

Ethical Journalism Initiative

Quality Media for Diversity and Pluralism

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This paper describes the origins of a 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 neighbours.

It has been elaborated 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 Co-operation in Europe.

Attached to the text is the declaration issued by a number of media professional groups and media support groups that have followed the evolution of this debate and the programme set out here.

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Ethical Journalism

1. Challenges of the current environment

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

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 most Asian and Middle East 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 media is under even greater pressure from governments and extremist groups. The publication of the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in some Arab and Asian 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 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 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 young North Africans find employment. And most significantly, Europe's once-shy minority groups are becoming increasing 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, recognizing 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 exercise of free, professional and independent journalism.

2. 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. Many 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 to 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.

But it is not just the behind headline “clash” of religious cultures where problems lie. The recent enlargement of the European Union brought millions of Roma people 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.

3. The growing importance of global broadcasters

The growing importance of news channels – either those broadcasting to the Arab world or to Arab communities living abroad – is a new factor in the world of public broadcasting. The impact of channels like Al-Arabiya and Al Jazeera on disseminating information – for instance their ability to mobilize millions of people to protest against the publication of caricatures of Prophet Mohammed - is an indication of the rising power of Arab broadcasters and the need for closer communication between western and Arab/Muslim television stations.

Such communication can focus on areas of common interest such as the security of journalists in war zones or exchange of information on existing or potential risks.

Some of these areas, identified and analyzed during meetings of world news channels (including BBC world Service, Al Arabyia, Euronews, Rainews 24, France 24, Russia Today, CNN and Al Jazeera) and recently promoted by the Conférence Permanente de l’Audiovisuel Méditerranéen (COPEAM) in Turin and Venice, have resulted in a certain number of recommendations, including the need for a common approach in reacting to exceptional crisis through setting up permanent links between newsrooms.

This would allow for the establishment of a sort of "hot line" that would allow broadcasters to reach key figures in each others’ organization in a few minutes in cases of exceptional emergencies.

A less controversial point identified in the discussion was the need to have an exchange of information on security alerts in war zones and the transmission of messages concerning journalists kidnapped. In Venice, for instance, the BBC agreed on the broadcast of a common appeal, broadcast simultaneously across the world, for the release of reporter Alan Johnston detained in Gaza.

The same approach – used more cautiously – can be used to tackle crisis such as the one provoked by the publication of the Danish cartoons.

As such, the initiative to hold annual meetings of representatives of all major news channels operating in global danger zones is useful and important. In the past such discussions have included topics like dealing with controversial religious and moral issues, reactions to kidnappings to minimize the risk of hostages being used for political purposes and the protection of reporters in conflict zones.

The Group of Venice, created by COPEAM and RAI (with the active backing of EBU and ASBU), has recently been transformed into a permanent network and could be part of the Ethical Journalism Initiative.

Significantly also, existing networks allowing media professionals from different cultural backgrounds to discuss common challenges must be reinforced. The EBU, for instance, gathers all national Arab broadcasters from the Middle East and North Africa (including Israel) and European public service channels but has rarely been used to convey messages for cultural dialogue. COPEAM is an even better example of cooperation among audiovisual professionals from both sides of the Mediterranean. ASBU - the Union of the Arab States Broadcasters - is the sister Union of EBU and provides another natural arena where these problems can be discussed.

But any discussion of challenges facing broadcasting has to cover the question of the impact of the new wave of content in media inspired by use of the internet and new communication technologies.

User Generated Content (UGC) as it is called is often described as a nightmare for ethical journalism. Already today, some of the most compelling pictures/broadcasts – for instance dealing with the 2005 Tsunami or the execution of Saddam Hussein in 2006 – were provided not by professional reporters but by people who just happened to be there and had access to mobile telephone cameras or digital cameras connected to portable phones.

The Internet is another challenge, especially given the popularity of bloggers. Websites such as those run by Al Qaeda which show hostages being beheaded raise a number of disturbing questions such as: who is responsible for the pictures, is there any deontology which applies to blogs and does freedom of expression also apply to blogs?

4. 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 IFJ 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.

5. 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;

5. A new global 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 minimize 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 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.

1. 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.

2. Conferences to launch the Ethical Journalism Initiative

As a first step it is proposed to formally launch the campaign at regional conferences of editors, journalists and journalists' organisations involving key representatives as well as researchers on the subject. The aim of the conferences is to involve mainstream media in the initiative and to agree a practical programme of work.

It is proposed to organise such a conference for South-East Asia following the two events already organised in Indonesia. The aim is to use the experience and important results of these meetings and to bring them into a regional focus.

3. Handbook for journalists, editors, programme makers

A publication highlighting best practice and giving practical tips and advice for encouraging a culture of sound, 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.

4. Information network

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

This would include reliable sources which could be accessible for interviews or simply for consultation in case of doubt on inter-cultural topics

5. 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 background on different topics and professional skills. The training will focus on editorial decision-making, how news are 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.

6. 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 web-site 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.

7. 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 web-site. It will build on existing initiatives.

8. 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 on the campaign web-site, the thinkers’ library for journalists.

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.

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.

Appendix:

ETHICAL JOURNALISM – A RESPONSE TO THE RISE OF NEW INTOLERANCE

The International Federation of Journalists hosted a meeting in Brussels on 15 February 2006 at which media professionals discussed the publication in Denmark and elsewhere of cartoons which have caused regrettable offence to many people in Europe and around the world. The following statement was agreed:

1. While all professional groups understand well the need to consider cultural and religious feelings at all times in the exercise of journalism, they are united in their condemnation of the violence, intimidation, deaths and death threats that have accompanied some protests over the publication and republication of these cartoons.
2. The meeting reaffirms, without compromise, that freedom of expression and opinion is a fundamental and core value of democracy and human rights that should not be subject to any undue restraint.
3. The meeting believes that all media, on all sides, must act professionally in dealing with religious and cultural issues and rights of minorities, and should not do anything that would create unnecessary tension by promoting hatred or inciting violence.
4. At the same time, the meeting is unanimous in the view that the ethical and professional duties of journalism are the sole responsibility of journalists and other media professional in the free exercise of their work.
5. The meeting does not accept that new supranational codes of conduct or other guidelines or new laws are needed. Existing voluntary codes, some of them in force for more than 50 years, serve journalism well.
6. The meeting welcomes efforts to promote dialogue and to raise awareness among journalists and media on all sides about the need for ethical and responsible practice.
7. The participants agree to promote co-operation within and between professional groups and welcomes initiatives to promote dialogue among journalists from different cultural traditions.
8. The aim of such co-operation should be to strengthen media quality and to raise awareness among journalists of the need for informed reporting in context when dealing with inter-cultural and religious matters.

Finally, the participants agree to co-ordinate their efforts in the coming months and request the IFJ to call further meetings of media professional groups to discuss these issues at both regional and international level; they also call on representative media professional groups from the Arab and Muslim world to participate in this process.

Brussels February 15th 2006

This statement is issued in the name of the Association of Commercial Television (ACT), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the European Federation of Magazine Publishers (FAEP), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the International Press Institute (IPI).

Other non-signatory participants at the meeting included representatives of: Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism, the Danish Union of Journalist,, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe (ECRI), the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), the European Newspaper Publishers' Association, the International Media Support, the World Editors Forum of World Association of Newspapers, UNESCO and leading international correspondents from the Brussels press corps.
