To Be an Effective Advocate for Peace, Media Distortions Must Be Addressed

Cornelis Hulsman. Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation; Editor-in-Chief of Arab-West Report
Sawsan Gabra Ayoub Khalil. Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation

The Cairo based Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation (CIDT) seeks to build bridges of understanding between the Arab and Western world through analysis of the news in the press from the two shores. Here we will learn specific examples of situations that the press has contributed to worsening. Faced with this, as the authors state, we have a role to play. We must be informed, sceptical and never accept offensive language as a proof of freedom of speech.

The media is a double-edged sword. It can play a role in bringing people of different cultures and religions together and in deepening the divide, strengthening stereotypes, amplifying false accusations and offences, inciting racial and extreme behavior, and undermining efforts to build tolerance and peace. These add to tensions, drive communities and nations apart, make people believe there is a clash of civilizations, and even prepare the road for violence as we see below with a few examples provided by the Cairo based Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation.

Too often we hear that we should neglect such media distortions, and not pay them any attention. This is ostrich-like behavior. Media distortions are not harmless, and even if the initial effects are small we must not give them any opportunity to grow, causing people to believe in a division of good and bad that then indeed could create a clash of civilizations. We must avoid creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by dealing with the problem adequately at an early stage.

The three examples we will provide here are:

1. Stories that make the public believe Muslims target Christians, creating Christian self-pity and Muslim anger by using rumors, uninvestigated allegations and neglecting social, cultural and historical contexts.¹

2. Prejudiced Western journalism resulting in and deepening a poisoned climate between Muslims and Christians in al-Kushh, a village in Upper Egypt where a small conflict developed into a massacre which garnered international attention, causing the general public to believe that Muslims targeted Christians.

3. Using the media with the deliberate objective of creating tensions to achieve other gains: for example Muslim Brothers using religious sentiments to oust a Christian candidate in parliamentary elections.2

Christian Self-pity and Muslim Anger

The problem in the Western media, often small Christian outlets, is the uncritical absorption of stories provided by individual Christians about persecution, not realizing or not wanting to acknowledge that stories may be motivated by other objectives such as the wish to emigrate, soliciting for Western financial support or putting political pressure on Egyptian authorities, believing that this may help to achieve their objectives. Stories also often reflect pre-existing deep anti-Muslim sentiments and reinforce such sentiments. Most stories of Muslims forcing Christian girls to convert to Islam fit this category. Such stories create a boomerang effect, angry responses from Muslims that could easily reflect on their relations with other Christians who had nothing to do with this type of reporting. False or exaggerated claims are dangerous because they desensitize people to the real issues of concern, such as Watani’s reports about some Christians not having been able to get a Christian identity card, or local Muslims trying to push Christian squatters off of land that was previously a swamp and that they had been cultivating for years.3

Prejudiced Western Journalism

Prejudiced Western journalism played a major role in driving Muslims and Christians in al-Kushh apart. In 1998, gambling and alcohol resulted in the death of two Christian villagers, followed by a police investigation with harsh interrogation methods often used in dealing with lower social classes. The Sunday Telegraph and some other Western media did not just criticize these interrogation methods but reported one-sided emotional claims. This resulted in angry responses in the Egyptian media, making their public believe that the Western media would target Muslims, and that Copts provided false stories that suited this purpose. In al-Kushh these reports created a climate that caused new sectarian tensions resulting in the death of 20 Christians and one Muslim in January 2000. The al-Kushh reporting also had great consequences outside Egypt, making a large percentage of the Western public believe this was an example of Muslims targeting Christians, simplifying a complex issue, and strengthening Western prejudices against Islam.

2. The Electronic Documentation Center archive contains several Arab-West Report reports about false claims of Christian girls being forced to convert to Islam, al-Kushh and the clashes in Alexandria and hundreds of summary reviews of Egyptian media articles about these subjects.

3. Watani, March 4, 2007, p. 13; Watani International, March 4, 2007, p. 1. We have a complete file of this case and have spoken with the priest of this hamlet.
To Be an Effective Advocate for Peace, Media Distortions Must Be Addressed

Distorting information by using religious sentiments drives communities and nations apart.

Photo: Pilgrimage by Glòria Giménez.
Deliberately Created Tensions

In October 2005, Egypt witnessed another media generated sectarian conflict in Muharram Bik, Alexandria. Christians had made, two years earlier, a video CD of a church play warning Christians not to convert to Islam by providing a caricature of Islam. The CD only had a very limited circulation, mainly in the local church and did not cause sectarian problems. But in the campaign for a seat in parliament for a district in Alexandria, some people, widely believed to be Muslim Brotherhood supporters, discovered the CD and found it a useful means for creating anti-Christian sentiments against the Christian candidate. Al-Usbu and Al-Maydan, smaller Egyptian print media, were provided with a copy of the CD, resulting in articles that – in combination with a deliberate distribution of the CD in the district – triggered anti-Christian riots causing substantial material damage and fear among local Christians. These tensions were again internationally reported and prepared the ground for an attack on three Christian churches in April 2006, whereby one Christian was killed. Egypt again received much negative media attention.

Egyptian Muslims believe that the West is deliberately highlighting incidents because it feeds prejudices against Islam and Muslims; Egyptian Christians believe they are targeted and Westerners often believe Islam and violence are interrelated. These distorted images neglect that the rights of Egyptian Christians have greatly improved in the last two centuries, a development from a protected minority to citizenship, equality with Muslim Egyptians despite opposition that certainly exists in certain circles in society. The distorted images also do not reflect how Muslims and Christians fought together against British colonialism, against the Israeli occupation of the Sinai and how people live together in daily life. Incidents are terrible and need to be properly dealt with, but should not be presented as the norm. This only leads to deepening the negative effects incidents have already had.

It is obvious from the examples we have found that sectarian tensions are to a considerable extent fed by poor media reporting, sensationalizing, highlighting tensions without providing context, exaggerating issues, and often anonymously quoting angry and emotional people’s statements that cannot be backed up by facts. But do these reporters or activists really care about truth? Does the quote not protect them, conveniently hiding their own opinions behind the quotes of others? If they really did care, they would try to dig deeper and find a more complicated reality than the story they reported. Stories about discrimination and persecution strengthen the feeling among many Egyptian Christians that the hardships they experience from poverty and social injustice that affect all Egyptians are related to their religious conviction. This belief of being persecuted and discriminated is expressed to reporters, and further feeds the stories of persecution. This does not help to foster good communal relations. The damage of these stories is not limited to Egypt alone. They deepen negative anti-Muslim sentiments in the West and also affect Muslim-non-Muslim relations in Europe for example.
Why do these tensions around religious communities always seem to come up? Egypt is a deeply religious society, thus linking social problems and distorted reporting with religion is stirring up deep sentiments. CIDT has a polemics report that shows how sometimes Christians in Egypt polemize against Muslims and vice versa. Feeling offended they blame each other in general for such offensive and false reporting which only generates more anger. It is a vicious circle that must be broken!

All of us can do something. Read history and social sciences, be skeptical of media reporting and do not accept offensive inciting language as so-called freedom of expression! Freedom of expression is a great achievement and makes it possible to present a great variety of opinions to the audience. It makes it possible to explicitly state that we disagree, why we disagree and about what. But offensive language is causing pain, creating anger and breaking communication. Worse is when this offensive language is accompanied with deliberate lies and distortions.

Much anger relates to being unaccustomed to attacks on what is believed to be sacred, but also because people often do not know how to respond, and violent outbursts seem the only way of venting their anger.

In Arab countries one hears the call for censorship, laws restricting the freedom of press, and even draconian methods more often than in the West. Others believe in pressurizing their own or foreign authorities through demonstrations and worse as was seen with the Danish cartoons. Much anger relates to being unaccustomed to attacks on what is believed to be sacred, but also because people often do not know how to respond, and violent outbursts seem the only way of venting their anger. Thus, we need to teach that different responses that are effective are possible!

Media biases, regardless of what kind, must not be ignored but must be addressed! Arabs often claim that they are powerless in the light of so-called invincible Western or Israeli machinations. Brian Whitaker comments on an accusation of selective and therefore distorting translations from Arab media of the Middle East Media Research Institute: “It is not difficult to see what Arabs might do to counter that. A group of Arab media companies could get together and publish translations of articles that more accurately reflect the content of their newspapers. It would certainly not be beyond their means. But, as usual, they may prefer to sit back and grumble about the machinations of Israeli intelligence veterans.”

CIDT has started addressing these biases through systematic media overviews and media critique and through providing and exchanging information:

- systematic media overviews in English from Arabic media to break stereotypes in the Western media and to give Western readers access to the variety of opinions in the Arab world;
- development of the Electronic Documentation Center with a web based search in thousands of media reviews and reports: providing journalists and students with a background for contemporary issues;
- development of an Electronic Network for Arab-West Understanding: providing a pool of available sources of similar minded organizations and people;

4. See www.cawu.org, then click on “Examples of Arab–West Report Reporting” and “Polemics Report”.
• media critique: media watch system trying to deter media, organizations and individuals in going too far in presenting biases;
• internships and student programs that cross cultural borders.

We should not stand on the sideline and scream that there are biases left and right. We must be advocates for peace through teaching understanding and respect for peoples of different cultures.