is not about terrorism and killing people.

Other reports described Shire Ali as Somalia-born. On what we know about his family’s history, he would have arrived in Australia somewhere between the ages of two and 11, and he was an Australian citizen.

Further reports referred to his “delusional” mental state and the fact that his wife had recently left him. Yet the characterisation of him [remained fixed](#) on his ethnicity and religion.

The three men arrested on November 20 were reported to be Australians of Turkish descent whose passports had been cancelled earlier this year. Hanifi Halis and brothers Samed and Ertunc Eriklioglu are [alleged to have been](#) engaged in a terrorism plot inspired, but not directed, by Islamic State.

What the media report about major crimes is almost entirely dependent on the information provided by the authorities – mainly police and intelligence services.

How the media frame these events tends to follow closely the way that authorities frame those events.

Read more: [**Manchester and the media: what coverage of the terrorist attack tells us about ourselves**](#)

The pattern that emerges from the three cases described here is that where the authorities frame an atrocity as a crime, ethnicity and religion play little, if any, part in the way the perpetrator is characterised.

But where the atrocity is framed as terrorism, ethnicity and religion play a large part in the way the perpetrator is characterised.

Yet the relevance of ethnicity and religion to a story about terrorism is not always obvious.

There was strong evidence that Shire Ali was severely mentally ill and that whatever his record suggested about terrorism being his motive – including an abortive attempt to go to Syria in 2015 – it may well have been a consequence of his disordered mind.

In the case of the three men arrested on November 20, it is not clear yet what the relevance of their Turkish ethnicity might be.

It is unfair to blame the media for reporting what the authorities say in the immediate aftermath of big breaking news stories. At that point, who knows what is relevant and what is not?

At the same time, the media have an ethical obligation to at least question the authorities about the relevance of statements about ethnicity, religion or other personal attributes.

It might elicit more newsworthy information, and it would certainly help the media make fairer decisions about how to characterise perpetrators.

Fairer decisions would not only ensure that the public was better informed, but would also reduce the risk of inciting prejudice, provide an antidote to the political exploitation that often follows a shocking crime and, where mental illness is clearly implicated, shift political attention to that issue.

Denis Muller does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/in-crime-reporting-we-should-ask-better-questions-about-the-relevance-of-religion-and-ethnicity-107421>