

Ethical Journalism Initiative.

Quality Media for Diversity and Pluralism

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This paper describes the origins of a project and programme that aims to raise awareness among journalists about the challenges they face in reporting from within an increasingly polarised world, dominated by extremism in religion and culture, public mistrust of traditional politics, and rising anxiety among communities about their future and their relations with their neighbour.

It has been prepared in the period since the publication of controversial cartoons in Denmark in 2005 and particularly after meetings of media professionals organised by the International Federation of Journalists in February 2006, meetings of media experts in Oslo and Bali organised by Norwegian media leaders and the governments of Norway and Indonesia, and other events of a similar nature organised by the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The proposals for practical activities developed in this paper focus in particular on the challenges facing journalism in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean countries.

Ethical Journalism

Challenges of the Current Environment

These are difficult and challenging times for journalists. In addition to coverage of increas-

ingly complex wars, civil conflicts, terrorism, foreign relations and economic developments, reporters and editors are faced with the daunting task of writing and commenting on social changes taking place across the globe. Keeping track of the rapid transformation of once mainly homogenous societies into vibrant and colourful multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities is difficult – but also fascinating.

The shifting social and cultural landscape often results in friction and strain as communities with different cultures, faiths and traditions adjust to living together. At the same time, however, the increasingly diverse worldwide mix of people, races and faiths has triggered a new political, economic and cultural dynamism across the globe. The darker side of current societal upheavals is not difficult to see.

As societies change, intolerance is on the rise, with racism and xenophobia re-emerging as powerful perils and anti-foreigner political parties gaining in popularity. In Europe, for

example, attacks on non-white minority groups are depressingly routine in many countries, leading to the growth of extremism among minority communities.

A range of recent controversies spotlight these trends. They include the publication last year of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, racist attacks and violence in the streets of France and Britain, anger over the killing of film-maker Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands, growing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in many countries, compounded by opposition to future Turkish membership of the European Union.

In addition, while politicians in most democracies insist they are committed to freedom of the press, journalists in all parts of the world are under pressure from governments and politicians seeking to muzzle press freedom in the name of a so-called “war on terror”.

The anti-terror campaign has in fact become a useful smokescreen for many governments seeking to crackdown on dissident groups accused of voicing extremist views or representing terrorist organisations.

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At the same time, extremists and fanatics in many countries are seeking to silence moderate opinion by attacking and issuing death threats against reporters. Such violence is especially rampant in developing nations – particularly Islamic countries – caught between the conflicting values of modernity and conservatism. In many Middle Eastern states, the war for who speaks in the name of Islam – the moderates or the radicals – is a daily occurrence, often fought on the streets.

The challenges to journalistic liberty are being faced with even more intensity by reporters

in the Arab and Muslim world where the media are under even greater pressure from governments and extremist groups. The publication of the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in some Arab papers, for instance, led to the arrest of the papers’ editors. Some were prosecuted, fined and, in a few cases, sent to jail.

This process has added to existing tensions and generated a new mood of intolerance in many countries where democratic pluralism is not fully matured. At the same time, as economic forces drive millions across borders in search of decent work and prosperity, social realities reveal an atmosphere of increasing uncertainty about the value of multiculturalism and tolerance.

The role of the media – to reflect the opinions of all and to provide the raw material of information for societies made up of a mosaic of languages, religion and cultures with different historical perspectives – has never been more difficult, or dangerous.

The killing in January 2007 of Hrant Dink, an outspoken Turkish-Armenian journalist, is a sad example of a prevailing culture of intolerance in Turkey and many other parts of the world where reporters are silenced for challenging established opinions.

The unprecedented levels of killings of journalists and media staff, many of them targeted victims of political and religious extremists, reached a peak in 2006 according to the International Federation of Journalists with 155 deaths. The work of the media and the cause of free expression has never been so challenged.

Nevertheless, many in Europe and elsewhere continue to view cultural and ethnic diversity as a source of celebration and pride as well as an important economic resource. In Europe, previously indifferent governments are gradually paying attention to promoting minority rights, fighting discrimination and combating prejudice. There is talk of affirmative action to help



Journalism should highlight the fascinating facets of an emerging multicultural Europe.

young North Africans find employment. And most significantly, Europe's once-shy minority groups are becoming increasingly self-confident and assertive as they emerge from years of self-imposed silence and exclusion to take their rightful place in society.

Elsewhere, including in Islamic countries, once-silent civil society groups are also making their voices heard with confidence. Demands for reform, access to education and the rights of minorities and women are on the rise in many nations. Under pressure to change, governments are gradually opening up political systems, introducing democracy, and recognising the legitimate rights of women and minority groups.

In this regard, it may be timely to press governments – particularly through the United Nations Security Council, with its peace-building and conflict resolution mandate – to adopt a clear policy regarding the need for member states of the United Nations to promote tolerance and dialogue by enabling conditions for free expression and, particularly, for the removal of legal obstacles to the exercising of free, professional and independent journalism.

The Media's Response: So Far, Not So Good

Most newspapers, broadcasters and other media outlets, however, have failed to take up

the challenge of portraying the global social revolution. Instead of provoking debate by raising awareness, helping fight prejudice and engendering inter-community understanding, a large percentage of the mainstream media has helped to stoke the fires of intolerance and racism.

In Europe, many newspapers remain wedded to an old-fashioned and out-dated concept of a continent where “immigrants and foreigners” are still viewed as exotic outsiders who have brought dangerous ideas and customs into Europe. They do so in the face of mounting evidence that more, not less, migration of people from neighbouring countries is needed in order to make up for labour shortages and maintain standards of living in a region where populations are ageing and the birth rate is static.

As shown in public criticism of racist discourse in recent episodes of Britain's *Celebrity Big Brother* TV series, however, such bias in European media does not always reflect the realities of European societies where people appear increasingly tolerant of minorities.

Few journalists, however, have tried to reflect Europe's racial and ethnic transformation or shown an interest in highlighting the many fascinating facets of an emerging multicultural Europe. Much of the media, unfortunately, have taken the easy but grimmer route of promoting, rather than countering, bias and prejudice.

Across the continent, a diet of inaccurate, inflammatory and biased articles – giving prominence to those who engage in hate speech and populist, anti-foreigner rhetoric – is exacerbating racism and bolstering intolerance.

Sensationalist reporting is to be expected from the popular “tabloid” press. What is depressing, however, is that many broadsheet newspapers have failed to provide space for counter arguments and those advocating a less hysterical white against black view of the world. European media – including broadcasters and Internet-based information outlets – have been especially unable or unwilling to provide a true image of Europe’s 20 million strong Muslim minority.

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But it is not just the behind-the-headlines “clash” of religious cultures where problems lie. The recent enlargement of the European Union brought millions of Roma into the fold, creating the largest single group within the minority communities with their own history of systematic discrimination at national level.

But it is not all bad news. Across Europe, more reporters are challenging prejudice. Broadcasters, particularly those with a public service mandate, are increasingly focusing on minority issues in their programmes. Alarmist and almost-hysterical coverage of minorities is not exclusive to Europe, however. Papers across the globe are guilty of providing a simplistic, one-sided view of the “other”. Such sensationalist reporting may help sell papers in an increasingly competitive media environment but it has contributed to an increasingly fearful climate between communities.

No to New Journalistic Codes of Conduct, Yes to Ethical Journalism

The global crisis over publication of the Prophet Mohammed caricatures has intensified calls for a new code of conduct for journalists. This has been forcefully rejected, however. Journalists are united in dismissing curbs on press freedoms and remain adamant that there must be no new rules, codes or regulations. Politicians and governments must not meddle in media affairs.

Few can doubt, however, that in a world racked by conflicts – both inside societies and between countries – the need for informed and professional journalism has never been greater. Writing about more complex, diverse societies requires sensitive, careful handling. This does not mean refusing to report on conflicts but ensuring that articles dealing with such issues are written with the same care, objectivity and impartiality given to other issues. Additionally, care must be taken to avoid incitement to hatred and a perpetuation of bias.

Good journalistic conduct requires, for instance, that government policies are challenged and politicians taken to task when they propagate intolerance, xenophobia and racist views. Widespread negative assumptions about immigrants need to be questioned and tested. Both sides of the story have to be reflected. The background to race riots for instance – feelings of frustration engendered by rising unemployment and racist recruitment policies of some employers – must be explained. The actions of one extremist or an entire group should not lead to the demonisation of entire communities.

Many of these norms were included in the declaration of principles on the conduct of journalists adopted by the International Federation of Journalists World Congress in 1954. That declaration points out very clearly that “a journalist shall be aware of

the danger of discrimination being furthered by the media and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions and national or social origins.”

Those principles need to be given more substance and potency in these difficult and fearful times. Although many journalists today strive to maintain high standards, media groups, in ferocious competition for readers and viewers and trying to cope with revolutionary changes in the media market, are cutting back on full-time employment and reducing investment in training and investigative journalism.

Questions Demanding Debate and Response

In these challenging times, journalists seeking to perform their tasks to the best of their abilities need to tackle an array of difficult but urgent issues. These include:

- debating “self-regulation” to ensure it is viewed as another manifestation of sound editorial judgment rather than self-censorship;
- ways of encouraging journalists to be better informed to avoid manipulation by extremists or unscrupulous politicians;
- ensuring impartiality and application of core principles of ethical journalism when covering highly-charged issues of crime, immigration, community relations, immigration, religious belief and terrorism at a time of high public anxiety;
- practical actions to be taken to improve quality media and eliminate prejudice within the industry, including through the recruitment of minorities in the newsroom;
- discussion of these complex issues with other civil society groups and policy-makers

without compromising editorial independence.

A New Campaign to Raise Awareness and Promote Dialogue

Given the challenges facing journalists in all parts of the world, the time is ripe for the launch of a new global campaign bringing together journalists as well as publishers, broadcasters and editors to strengthen press freedom, reinforce quality journalism and consolidate editorial independence.

Such an ethical journalism initiative will aim to strengthen democratic values through dialogue and raise awareness of the role informed journalism plays in creating understanding where there is division, whether defined by language, culture, ethnicity or religious belief. It will highlight three ethical principles in the practice of good journalism: the respect for truth, editorial independence and the need to minimise harm. The initiative will focus on promoting a global inter-media dialogue as an essential and valuable element in any strategy to avoid cultural misunderstandings, peace-building and development.

The message of such a campaign will clearly be that governments must not meddle in journalistic affairs. They can, however, create an enabling environment for media freedom by removing obstacles to press freedom and improving the status of people in journalism. To ensure success, work will have to centre on identifying the roots of division, potential for conflict and information deficits which contribute to misunderstandings between groups in society.

In addition, the initiative will have to establish structures for dialogue between media representatives, governments and civil society members to overcome these shortcomings. Most importantly, the focus will be on implementing practical actions to improve the performance of

the media through improved training, recruitment and newsroom practice.

The Ethical Journalism Initiative: Programme of Activities

The objective is to strengthen democratic values through dialogue and ethical journalism and to raise awareness of the role informed journalism plays in creating understanding where there is division, whether defined by language, culture, ethnicity or religious belief. Dialogue and practical joint initiatives involving journalists from different communities are at the heart of the campaign.

Ethical Journalism Initiative Campaign Committee

It is proposed to set up a small campaign committee to further develop the work of the campaign and to work with the campaign advisor and campaign coordinator. The committee should include three or four advisors, media professionals who have been active in the area and can make the link to the organisations of media professionals.

Euromed Conference To Launch the Ethical Journalism Initiative

As a first step it is proposed to formally launch the campaign at a conference of editors, journalists and journalists' organisations from Europe and the Mediterranean region in the second half of 2007. The aim of the conference is to involve mainstream media in the initiative and to agree a practical programme of work. The conference will involve journalists and editors from mainstream print and broadcast media as well as representatives of journalists' organisations. It is proposed to organise the conference to coincide with a meeting of ministers from the EU and the Mediterranean countries during the Portuguese presidency of the European Union.

Handbook for Journalists, Editors, Programme-Makers

A publication highlighting best practice and giving practical tips and advice for encouraging a culture of sound and considerate judgment in the newsroom will be produced. This will be done in cooperation with journalists' organisations, publishers, broadcasters and organisations active in the field of media and minority rights. The aim of the publication is to give guidance and practical tips to media professionals; not to impose rules on reporting but to promote standards of quality and sound editorial judgment.

Information Network

Using existing resources through partnerships, it is proposed to establish a website which will collect information on existing initiatives promoting quality journalism in intercultural dialogue, provide journalists with links to resource and information websites and establish a forum for exchange of information among journalists and media professionals.

One initiative, "New Horizons: Bridging Divides", currently in the process of being set up, is a website to encourage dialogue between decision-makers – intellectuals, business leaders, government officials, journalists, members of the civil society as well as students – on a range of political, business and cultural topics which can help promote understanding and contribute to eliminating misperceptions between the West and Muslim world.

The website will be in English and Arabic. About 6 to 10 contributors will be asked to write on topics related to ways of bridging current divides between people, cultures and religions. An average of 40 to 50 articles will be published every month. The site will be open to all users and news media will be able to use the articles without charge. The site will be updated twice a week in order to

cover enough topics. Another existing web-resource is www.eu4medjournalists.eu, which includes a network and forum tool involving journalists from the 10 Southern Mediterranean countries. The network is already functioning and can be used as a base for the EJI website.

Training Seminars for Journalists

The best result in aiming for better understanding of different cultures and promoting sound and considered editorial judgment in a training environment can be achieved by training journalists who come from different cultures and backgrounds in different topics and professional skills. The training will focus on editorial decision-making, how news is selected and presented while always focusing on newsworthy topics and issues that the journalists would normally report. At the end of each training session, the journalists will have jointly produced material to be published or broadcast by their media. By working together in teams with journalists from different cultures, countries and backgrounds and by highlighting the different choices journalists and their editors make when producing news, the training will instil more awareness of processes of editorial decision-making and a willingness to question their choices in the journalists. In addition, training on newsroom management with editors will include sessions on how to create space for debate and better mechanisms for editorial decision-making.

Monitoring Violations of Independent and Ethical Journalism through Surveys and Reporting on Issues of Ethical Concern

Through partnerships with existing structures the campaign will monitor violations of ethical standards as established by the journalists' codes of conduct. The campaign website will be the tool for collecting this information. The focus of the campaign will be to show how to

avoid violations and how to produce better quality in reporting.

Twinning Projects

In addition to the training seminars the project will support twinning projects between media organisations to facilitate exchange of journalistic material and working visits between journalists from the participating media. Potential participants for twinning between media organisations will be identified through the organisations of publishers and broadcasters as well as through the training programmes and the project website. It will build on existing initiatives.

Journalism – a Thinker's Library

The current debate often suffers from lack of insight and rigorous intellectual argument. To raise the level of the debate and to put quality and thoughtful editorial decisions on the top of the campaign's agenda it is proposed to create the thinkers' library for journalists on the campaign website.

The Ethical Journalism Initiative would commission well-known and respected figures working in journalism or in media studies to write essays on key questions currently facing the profession. These would include:

- Free expression and religious rights: Linked or in contradiction?
- 1st amendment or Article 10 – A journalists' choice?
- Reporting migration – Economic benefits, cultural challenges?
- Words are weapons too – The impact of language in reporting
- Seeing is believing: Editorial choices and the impact of media images
- Money talking in media: Private voices and public values
- Citizen journalism – Blogging, the voice of the people?

- Still gatekeepers – Can the public influence the media?

These essays would provoke discussion among the profession, give sustenance to those wanting to argue about editorial choices and provide a thought-provoking background to public debate.

Mechanisms for Relations with Governmental Institutions and Donor Agencies

In conjunction with the launch conference it is proposed to organise a round table between jour-

nalists' organisations, editors and governmental organisations and donor agencies to discuss the initiatives of the campaign and to obtain new investment and support for media and journalists' groups in this work. The round table will further allow for a frank exchange between journalists and governmental institutions about the best way to tackle racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance and the different roles media and government play in this area.

Finally, the initiative will be a powerful reminder to journalists that their key task is to provide accurate information, objectively, rapidly and independently to a public seeking to understand the complexities and challenges of today's world.