

## **Case Study: Representation of Muslims and improving diversity of sources in the Greek and German media**

**By Jennifer Collins and Nikolia Apostolou**

Muslim communities in Europe have been subject to much vilification in recent years as countries introduce laws banning burqas and minarets. Politicians question whether Islam is compatible with European values even in countries like Germany with strong and established Muslim communities. In countries, facing economic crisis such as Greece, the far-right is targeting Muslim groups and is tacitly supported by the government

Media in Greece and Germany are grappling with how to portray Islam and Muslims and generally refer to Muslim sources only when reporting on specifically Muslim issues, such as the Burqa, mosques and when tackling the issue of "Islamist" terrorism, which has become an increasingly hot topic as the Islamic State continues to expand across the Middle East.

The situation could be changed through diversity training, hiring journalists of different backgrounds, introducing intercultural outreach programmes and establishing databases of expert sources with different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. But the success of such endeavours depends wildly differing framework conditions for the media in both countries.

### **Germany's media landscape**

In Germany, journalists, analysts and groups representing minorities and Muslims, said the German media has improved to some degree in its representation of Muslim groups and Islam.

The conversation has broadened beyond debates about honour killings and whether Muslims can integrate, which became a particular issue after 9/11. Such debates culminated in the furore surrounding German politician and former Deutsche Bundesbank executive board member Thilo Sarrazin's wildly popular 2010 book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Does Itself In). The book criticised a perceived lack of integration by Muslims and even suggested Muslim immigrants were less intelligent than native Germans.

Since 2010, the media has generally moved away from such stereotyping as well as the insensitive reporting seen in what the media labelled the "döner murders" in the 2000s when Neonazis killed a number of Turkish-Germans, said Daniel Bax, a journalist who writes on racism, immigration and other connected topics for German daily the *Tageszeitung*.

"After 9/11, the question was how can we trust Muslims in general. In 2010, the big negative hype came to an end with the debate about Thilo Sarrazin's book. It was successful but the debate made clear the line between criticism of religion and Islamophobia/racism. The debate about Islam in general has become more rational," said Bax.

According to those we interviewed, the change is partly due to the long history of Turkish guest-workers, who have now become rooted in Germany, and a relatively pluralistic media with opinions across the left and right spectrum, as well as somewhat more diversified newsrooms.

While the media group Axel Springer, owner of tabloid *Bild*, is a dominant force in German media, newspapers such as the left-wing *Tageszeitung (taz)*, moderate newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Zeit* and arch-conservative paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* add to a relatively healthy debate and media landscape.

"Many [newspapers] have their strengths," said Dr. Mehmet Ata, a journalist and board member of Neue Deutsche Medienmacher (New German Media-Makers), a group made up of media-makers from various cultural backgrounds which helps support diversity in front of and behind the microphone.

"The left-wing *taz* is attentive to racism topics. *Zeit* often does interesting topics on religion, also about Islam. And one can find good analysis of Middle-East topics in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. I could list many other papers. I think every media outlet can learn from others," said Ata.

Muslim and immigrant groups in Germany such as the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland) have also done much outreach work with the German media to improve the image of Islam and Muslims in Germany and to educate journalists and reframe the debate.

"Muslim groups have organised themselves better and have become more professional. The German government has also made some right moves and realised if you want to fight extremism, you shouldn't alienate Muslims," said Bax.

However, with the rise of Islamic State and the news of some young Germans travelling to join the fight to establish a Caliphate as well as protests in Germany against Israel's actions in Gaza in the summer, negative reporting and stereotypes are once again making it into print.

For instance, *Bild am Sonntag's* former deputy editor Nicolaus Fest wrote in a commentary in July, that Islam was a "barrier to integration" and that a disproportionate number of young criminals had a "Muslim background". Fest also wrote of Islam's "contempt for women and homosexuals".

While some applauded Fest's comments, the public backlash was swift and negative, leading *Bild* to distance itself from the piece. Press watchdog Deutscher Presserat (German Press Council) said the commentary "overstepped the boundaries of freedom of opinion", discriminated against Muslims and violated its press code – all of which the newspaper noted on its website.

As Bax points out this kind of Islamophobic discourse is not new, particularly in the tabloids. What was new was that *Bild* essentially apologised.

### **Positive developments but journalist and media outlets can do more**

Still, despite the positive developments in recent years with regards to improved diversity in the newsroom and diversity of sources, Ata says much more needs to be done with regard to how the press portrays Islam and Muslims and media diversity in general.

One area the German media could improve in, Ata says is using Muslim or other minority sources when reporting on topics not connected to Islam or specifically minority issues. This would "normalise" minorities, showing them as part of the community rather than portraying them as one-dimensional alien subjects.

"On one hand with regard to Islam topics, those who are being written about should also have a say. People speak all too often about Muslims instead of with Muslims. But also why not much more often

with regard to other topics? A good lawyer could also be coincidentally be a Muslim. Or a political scientist," said Ata.

When speaking to journalists, we found that some never considered the use of diverse sources and told us they use the sources they think are "best qualified" and ethnic background should not play a role in this choice. Others said they lacked the time, resources or connections to seek out such sources.

There are a number of ways this could be tackled, including establishing a database of diverse sources – which some journalists said they would use – promoting diversity in the newsroom itself and offering diversity training and intercultural outreach programmes.

Neue Deutsche Medienmacher, which is partnered with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees among others, has such an expert source database, which journalists and experts can sign up to. The "Vielfaltfinder" – or diversity finder in English – has experts with "migrant backgrounds on all possible topics".

Hiring journalists of different backgrounds would also help but newsroom diversity is still lacking, says Ata. Still, the situation seems to be improving with many media outlets, such as the Axel Springer Academy, specifically looking to hire minorities and migrants.

"Of course, more media diversity is a good thing. Because you have employees who have different perspectives on issues. More diversity can and must mean many things: religion, gender, sexual orientation and those with and without disabilities," said Ata.

Andreas Hieronymus, a Hamburg-based diversity consultant and ethnographic researcher agreed that representation in front of the camera is useful but its more important to have diversity in the "backroom".

"Who writes the stories? who decides on the stories? It has to change [...] If somebody who has no contact with Muslims, the story would be different from a journalist that has grown up in a Muslim community," he said.

Another topic we discussed with journalists and others was the use of certain words and phrases that may have negative connotations when reporting on Muslims, migrants and minorities. Some felt a glossary with words journalists should stay away from and showing better alternatives to those words and phrases would be useful.

For instance, the phrase "Mensch mit Migrationshintergrund" or person with a migrant background came into circulation to avoid the use of "Ausländer" or foreigner, which had become negative. But the new phrase has also recently become stigmatised because it is generally not applied to Western Europeans who have migrated to Germany but instead to Turkish, for instance.

Neue Deutsche Medienmacher offers alternatives to the phrase in its glossary and explains their meanings. It also asks journalists to think consider whether it is appropriate to refer to religious or ethnic backgrounds in certain stories and says "Muslim" is often a term that is used reflexively without any real reflection of what it means – rarely would a journalist describe someone was Catholic or Protestant in a story unless it was directly called for.

Ata says the ultimate goal when reporting about Muslims, migrants and other minorities is to treat them as a part of German society and culture and not an alien, outside element.

"In the past few months, I have led seminars with Muslim youths. They had to analyse newspaper articles on the topic of Islam," said Ata who added he found the results surprising.

"The young people often did not want the migrant background or Islam to be raised. In fact, it is often also superfluous. I think it's important, that one sees Islam as a part of Germany, when one writes about it," said Ata.

### **Differences between Greece and Germany**

These practises could also be employed in Greece to an extent, although the wildly different media landscape there has to be taken into account.

While Germany has strong institutions, a relatively pluralistic media with a number of players and a strong, rooted Muslim community that has evolved over time, Greece's institutions are relatively weak

and concentration of media ownership is an issue as business and government appear to have a strong influence on the media.

There are many similarities in how Greek and German media approach the topic of Islam, but the main difference is that in Greece the focus of media rhetoric is against the "new immigrant enemy" who has just arrived from Asia and Africa, while in Germany Islamophobic reporting has been reframed in terms of the Muslim-turned-jihadist in the wake of the spread of IS.

### **Greece's media landscape**

To understand how immigration-related issues are covered by Greek media, we first need to analyse how the media system operates.

Since the beginning of the economic crisis six years ago, journalists in Greece have come under increasing pressure from the country's two ruling groups: government officials and the business tycoons that own media conglomerates or outlets. Without domestic laws to protect press freedom and free speech, journalists are left vulnerable and open to intimidation. As a result of the worsening conditions, the country has fallen steeply on the press-freedom index compiled by watchdog group Reporters Without Borders, from spot 31 in 2008 to 99<sup>th</sup> on the list this year.

The corruption that has long plagued Greece's political life also has strong roots in the media business. A genuinely free press is difficult when the business elite controls much of the coverage, analysts say.

"Practically all of the country's major television and radio stations, newspapers, and magazines, as well as major web portals, belong to a handful of extremely wealthy and well-connected media and business moguls," says Michalis Nevradakis, a Ph.D. student at the University of Texas, Austin, and Greek media analyst. "[They] use their media outlets to exert pressure on the government of the day and to present an almost completely one-sided [version of] their own political point of view."

"The same owners who control the major media outlets also own and operate most of the country's major banks and financial institutions, major gas and oil companies and major shipping interests, as well as large construction firms, which receive major contracts from the state for public works projects," Nevradakis added.

According to journalists, analysts, and immigrants we spoke to, immigration-related issues are covered by the mainstream media according to how politicians want to exploit the issue. The most sensational stories come out once an election is nearing, in order to divert the public discourse away from scandals that might damage those in power.

"You often see depictions in the news either directly or indirectly about how the rise in crime for instance, can be attributed to these immigrants," says Nevradakis.

### **How journalists operate**

One of the problems with Greek journalism is the lack of strict codes of ethics, including how to deal with hate or racist speech.

"Most of the people who work in the media industry in Greece, they don't have a code of ethics to follow, its not like the United States or other countries where each newspaper has its own code of ethics," said Ioannis Papadopoulos, a journalist working for *Kathimerini* newspaper in Athens.

Christos Alefantis, publisher of the street-paper, *Sxedia* – similar to the UK's *The Big Issue* – said Greece need laws in this regard.

"We all can exhibit racist behaviour but in Greece there is no a state with laws that is trying to get rid off the phenomenon nor is it a society that is working in a multi-culture," said Alefantis.

Journalists said the atmosphere in Greek newsrooms is leading to self-censorship when it comes to covering issues touching on Islam or immigrants.

"When you have ideas to suggest in the newsroom, sometimes you might censor yourself because you know there are times when the newspapers don't run these stories," said Papadopoulos. "You know they don't want so many stories about immigrants, so you need to come up with new ideas, new angles."

### **The “L” word**

Use of certain words with negative connotations when describing immigrants or Muslims in reporting is also an issue in Greece and the sensitivity to the power of words is increasing.

For instance, it's been a year since the biggest newspapers *Ta Nea* and *Kathimerini* started to favour the term "irregular immigrant" instead of illegal or *lathrometanastis*, which has a negative connotation and means clandestine.

However, not all journalists are sensitive to the issue and, again, there seems to be a lack of guidance or guidelines in Greece similar to ones produced by Neue Deutsche Medienmacher in Germany.

"Four years ago, when the term irregular immigrant wasn't known, I didn't want to call them *lathrometanastes*. I would call them illegal or most of the time I would paraphrase and say illegally-entered immigrants. But, nobody [in Greece] actually cares how these people are called that's the problem," said Papadopoulos.

### **Diverse newsroom**

There are few if any Muslim journalists working for the Greek mainstream media, as the Muslim community in Greece has been marginalised by the state.

"We cannot have diversity now in newsroom because there are not so many qualified people from other countries living here that could do this job. When I graduated from the University of Aristotle in Thessaloniki, in 2006 I don't remember having people from other countries in my class," said Papadopoulos.

Speaking to journalists and analysts, it became clear that Muslims and immigrants are not treated as equal members in the debate and have little say in how they are represented – with the right-wing press covering Muslims as a threat and the left-leaning media covering them as victims.

In 2011, a big hunger strike was organised by immigrants and refugees from different countries for more than 40 days. The demand was that the Greek state should offer all immigrants and refugees that were in Greece a legal status.



"Some left-leaning media reported that the hunger strike was done by 300 people," said Papadopoulos. "They were less than 300, 290 and something, and the left media named them 'the 300', like the 300 hundred soldiers of Sparta. But this actually backfired and the Greek society reacted in the opposite way and basically saw this people as a threat, instead of heroes or just regular people."

The tenor of the debate about Islam is similar to the arguments in Germany a few years ago – arguments that are still trotted out there in editorials like the one that appeared in *Bild* in the summer. Essentially, the argument is cultural: Islam runs counter to Western ideas and cannot be part of Greek society. For instance, this angle is seen in stories and debates in a long-standing controversy over building a new mosque in Athens, where sometimes Greek journalists go as far as to dispute Muslims' religious rights.

This could be due to the lack of diversity in newsrooms and because of the lack of connections between the communities – instead of Muslims being asked to join the debate in a sincere fashion, they are written about without having a proper voice in the story.

But even when journalists do reach out to the Muslim community, representatives told us they focus on negative stories and even made things up – highlighting the need for an enforceable journalistic code of conduct and diversity and cultural sensitivity training.

"A journalist comes to interview me about the Islamic State, but he comes with a fixed idea, influenced by his editor, that he has to get out a specific angle of the story," said Naim Elghandour, chairman of the Muslim Association of Greece.

"I tell him then, you can freely ask me whatever question you want, but I will answer to you the way things are. The journalist then calls his boss in front of me and tells him that they can't do the story with me because I won't say what they want. Now, with all the reports in Greek media with interviews with people claiming to be jihadists, that's a new low. They go to poor fellows who don't speak Greek, they buy them a coffee, give them a few euros, and the men tell them whatever they want to hear."

The other problem is that Muslims aren't used as sources for non-Muslim related stories and many journalists are not open to the idea of a diversity data base similar to the Vielfaltfinder.

“If I'm gonna write a story and I would to speak to an expert, I would choose the best expert based on that he or she is the best person in that field not going to go to on a database to choose a woman just because it is a woman,” said Papadopoulos.

Greece desperately needs a different media framework that would allow journalists to operate free from political and business influence and that would allow for a more pluralistic media landscape. This could be in the form of non-profit, non-commercial community media outlets or by looking at alternative financing options or by breaking up media monopolies.

In the meantime, it will be difficult to apply media diversity training, diversify newsrooms or institute a code of ethics in Greek newsrooms.

## **Conclusion**

To improve diversity inclusiveness, German and Greek media outlets and journalists need to focus on improving newsroom diversity by hiring staff of different backgrounds and carrying out intercultural training and engaging in community outreach.

Journalists should utilise tools such as Neue Deutsche Medienmacher's diversity database to improve use of diverse sources when reporting as well as using guidelines for reporting on minority and religious issues.

Where those tools don't exist or other barriers to improving diversity inclusiveness get in the way, such as in Greece, the situation is more complicated, although, such recommendations can be applied in the long-term.