

## **Prologue**

Secularisation, individualisation and globalisation have shaped present-day Europe in crucial ways. One third of the inhabitants of all larger cities in Europe have a migration background and in the big international cities the proportion of people who have come to Europe from abroad is much higher than that.

Today, all around the world foreigners are able to develop hybrid identities. They build up a new identity in their new home and at the same time they hold on to their original identity with the help of internet and new possibilities of transport. Multiple identities are a fact in a dynamic world and it is an illusion to think that this development can be stopped. It is inherent to the process of globalisation. In all European countries this tendency can be seen. The big question is: how can we find a 'new we' in Europe, so people with different social, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds can live together in peace and feel at home.

It is not easy to accept this changes smoothly. As a matter of fact, fear toward the other who is entering 'my home' is one of the reactions to this challenging reality of daily life in Europe. The antagonism between 'us' and 'them' has come more into the open in different European regions in recent years. The question how to find social cohesion when people have different customs and various (religious) expressions is a burning one in all European countries. How can the community feeling be strengthened without losing sight of each other's differences? How is it possible to create a 'we' that does not exclude the other, but is rather oriented towards participation of all citizens? How to find a way to understand one another's view on life and sources of inspiration?

## **Media as a 'living room'**

Media can fulfil an important task in bringing this about. They are able to reach large numbers of people in daily life through newspapers, radio and television programmes and through the World Wide Web. Media are like a 'living room': people are invited to sit at table and discuss important issues in daily life. The question is: who takes part in the discussion, who is sitting on the couch as the audience, who is presented as an item to discuss about and who is just forgotten to be invited to speak of his or her own? Let's face it: the societal issues and codes of the discussion are mostly defined by a small dominant group, in particular by middle-age white males. 'The others' have to accept.

So the important questions in a society which is becoming more and more diverse are: Who is building the frameworks for encounters between people? Who is in a position to influence the conditions of the dialogue? Who decides what the burning questions are? Through which glasses do they look at daily life? What background do they have? In other words: journalists decide who is speaking, to whom the message is addressed, whom the media are talking about, how the subject is presented, whose voice remains silent. Thus media have a large societal power and responsibility for making or breaking encounters in society between people of different cultures and worldviews.

Three main points to remember during the 'living room talk':

1. Media do not only represent reality in society but they do also create reality by making the images. Thus they are shaping the perception of the spectators and evoking emotions of joy or fear. Who is speaking and who is silent? Which topic is framed? Is there an aim to brand something or is daily life shown in a multi-layered way?

2. Media play an important role in democratic decision-making processes. Public opinion is formed as a result of the public conversation that mainly takes place in the media. In order to secure that process all people need to have an equal access to that discussion.

3. Media can 'make or break' prejudices by offering balanced information on real life stories of people with different backgrounds.

In order to create a plural and diversity-sensitive platform for encounters, all people should have equal access to the public conversation, the representations should be fair, and the audience should be understood as individuals with different cultural and religious / worldview backgrounds.

## **Three Models to live in / The aim of our paper**

There are three models in trying to deal with diversity:

### **The exclusive model**

In the exclusive model there is a mainstream we-group, which is dominated by white males. Outside that group there are 'the others'. The aim is *assimilation*.

### **The inclusive model**

In the inclusive model the ideal of unity is the starting point. Everybody should be one. It values the similarities between individuals and groups. The aim is to overcome differences in favour of unity. This is the concept of *integration*.

### **The pluralist model**

In the pluralist model, unity is seen as a violent concept because it excludes everything which does not fit into the 'same'. It values the differences because they mirror the multiplicity of daily life. This is a post-integration network concept which aims to connect the differences without overcoming them.

In this paper we will focus on the media which approach diversity with the concept of the pluralist model. There are not many examples of media that fill the requirements but there are some ambitious attempts. One example is the Dutch New We-project that is an attempt to build a real multicultural and equal platform for the dialogue in the diverse society. It has taken diversity into account on three levels:

1. It brings diversity to the editorial staff and to the topics
2. It values the differences without overcoming them
3. It encourages people to participate

The aim of our paper is to explore these three essential added values that the New We-project has and to show how they could bring diversity into the media and help journalists to implement diversity in their daily work.

## **What is the New We-project?**

The multimedia New We-project started in December 2008. The aim of the project is to find social cohesion in a society, which is at the same time secular, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. The challenge is to find answers to the question of how to live together in peace and harmony without denying the mutual differences. The site offers 'infotainment' - elaborate information about different religious and spiritual backgrounds of people, and personal stories and views on topical issues in society from diverse perspectives, in order to learn more about the background of all citizens in the Netherlands. The idea

behind the New We-project is learning to deal with different worldviews without unnecessary anxiety towards 'the other' and with fewer prejudices. Information and communication in order to promote mutual understanding and connecting people are important ingredients in the search of a new we.

The starting point is creating room for diversity, also for controversial views and opinions. Therefore the New We-project is in the first place a platform for dialogue. It aims to achieve a situation in which more people can deal with religious and cultural differences in a constructive way and are willing to be leaders in their own way in their sphere of influence. The motto of the project is: "WE - connects the differences". It underlines the necessity of taking differences seriously, not to obscure them in the quest of connections so as to reduce them to become 'the same'. Without facing the differences, and trying to make them fruitful in an equal way, there will be no New We.

New We wants to make visible where the need and possibilities for cooperation are to be found in everyday life and where people are already working towards 'the good life for all' with the help of concrete projects. The multimedia website offers various materials - video, audio, columns, interviews, opinions, articles, etc. - to read and to respond to. The service unit on the website is a concrete encouragement for everybody to make progress.

After six years the multimedia website-project has about 35.000 unique visitors every month and the number of visitors is still increasing. The content of Nieuwwij.nl is also placed on other websites, where people can discuss it. All videos can also be seen on YouTube. In this sense, the website has a wider reach than only the visitors on Nieuwwij.nl. After the first year the website was already nominated for the Erasmus EuroMedia Awards 2009 and received a 'Seal of Approval' from the European Society for Education and Communication (ESEC). The jury emphasised the creative and excellent way in which education and communication are tied together and they were very positive about the fact that mainly young people with diverse cultural backgrounds are working on this project.

Nieuwwij.nl does not provide a ready-made recipe for how to deal with plurality in society. Instead it offers inspiring ideas, conversations, information and opinions about what is needed to create a 'new we'. The New We-team interviews people in the streets, in their neighbourhoods, young people, poorly and highly educated, known and unknown people. People and their initiatives, about whose existence we did not know, come to the fore. And people who are sceptical about a new we are getting a voice as well.

Practical experiences in daily life, questions and stories of people about religion and society, are the starting point of New We. Which questions and problems do they meet, which solutions did they invent, what is necessary according to YOU to make living together of people with different beliefs and cultures as agreeable as possible?

The project focuses on three target groups:

- Key figures or change agents: people who can have a positive impact on the dialogue between religion and society in their personal social network, e.g. the chair person of a union of employers, a member of the board of a sporting club, a politician, a teacher, a civil servant, a team manager in health care etc.; in brief: people who live in the midst of society and meet with (inter)cultural and religious questions.
- People who are already active in the field of interreligious dialogue: those who are involved in organisations for building up religion and society on a local, regional and national level; they have already experience and knowledge of the dialogue between religion and society, for example as a theologian, a youth worker, an imam, or an intercultural worker.
- Individuals who encounter (inter)religious questions in their daily activities and want to deal with them.

## **Access to the media in the New We –project**

One of the biggest challenges to media is to bring diversity into the editorial staff. Very often immigrants do not have the required language skills and the required education. This means one has to reflect on how to tackle these problems.

One of the important starting points of the New We–project is that it will need people with different cultural and religious backgrounds in the editorial staff - men and women, old and young people. Diversity in the editorial staff has the following benefits:

1. The ability to look at society in different ways will help to find the topics, which are not in the media spotlights very often.
2. Understanding the meaning and importance of the different cultural and religious traditions can be easier.
3. The different cultural and religious networks can be found easier, as well as people from different networks who can and will participate in the various programmes.
4. The diversity of origins in the editorial staff is a reminder of the fact that the audience, too, consists of individuals with different cultural backgrounds. It will remind the journalists themselves of the diversity of the audience and also of the fact that diversity is already part of our daily life, even if it is not always visible in our immediate surroundings.

One of the reasons which prevent immigrants from finding jobs in the field of journalism is the already mentioned lack of language skills. It is understandable that in the hectic daily reality of journalist work, and the constantly tightened requirements that journalists have to deal with, it is not realistic to think of teaching someone language skills or rewriting the texts. However, diversity can still be brought to the editorial staff by realising that not all of the tasks need the same skills. Photographing and making films are examples. It would also be a good idea to have trainees with different backgrounds. This would help young journalists to make the first steps in the field and at the same time the editorial staff will benefit from new ways of thinking, seeing and knowing.

In the New We–project the essential starting point is to give a voice to those people who are not heard. Therefore the New We-team interviews people in the streets, in the neighbourhoods, young people, poorly and highly educated people, more and less famous. People and their initiatives, about which nobody has heard before, come into the spotlights. Which questions and problems do they meet in daily life? Which solutions do they invent and what is necessary, according to them, to make living together with people of different beliefs and cultures as positive as possible?

## **The attitude toward differences in New We -project**

The most essential added value that the New We –project brings is the attitude towards the differences. Very often the differences between groups and individuals are either highlighted (model number 1) or downplayed (model number 2) in society and media. Both ways of dealing with the differences might have negative effects. If differences are highlighted with the concept of 'we' and 'others' in the background, prejudices will be strengthened. If, on the other hand, differences are downplayed, many problems remain hidden and cannot be solved. Within the New We –project the differences are seen as valuable (model number 3) because they reflect the multiplicity in daily life. The project aims to connect the differences without overcoming them.

The required starting point for really seeing differences as valuable is first of all to become aware of one's own values, prejudices and culturally constructed ways of thinking and seeing. This is why it would be

important for journalists to have a training in terms of intercultural and interreligious competence. A journalist has to recognize his/her own systems of values and beliefs. Also, he or she has to have a good knowledge and understanding of other cultural values, beliefs and traditions.

Awareness of your own normative approach is the aim of this exercise. This is an essential insight of the New We-project.

## **Sharing is caring**

Social media and new technology have had a great impact on how products of the media are consumed by the audience. Nowadays people can follow their favourite programmes whenever they want and wherever they want. People themselves can also produce media content such as blogs, videos and audios. People are no longer passive receivers, instead they want to participate too.

These two challenges have been turned into strengths in New We –project with two essential insights.

First, the whole philosophy behind the New We–project is to ‘give the content away’. This means that all the content is shared with the help of social media and new technologies. The videos and audios are shared on YouTube, the interviews and columns are shared on Facebook and through Twitter and interesting articles are linked to the discussions on different web pages. This means that the media go where the people are.

Second, the aim of the New We–project is to make people participate. All the media content has been made with the idea of participation in mind. There is space for discussion on the website. People are also encouraged to ask questions and take part in the issues to be brought up on the pages of the site.

Through sharing of the content and through the participation of the audience, the editorial staff is able to find signals of issues and phenomena that could otherwise remain unseen. By listening to the discussions and by picking up the different points of view, journalists can understand the multilayered reality better. This reflects back on the sources too: the audience can influence the topics that media put on the agenda and it can also influence the way that questions are framed and named. This brings diversity and democracy to the decisions about what is put into the spotlights, how media content is constructed and it also makes the diversity of the audience visible.

## Literature

The difference and similarities of values are made visible on the website of the Atlas of European Values:  
[www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/](http://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/)

Studies about media and diversity:

Changing Media, Changing Europe is a book series of new essays bringing together original analyses of the changing landscape of the media in Europe, <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/books/view-Series,id=6/>

Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies Volume 23, Issue 4, 2009 Special Issue: Listening – new ways of engaging with media and culture,

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10304310903026602>