

# Press Freedom in a Complex Context

Panorama

Med. 2006

200

## **Aidan White**

General Secretary  
International Federation of  
Journalists

The Mediterranean, which has been the centrepiece of civilisation for centuries, has become the natural forum for a vigorous renewal of dialogue in recent years with two of the world's most powerful regions – an expanding European Union and a resurgent Arab world – wrestling with the challenges of modernity and political change.

As Turkey and Croatia bid for European Union membership, with, who knows, Albania and Serbia to follow, and as Israelis and Palestinians continue their painfully slow and wary progress towards some recognisable and peaceful solution to an injustice, which is the cause of a burning resentment within the Middle East and yet barely understood by people in the west, the role of media in the region has become more important than ever.

There has never been a more critical time, whether it is in the service of peace or modernity or development, for building an information bridge between the north and south of the Mediterranean. Yet if we look closely at the experience of events in 2005, it suggests there is still a long way to go.

## **Information Caravan Pulls Into Tunis**

By far the most significant media opportunity of the year was that offered by the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Tunis, 16th-18th November. For the past decade the Unit-

ed Nations has been holding summit meetings on major issues of global concern, including poverty, racism, globalisation, and the rights of women. The caravan finally pitched up in Tunisia just as the information revolution seemed to be coming to a peak.

In the Internet era telephones and televisions have become boutiques of information and the traditional world of the media has been blown apart by the process of technological convergence. The uncertainties, and the optimism, of the information society meant that many invested great hopes in the summit as an opportunity to give the information society human form by ensuring that everyone, even the poor and isolated, has access to computers while guarantees could be put in place to end all forms of Internet censorship.

Regrettably, it is not so simple. While thousands of international delegates and activists from civil society argued for simple and inclusive policies inside the Summit tent, outside the atmosphere was very different. Tunisia is one of the world's worst offenders when it comes to violations of press freedom and the Summit, as many feared, was marred by the continuation of Internet censorship outside the conference zone. A hunger strike by human rights activists added to the bizarre atmosphere.

The meeting ended quietly. The United Nations caravan moved on, with summit fatigue settling in, and with no great breakthrough to speak of. For many in the world of the media it was a wasted opportunity made worse by the grotesque choice of venue and summed up by the local censorship of the representative of Switzerland when he spoke out against Tunisia's denial of free speech to its citizens.

## **A Clash of Cultures**

The summit highlighted divisions between the information culture north and south of the Mediterranean. In the north most journalists work in conditions where there is enough attachment to a notion of freedom of expression that gives the media the right to decide freely what to say and how to say it. In many countries of the south, however, press freedom exists in twilight conditions where laws and intrusive governments keep information sources, particularly the television, under a tight rein.

The problems of understanding between north and south are exacerbated by European media stereotypes of the Arab world which seem to be greater and more dangerous than they have been for decades. The media fails to distinguish between fundamentalism and mainstream Islam and appear to regard engagement with religious communities as compromising progressive values rather than an opportunity for dialogue in order to win people over.

The emphasis on terrorism and fanaticism in the Arab world has been made worse by the war on terrorism launched by the United States after the 11th September attack on New York and Washington.

It is an obsession, fed by sensationalist and superficial reporting of conflict in the Middle East and nurtured by unscrupulous and racist politicians. It contributes to an increasingly fearful climate within previously stable metropolitan communities in Europe.

Today in countries with a history of tolerance like Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands, a toxic

## CONFERENCES "EUROMED AND THE MEDIA"

In the framework of the celebration of the Year of the Mediterranean, the European Commission started a series of conferences called "Euromed and the Media". This initiative, which included the celebration of three international seminars during the second half of 2005, had as an objective to analyse the actual and potential role played by the communication media within Euro-Mediterranean relations. After ten years of partnership, "Euromed and the Media" offered to journalists, chroniclers and commentators the time and the opportunity to reflect upon general issues within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the role that communication media can play.

### 1. Dead Sea, "Euromed and the Media", 26th and 28th September

The first meeting of the series took place on the Dead Sea (Jordan) between the 26th and the 28th September 2005. Even though topics on the situation of the Near East, Iraq and Cyprus were discussed in detail, the participants also had the opportunity to analyse and discuss the role of journalists in this type of context. Also, they called for action on a significant number of practical recommendations and agreed on the need to make proposals on essential issues for journalism as a profession, such as security, freedom of expression, action against racist and xenophobic news presentation, and regulating the power of those who control the media in the region. Moreover, they insisted that media professionals can act in favour of mutual understanding only if they are allowed to carry out their work in an appropriate way, which is not always easy in this region.

### 2. Marseilles, "Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue on the Media", 17th and 18th October

New issues were dealt with in Marseilles, such as the journalists' need to find accessible information regarding Euro Mediterranean policies and the migration dossier. On this note, the participants stressed the importance of the migratory phenomenon and how it is dealt with in the news, because of its effects on society. One of the issues highlighted was the training of journalists, since it was concluded that estab-

lishing Euro Mediterranean faculties of journalism could be an essential vehicle for the propagation of the Barcelona Process.

### 3. Barcelona, "Mass Media and the Mediterranean", the 25th and the 26th November

Following both these seminars, the "Euromed and the Media" series was completed with the holding of a third seminar in Barcelona, the day before the Special High Level Meeting of Barcelona on the 27th and 28th November. Organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (EIMed), the European Commission and the Anna Lindh Euro Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures, the international seminar on "Mass Media and the Mediterranean" took place on the 25th and 26th November. The Barcelona meeting, which was attended by over two hundred participants from 35 countries, amongst whom were mass media editors, journalists and experts, had two main objectives: to analyse the production of news information and the creation of opinions and perceptions in the Mediterranean; and to present the conclusions reached by the "Euromed and the Media" series.

Amongst the main conclusions arising from the Barcelona meeting, stands out the complexity of the news in the Euro Mediterranean region, especially after September 11th. For this reason, representatives stressed the need to face the increasing simplification of the news through the use of reliable sources and authentic freedom of expression. Along with complexity, the challenge of reality was also highlighted as reflecting upon the fact that information agendas are mainly centred on terrorism, violence and religion. In front of this situation, participants emphasized the need to make less spectacular news and to concentrate more on social and economic transformations. The seminar's conclusions also highlighted the challenge involved in today's world in presenting information about other individuals or communities. In front of the distortion of the other person's image and its consequent criminalisation, mutual understanding becomes necessary before any type of dialogue can take place.

They also pointed out the challenge that would represent for our sense of identity, the reorganisation of the news scene, due to the increasing number of Arab satellite television channels. Finally, the need to strengthen the public image of the Euro Mediterranean Partnership was presented as an obvious and basic condition in order to obtain a further involvement of the society in the Barcelona Process.

Amongst the conclusions underlined in Barcelona stands out the appeal for a more active and committed role of the media in order to build bridges between countries and cultures. This idea, brought up by the European Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, was reinforced by the call of the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, for responsibility in the communication media, insisting on the urgency of the need to create and consolidate a space devoted to Euro Mediterranean questions.

Another subject that should be especially highlighted is the European Union's commitment to drive initiatives in order to foster freedom of expression and plurality of information in the southern Mediterranean countries. The European Commissioner for External Relations as well as Christian Leffler, European Commission Director for the Middle East and the Southern Mediterranean, expressed the European Union's wish to offer compensations and aids to countries who introduce law reforms which guarantee freedom of expression. The proposal to create a specific Euromed Centre which would provide concrete information on the projects encouraged in the Euro Mediterranean conferences should also be emphasized. Moreover, with the intention of facilitating mutual awareness and collaboration on both shores of the Mediterranean, it was suggested to create journalist networks and "lobbies" as well as exchange and mobility programmes. In order to continue with the series "Euromed and the Media" it was proposed to create a reflection *Focus group*, able to produce specific proposals.

Mariona Rico  
IEMed

cocktail of prejudice and ignorance about Arab culture is leading to a resurgence of extremist politics not seen for 50 years. It is a shift that is making waves around the Mediterranean.

### Journalists' Summit Outlines an Agenda for Change

This difficult climate provided the backdrop to a crucial meeting of Mediter-

anean journalists held in Almeria, Spain, 14th-17th April. Organised by the Almeria Press Association, the Federation of Spanish Press Associations (FAPE), and the International Federation of Jour-

nalists (IFJ), 30 groups representing more than 65,000 journalists from 24 Mediterranean countries agreed a crucial manifesto that confirmed the role journalists from the Mediterranean have to play in building bridges of understanding.

The Almeria Declaration was stout in its defence of free journalism against all forms of pressure and censorship and denounced the conditions in some Mediterranean countries where journalists suffer attacks, censorship, tortures and other forms of intimidation.

The journalists called for action over the safety of journalists, fresh initiatives to promote the rights of women in journalism, and urged journalists and the media to exercise caution in the language and coverage of issues related to migration and ethnic minorities.

They also expressed concern over media concentration and its impact on free expression and pluralism and made a strong statement in favour of professional independence for journalists and protection of their social conditions.

### **Dialogue on the Road to Barcelona**

Three meetings supported by the European Union Euro-Med programme during the second half of 2005 focused continually on the contradictions and challenges of working in a region where notions of independent journalism and versions of freedom of expression vary from culture to culture and country to country.

Arising out of the 10th year of the Barcelona Process, as the Year of the Mediterranean, the series of meetings in Jordan, Marseille and Barcelona gave journalists, media experts and policy-makers an opportunity for reflection on achievements of the European Union's efforts to create dialogue and working relations between the media and journalists in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean and the European Union. Selected international journalists took part in meetings which had the task of defining policy affecting the media in the next phase of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Not an easy task, giv-

en the increasing tension which overwhelmed the media in an intemperate global debate in the early part of 2006 over a series of cartoons published in a Danish newspaper.

In fact, while the first meeting of journalists was getting underway at the Dead Sea, Jordan, 26th-28th September, the cartoons crisis was about to explode in Denmark where it was to become a matter of national controversy for almost three months before making international headlines and sparking a painful confrontation between western values and Muslim conventions.

This fracture highlights a division within journalism on both shores of the Mediterranean which figured throughout the discussion both in Jordan and the subsequent meetings in Marseille, on 17th-18th October, and Barcelona, on 25th-26th November.

Journalists at these meetings continually touched on the degree to which each society has the right to set limits to what is tolerable in what can be published and reported. Cultural sensitivity means that journalists, occasionally, must exercise restraint and leave unsaid things that might cause unnecessary trouble and tension.

This is freedom of expression moderated by commonsense. All of these meetings were framed around the notion of respect for the nature of different cultures and an understanding that without dialogue and professional exchange between journalists the complex differences in approach to news selection and media content, which are strikingly different in the region, will not be properly understood.

What is important, however, is that the debate takes place between professionals without the interference of politicians and governments intent on manipulation and massage of the media to suit their own interests. The issues are important, but they must be debated, discussed and decided by journalists and media professionals themselves.

In this respect the outcomes of these meetings, which looked at media cooperation, training issues, relations with authorities, the need for professionalism and social conditions, were a success and continued with the adoption of

a structure for continuing dialogue which will see a new set of media initiatives to be adopted in the context of the European neighbourhood policy which replace the multilateral basis of the Barcelona process.

In Jordan key international journalists and analysts from around the Mediterranean discussed the complex role of the media in different societies and priorities for further action were forwarded into the further meetings in Marseille and Barcelona. The results, which as expected focused on training and assistance issues, gender rights and the critical issue of racism and xenophobia formed the basis of a package which was delivered to the November Barcelona summit meeting of governments as policy issues for further consideration.

### **Bridging the Gulf in Understanding**

Besides providing a welcome opportunity for discussion between a comprehensive gathering of EU and Mediterranean journalists, the meetings did move along an agenda calling for better understanding and continued cooperation between international journalists in the north and south.

The meetings could not have come at a more critical time. Issues such as press freedom, the struggle for gender rights, tackling xenophobia and the importance of professionalism in the media are as important as building a political dialogue. Importantly, the meetings helped identify a core group of journalists and experts to help build a structured, sustainable system of information exchange and dialogue aiming to improve levels of understanding and to eliminate the hostility, suspicion and ignorance which characterises much of the media coverage of Mediterranean affairs.

If 2005 revealed anything it showed that the gulf in understanding between communities is as wide as ever and that the challenge to the media is to break the templates of prejudice that continue to distort relations. An early return to the simple values of informed reporting, in context, by people of goodwill is long overdue.