Essays for civil liberties and democracy in Europe

Why Terror and Tolerance are the Greatest Test of Modern Journalism
Aidan White

There is no greater challenge to journalism today than finding words and images that help us to understand the nature of terrorism and religious fanaticism without falling into the trap of negative media coverage of Arab and Muslim communities.

Anti-Arab intolerance is on the rise, as is anti-Muslim sentiment, and Western media stereotypes of the Arab world seem to be greater and more dangerous than they have been for decades. Too often media fail to distinguish between fundamentalism and mainstream Islam and appear to regard engagement with religious communities as forever compromising to progressive values.
In the process, there is another story – one of heroism and the struggle for rights – in the Muslim world which is being missed altogether. If ever there was a need for good, honest reporting and for facts to be placed in the context of social change it is now, but there is little evidence that media are rising to the challenge.

Of course, the emphasis on terrorism and fanaticism in the Arab world has been made worse by the war on terrorism. 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 and the United States.

Today in countries with a history of tolerance like Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands, a toxic cocktail of prejudice and ignorance about Arab culture is leading to a resurgence of extremist politics not seen for 50 years.

Europeans are waking up to a difficult reality – that immigrants who began coming to Europe in the 1950s when governments and businesses encouraged mass migration, are profoundly alienated from European society and remain unreconciled to their situation in Europe. Some have turned to the most grotesque interpretation of the Islamic faith to give their lives meaning and there is a growing attachment to violence on the fringes of the diaspora.

The multicultural dream of Europe is being eclipsed everywhere. But no-one, apart from the die-hard racists, are able to describe what will replace it. The danger is that the anti-Muslim discourse of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in France or the Vlaams Belang Party in Belgium or the British National Party may become part of the political mainstream.

The decline of investigative and thoughtful journalism is partly to blame. Even worse, some media have turned their backs on European models of balance and impartiality which are essential to the quality of this debate and complex discussion.

The murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh by a lone Muslim extremist in Amsterdam, for instance, unleashed a spiral of Islamophobia, in which Dutch media, previously standard bearers for tolerant reporting, did little to

dampen the fires. The government considered closing mosques that spread "non-Dutch values." Primary schools for Arab children were fire-bombed. Attacks on Muslim and Arab communities increased. In Britain, the same pattern of racist violence against Muslims followed in the wake of the London bombings of July 2005.

Media responses have often reflected a profound uncertainty, mirroring the political paralysis and drift to extremism that threatens fundamental rights and stability within society.

Yet a return to the basic building blocks of good reporting – asking simple questions, putting facts in context and striving for balance in comment – may well provide a solution.

Are Muslims really a threat? In Europe, for instance, the number of people voting for openly xenophobic parties in most countries exceeds the number of Muslims let alone those who inhabit tiny cells of Islamic extremism. In truth, Europe poses a far greater threat to Muslims than Muslims do to Europe, but this reality hardly figures in media coverage.

Who is harassing who? Countries with minority Muslim populations devote increasing police resources and efforts to the monitoring of Arab and Islamic communities. The number of Asian people stopped and searched in the UK, for instance, increased by 285% in 2002/3, fuelling resentment in already alienated communities.

Under the banner of "radicalism and recruitment", Muslim communities' places of education and worship across Europe are being targeted for increased surveillance. Racial profiling, a practice theoretically prohibited by international law, has also made a come back. There have been renewed arguments about wearing "the veil" at school and about use of religious symbols, all of which have added to the tension.

Are Islamic countries fomenting "extremist" societies? A climate of suspicion and press scaremongering, bolstered by some absurd

notions of a "clash of civilisations," is contributing to support and electoral success for anti-immigration and far-right political parties. Yet no one who visits the Middle East can believe that communication is now controlled by governments or that society relies on traditional voices or the Mosque.

Radical changes in every aspect of the forces that shape public opinion, such as the yearning for social justice, free expression and fundamental rights, are an ongoing reality in much of the Middle East and North Africa, despite the presence of outdated laws and, in some quarters, a still unreconstructed and corrupt political class.

In fact, change is in the air and the evidence is to be found in the invigorated newsrooms of Arab media like *Al-Jazeera*.

Arab states are singular and complex. They are vastly different, both in economic and cultural traditions. Many do operate in a political and social climate where secular political options attract a limited following, but the reasons are rarely fully explained.

In the routine stereotype of Western media, Islamic extremists on the margins of society are confused with the whole Arab world; Arabs are typecast as supporters of terrorism and in the background is a growing media fixation on a millennial clash between Islam and Christianity.

But burning resentments in the Arab world, much of them focused for decades on the injustice of the conflict in Palestine, are too complex to be reduced to such simple terms. Even limited research by reporters of political rebellions against Western domination in the region would reveal they have been mainly secular. Arab nationalism, though often associated with Islam, is sometimes at odds with it. Pan-Arabism, some of whose founders were Christians, offered an alternative, more secular, form of cohesion even if it was not necessarily more democratic.

Its failure and Western interventions, often imperialist in nature, leading to the toppling

of freely-elected governments and the support of dictators, have not helped the cause of democratic change, but may instead have contributed to a revival of Islamist movements.

Although Western media tend to suppose that the lack of separation between church and state is the basis for Islamist revolutions, they ignore the fact that in the non-Arab Muslim world, in places like Indonesia and Malaysia, religious ideologues have failed to make much headway.

Indeed, more pragmatic Muslims in many countries are keen to separate politics from religion. They form a significant body of opinion in the ongoing debate in the Muslim world on Islam and democracy and Islam and modernity. This inner conflict rarely surfaces in Western media coverage.

Despite all of this, the rhetoric now building in both the West and the Arab World is of a final showdown between great religions. Socially democratic governments are moving further to the right, abandoning the ideals of diversity and pluralism.

The time may be right for a new dialogue between western and Arab world media professionals about rights and tolerance in journalism. We may also think it is the right time to revive anti-racist campaigning within journalism to counter xenophobia which was a feature of cross-border co-operation among journalists' unions in Europe during the 1990s.

Journalists and media need to navigate through these treacherous developments with some sense of professionalism. If they do not, then the onward march of intolerance and racism, with its bleak and pitiless inhumanity, can be guaranteed.

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