



# Journalism in the Face of Intolerance and Racism

**F**or centuries people have crossed continents for a better life, creating an increasingly diverse worldwide mix of people, races and faiths which in turn has triggered new political, economic and cultural dynamism across the globe. However, the darker side of these societal upheavals is not difficult to see.

There is friction and strain in the shifting social fabric as communities from different cultures, faiths and traditions adjust to living together. Traditional communities within countries feel a loss of self-confidence, and immigrant communities also feel that their ways of life can be under threat. Immigration is not new; waves of population movements have followed wars and pogroms throughout history. The United States was built on immigrant communities and many European countries have well-established, long standing and successful minority ethnic communities whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents originally came from former colonies. Usually, those who start a life in a new country are people of energy and industry, often fuelled by a desire to do better for themselves and their families.

Today, as often in history, economic pressures drive millions across borders in search of decent work and prosperity, while migration is also fuelled by wars and conflict at home. Many risk their lives and undertake hazardous journeys to bring themselves to safety.

In the coming years more people will be on the move. In the next decade almost 1.2 billion will come into the global jobs market, but according to the World Eco-

nomics Forum there will only be 300 million jobs for them.<sup>38</sup>

Many good things come out of human migration. However, in Europe and in some Asian and Middle Eastern states, intolerance is on the rise, with racism and xenophobia re-emerging and anti-foreigner political parties gaining in popularity. This process has generated a new mood of intolerance in many countries.

In Europe, there is a weakening confidence of the old approach of multiculturalism and growing intolerance. Attacks on non-white minority groups are depressingly routine in many countries, leading in turn to the growth of extremism among minority communities. In some areas communities live alongside each other but have limited mutual understanding and respect. Extremists and fanatics encourage sectarianism and discord in many countries. Ethnic and religious discord is also rampant in developing nations caught between the conflicting values of modernity and conservatism. In some Asian and Middle Eastern states, the conflict over who speaks in the name of Islam — the moderates or the radicals — is a daily occurrence, often fought on the streets.

In Denmark, as in much of Europe, fears of terrorism are often linked to con-

<sup>38</sup> World Economic Forum, Dubai, November 2008.

cerns about immigration, particularly the influx of Muslims. About 15 million Muslims make up about 3.3% of the 456 million people living in the 25 countries of the European Union. Roughly 200,000 (3.7%) of Denmark's 5.4 million people are Muslim. A right-leaning government was elected in November 2001, on the back of public concerns over rising immigration. Nearly overnight, the government reversed Denmark's generous immigration policies, tightening requirements for asylum-seekers and for foreign residents trying to bring in spouses.

In other countries of Europe similar political shifts have had their effect — in Italy, Roma have been the target of repressive government policy from the government of Silvio Berlusconi; in the Netherlands, the killing of Theo Van Gogh sparked anti-Muslim sentiment; in Belgium (where the whole country has an identity crisis), a new right wing government exploits anti-immigrant

anxieties; in Austria hard right anti-foreigner parties swept into power in September 2008.

Journalists need to navigate with care around racism and extremism to avoid stirring up intolerance, and to report fairly the mosaic of languages, religion, cultures and different historical perspectives that shape modern society. It is an issue at the heart of the Ethical Journalism Initiative.

Many newspapers, broadcasters and other media outlets have failed to rise to the challenge of portraying the global social revolution. Instead of raising awareness and challenging ignorance, they stoke the fires of intolerance and racism.

However, some previously indifferent governments are paying attention to promoting minority rights, fighting discrimination and combating prejudice. And most significantly, once-shy minority groups are increasingly assertive as they emerge from years of self-imposed silence and exclusion to take their rightful place in society.



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## ITALY: Journalists Find a Code to Combat Racism

Like many European states Italy has a rising numbers of migrants, many of them from poorer countries. According to official figures, the number of resident immigrants in Italy more than doubled in a decade to 2.7 million in 2004.<sup>39</sup>

This accounts for around 5% of the population but while the change has been rapid, the numbers are lower than in many other European countries and with falling birth rates and an ageing community, Italy can hardly survive without foreign labour.

Nevertheless this influx of new people, many of them Africans and Muslims, as well as Roma from Eastern Europe, has sparked an outcry in Italy fuelled by right-wing politicians, who link their arrival to terrorism and crime. Many Italian migrants complain they suffer discrimination. They struggle to find jobs, obtain loans, or to climb the social and political ladder.

There is particular concern over discrimination faced by the estimated 150,000 Roma, also known as “gypsies” and “nomads”, many of whom live in squalid shanty towns on the fringes of Italian cities. Police arrested hundreds of suspected “illegal immigrants” in raids on Roma camps across the country, prompting criticism from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The new government, led by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, and composed of restyled former Fascists and traditional conservatives began to flex its anti-immigrant muscle with decrees on crime and immigration and a controversial proposal to fingerprint Roma and their children. Critics include the European Parliament and religious leaders, who draw a parallel with the tagging of Jews by Nazis in the 1930s.

With feelings running high and politicians ready to stir up public discontent, Italian journalists led by the National Journalists Association and the National Federation of Italian Journalists (FNSI), issued an industry Code of Conduct — the Charter of Rome — to strengthen reporting of refugee and immigration issues.

This unprecedented exercise in professional co-operation, which included press owners, academics and policy experts, came after the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) gave the country's media a public dressing-down over sensational and racist coverage of a multiple murder in Northern Lombardy in December 2006.

Three members of a migrant family and a friend were found dead from stab wounds and some sections of the media pinned the blame on an absent husband with a criminal record. They were mistaken, but poisonous media coverage followed and in an open letter to editors-in-chief of major media, the UNHCR said: “*Strong and unexpected evidence of xenophobic sentiments emerged, as*

*did a media system ready to act as the sounding board for the worst manifestations of hate.*”

The protest opened up a long-overdue dialogue on alarmist media coverage of refugee and migration issues which has been blamed for stirring up hostility and intolerance.

The FNSI, says the Charter of Rome, which provides guidelines for media on how to be more responsible will help calm the atmosphere in a country where political extremists are only too willing to exploit community divisions.<sup>40</sup> The Charter was presented to the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, in a public ceremony where he welcomed the initiative.

“Journalists are not promoting fearful politics — the blame for that rests with unscrupulous political parties who are cynically exploiting people's anxiety and “fear of the other” for electoral purposes,” says Roberto Natale, the FNSI President. “Journalists have a duty to avoid fanning the flames of racial hatred. We do not ask them to be ‘militant’ but simply to do their job and respect the truth as they see it and always within the law that guides our profession.”

In particular, the code says Italian journalists must:

- ▶ Use appropriate language, stick to the facts and avoid terms that inflame the situation;
- ▶ Avoid spreading inaccurate, simplified or distorted information;
- ▶ Protect asylum seekers, refugees, or victims of trafficking and migrants who choose to speak with media by protecting their identity when appropriate;

Italian journalists also agreed to insert issues relating to asylum seekers and migrants into training courses for journalists and to arrange a series of national and regional debates on how media do their job.

It was also agreed, in collaboration with the UNHCR, to create an independent observatory which will monitor coverage to ensure media are doing their job properly when dealing with discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance.

Finally, the journalists also committed themselves to establish awards specifically dedicated to media coverage of asylum seekers and migrants.

It is doubtful that these actions alone will stem the flow of prejudice and ill will that some political groups and extremists bring to the table whenever migrants and foreigners are under discussion, but they may find media less inclined to give them uncritical publicity they may have enjoyed in some quarters in the past.

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, recognising the legitimate rights of women and minority groups.

In line with these developments, more media are challenging prejudice. Broadcasters, particularly those with a public service mandate, are focusing on minority issues in their programmes.<sup>41</sup>

In the Netherlands, for example, the public broadcaster NPS made headlines with its challenging programme *Bimbos and Burqas* broadcast in 2007 in an entertainment format which focused attention on the national debate over individual freedom and religious values. In a country which for decades had fostered tolerance and political correctness, the killing of film-maker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim youth in 2004 had created a new mood in which controversial opinions were expressed without restraint — accompanied, too, by attacks on gays and Muslim community leaders. The programme provided a platform for intense debate about free expression and cultural values and involved religious and community leaders, politicians of every colour and members of the public. More than a million people watched. People raged or praised according to their taste, but it succeeded in finding new ways to put serious dilemmas and debate before a mass audience.

However, there is some alarming and near-hysterical coverage of minorities. Media in every country are often guilty of providing a simplistic, one-sided view of “the other”.

Sensationalist reporting may help to sell newspapers but it has also contributed to an increasingly fearful climate between communities. The changing media landscape, which has led to declining investment in editorial quality and a decline in social and employment conditions in many areas, has lowered morale in journalism and undermined attachment to traditional ethical values.

When the news agenda becomes dominated by inaccurate, inflammatory and biased articles — giving prominence to those who engage in hate speech and popu-

list, anti-foreigner rhetoric — racism is exacerbated and intolerance is bolstered.

In Europe, the Middle East and Asia regional conflicts based upon communities divided by language, religion or ethnicity provide the backdrop for a news agenda dominated by images of violence and apparently senseless confrontation. The need for journalism to provide balanced, inclusive and informed coverage has never been tougher or more important.

A number of journalists' unions and media, including public broadcasters, have established specialist working groups and guidelines committed to combating racism that go beyond the good intentions of ethical declarations. At the same time national Press Councils have adopted codes which challenge intolerance and have taken up complaints from members of the public over racism in media, with varying results. Some have seemed to interpret their codes in the narrowest possible terms and have refused to find against newspapers even where there appears to be a strong *prima facie* case. (See panel — UK: A Collective Voice Against Prejudice)

During the 1990s the National Union of Journalists in Great Britain and Ireland and its Black Members Council together with the Netherlands Association of Journalists and the working group Migranten & Media formulated some general recommendations for journalists. Other journalists' organisations in Germany (the Deutscher Journalisten Verband) and Belgium (the AGJPB/AVBB) and the Union of Journalists in Finland joined the IFJ in an industry-wide initiative — the International Media Working Group Against Racism and Xenophobia.

These groups drafted guidelines for everyday reporting and suggestions for reporters on how to deal with assignments that involve racist or extreme right wing groups that promote racism and intolerance.

## Diversity Checklist

- ▶ What are my own personal assumptions about the people I am reporting on?
- ▶ Am I open to accepting ideas for stories that go beyond my own cultural standpoint?

<sup>39</sup> European Migration Network, Italian Contact Point. <http://www.emnitaly.it>

<sup>40</sup> The Code is a Protocol to the Journalist's Charter of Duties (Carta dei Doveri del Giornalista) and was drafted by a national Consultative Committee whose members included representatives of the Italian Interior Ministry, the National Office Against Racial Discrimination, the Department for Equal Opportunities, universities of La Sapienza and Roma III, as well as Italian and foreign journalists.

<sup>41</sup> The European Broadcasting Union, for instance, has developed a special programme of work (see [http://www.ebu.ch/en/union/under\\_banners/CulturalDiversity.php](http://www.ebu.ch/en/union/under_banners/CulturalDiversity.php)), which includes some co-productions in the field — where minorities are put on screen.

- ▶ Have I any prejudicial attitude to the issue at the heart of story I am covering?
- ▶ If I mention colour, ethnicity or physical appearance is it strictly relevant?
- ▶ Am I using the correct terms to describe people or their culture?
- ▶ Have I talked with experienced colleagues or people from different backgrounds about the story?
- ▶ Have I used a variety of opinions and sources including from minority groups?
- ▶ Is there a dominant discourse? Have I questioned this approach?
- ▶ Have I ensured that my work does not reflect stereotypes?
- ▶ Am I sensitive to the needs of the people involved directly in the work?
- ▶ Have I considered the impact of the story or the images on the lives of others?

These activities led to the world's first international conference on racism and journalism. *Prime Time for Tolerance: Journalism and the Challenge of Racism* in Bilbao in 1997 was attended by journalists from more than 60 countries. A ground-breaking declaration between the European Federation of Journal-

## UNITED KINGDOM: A Collective Voice Against Prejudice

In the United Kingdom tabloid journalism has a reputation for stretching the truth to the limits of tolerance and beyond. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and its members are increasingly concerned over how owners attempt to build circulation on the back of sensationalism and prejudice.

NUJ members at the Express group of national newspapers have mounted a long campaign of resistance to pressure from their proprietor to produce brutally racist headlines about immigrants and immigration. The journalists have not been helped in their campaign to uphold standards by the fact that the 'self-regulatory' body in the UK, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) is dominated by industry employers and consistently rejects complaints that may threaten their autonomy.

The Express group, which owns two daily and two Sunday papers — one "middle-market" and one down-market of each — is owned by tycoon, Richard Desmond, who made his millions in pornography before he bought the papers in 1998.

Desmond believes that racism, particularly the xenophobic strain, sells newspapers — (even though the sales of all his papers are in sharp decline). In August 2001, he pressured executives into leading the front page with racist headlines on stories about immigration for six days in a row. The NUJ chapel on his papers declared that "the media should not distort or whip up confrontational racist hatred, in pursuit of increased circulation," and asked the NUJ to complain to the PCC. The complaint that the asylum stories breached the PCC's own code of practice would seem to be self-evidently true, but was rejected by the PCC on the innovative grounds that "no individuals" had been named.

The PCC Code says: "The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, gender,

sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability."

As interpreted by the PCC, this allows media to escape censure if they whip up hatred against entire ethnic groups, so long as they do not mention any particular individual, a licence that would have been welcomed by media promoting ethnic hatred from the former Yugoslavia to Rwanda. It contrasts poorly with the IFJ Code of Principles and the NUJ Code of Conduct which states: "A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination, ridicule, prejudice or hatred."

Three years later Express journalists threatened to resign after a week long campaign demonising enlargement of the European Union, under which citizens of the accession states were to be allowed to Britain to work. Front page headlines included 'As 1.6 Million Gypsies Ready to Flood In' and 'We Can't Cope with Huge Gypsy Invasion'. Journalists were receiving calls from racists saying, "Well done, keep it up".

The leader of the Express chapel, Michelle Stanistreet, says: "It was very upsetting. There was a great deal of anguish." A crowded and angry meeting of Express journalists decided to write to the PCC, this time to raise the need to protect journalists unwilling to work against the NUJ Code of Conduct — effectively calling for a "conscience clause" to allow them to refuse to do such work without jeopardising their jobs. Their argument was that they had no problem with paper campaigning over European Union enlargement, but that the editorial line and the shape of the stories — biased, inaccurate and pandering to racism — crossed an ethical line.

The PCC, true to its mission of never threatening the interests of newspaper magnates, again rejected the complaint, saying that this was "a matter between the employer and the employee," and not a matter for them.

ists, the European Newspaper Publishers Association and the European Broadcasting Union committed the groups to a fresh dialogue to combat racism and intolerance.

The groups agreed to engage in a dialogue with civil society as a whole in order to reinforce efforts to confront racism. They also agreed to work on improving admission criteria for training courses in the media sector; to incorporate into training programmes modules on how to report on intolerance; to establish models for improving professional awareness and standards; and to carry out a full review of policy and methods of recruiting staff to improve levels of participation in the media workforce from minority communities.

Ten years on, the problems remain current and require further effort. The Ethical Journalism Initiative will promote a new round of activities designed to:

- ▶ **establish a network** of journalists' groups working to combat racism in media
- ▶ produce an **updated manual for journalists** covering issues related to migration, relations between different communities, policing, security, asylum policy, intolerance and racism
- ▶ **develop structures for dialogue** to improve industry policies related to recruitment of media personnel, with the aim of elimi-

In July 2005 the Express combined two of its most corrosive prejudices with a splash headline 'Bombers were all sponging asylum seekers'. The story, that four Muslim suicide bombers who had blown themselves up on public transport in London three weeks earlier, killing more than 50 people, were asylum seekers, was untrue. Their identities were not known at the time, and in fact all four turned out to be indigenous UK citizens. Again there was a complaint to the PCC against the headline, which was turned down on the grounds that it was consistent with the story beneath it.

In October 2006, Express journalists had the first clear success when they forced the scrapping of a page in the Daily Star. The page, headlined "The Daily Fatwa", was a supposed to be a spoof of what papers would look like if British Muslims controlled the press. Their pastiche of the downmarket Star included a "Burka babe" veiled from head to foot and a promise of "a free beard for every bomber". As the page was about to go to press NUJ members called an urgent meeting and asked editors to pull it, which they did. Combative owner Richard Desmond was out of the office, and editors gave the impression they were quite relieved by the union action — there was no strike threat. The action was greeted as a triumph by those concerned at the spread of Islamophobia in the British press.

The NUJ's "conscience clause" proposal echoed concerns the union had been raising for 70 years. In 2005 it formally adopted the text for such a clause to its Code of Conduct. It read: "A journalist has the right to refuse assignments or be identified as the author of editorial which would break the letter and spirit of the code. No journalist can be disciplined or suffer detriment to their career for asserting his/her rights to act according to the code."

The NUJ insists that ethical issues are a legitimate topic to take up with management, particularly at a time when editorial cuts and job losses have had a devastating impact on the quality of journalism. Undue pressure on journalists to behave unethically and the creation of precarious employment conditions are two sides of the same coin.

In the past managers' response has been that if journalists don't like the way they are treated they can always quit, and a number have done so, notably from Rupert Murdoch's national newspapers, over the way their copy was handled on stories about the IRA, Israel and the Iraq war. But the notion of "principled resignation" by individuals as a form of resistance to commercial pressure is hardly an option, given the power relations in modern media.

The NUJ has been in the vanguard to defend for example the quality and reputation of Britain's global media leader — the BBC. When the government and judiciary targeted the BBC over its coverage of the Iraq war in 2003 and 2004 a spontaneous protest involving thousands of staff and backed by the union challenged the removal of the Director-General and deplored the "grovelling apologies" made to government by the BBC governors. In 1985, all NUJ members in the broadcasting sector — commercial as well as public — staged a one-day strike in protest at censorship of a BBC TV documentary on Northern Ireland. The Times of London reported that the 24-hour walkout "represented the most serious industrial action ever undertaken in British television, and attracted more support than has ever been won by a pay claim."

The union's actions have never threatened, as proprietors have tried to argue, the notion of press freedom. The NUJ rarely use union muscle to try to control what goes into media, but sees its core responsibility to improve journalistic standards by other means.

The NUJ created an Ethics Council in 1986 to promote higher standards through a process of education and to hear complaints against members who were alleged to have breached the union's code. The council's work has focused increasingly on raising awareness, and trying to create a more ethical climate within newsrooms, rather than acting as "policing" body. An NUJ spokesperson described the Code of Conduct as "a beacon for journalists to aim for rather than a means to punish."

nating discrimination where it exists; to update training and further materials in dealing with these questions; and to promote newsroom debate and discussion on ways of improving the quality of media reporting by, for example, challenging stereotypes, improving the range of sources used by media and developing benchmarks for editorial standards

- ▶ seek to ensure that journalists are entitled to act according to their conscience and to refuse to work on racism material without putting their employment at risk
- ▶ establish a **dialogue** between policy-makers, relevant civil society groups and media on actions to raise awareness of the role of media in dealing with these issues
- ▶ develop a **programme of education and training**
- ▶ organise **discussion and debate** between journalists from different regions — for instance Europe and North Africa — on positive actions to challenge misconceptions and discrimination in media reporting while promoting awareness and better understanding of ethnic, religious and other cultural differences.

## Journalism and Combating Intolerance: Those Cartoons

In an era of insecurity and anxiety over community relations, issues of religious intolerance, terrorism and ethnic conflict feature strongly on the news agenda. Rarely has this happened with such an intense focus on the work of journalists as in early 2006, following the publication of a handful of cartoons in a Danish local newspaper *Jyllands Posten*. The drama which followed took everyone by surprise. Within months the issue was the talk of the world's media and sparked street protests, mob violence and the deaths of at least 139 people, mostly due to police firing on crowds in Nigeria, Libya, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, media standards came under scrutiny as some angry Muslims protested at the perceived casual disregard of cultural sensitivities over the publication by the newspapers



DRAWING FIRE: London protests over the cartoons.

— soon followed by others as the controversy exploded — of cartoon images of the Prophet, which, through custom rather than doctrine, is never done in Muslim societies. Although Islamic art is highly regarded, mosques never display images of people.

This row was, of course, mainly focused on religious sensibilities, but many of those protesting saw the cartoons in the context of what they perceived as a wider attack on their countries, customs, religion and cultures.

It sparked much debate about the interpretation of what constitutes freedom of expression. Media were accused of displaying ignorance about other cultures, even when they form substantial minority communities within the local population. Some inside media argued the right to publish cartoons of this kind was a fundamental test of free expression rights.

The controversy served as something of a wake up call for media, initiating a round of debate and analysis about how journalists



**The row has challenged media professional groups to establish a dialogue on how best to balance cultural and religious sensitivity and the right to free expression.**

do their job and what they need to do, if anything, to improve their performance.

The reaction of many journalists was, at first, defensive. Media are used to criticism and wary of where it comes from. In many western countries media instinctively recoil when vested interests — political or cultural communities among them — try to interfere with editorial decision-making. In other countries where media are subject to routine monitoring and official sanction they know that when media are taken out of the hands of professionals they can become destructive weapons.

In the 1990s, conflict in the Balkans and genocide in Rwanda provided brutal reminders that human rights law, journalistic codes and international goodwill count for little when unscrupulous politicians, exploiting public ignorance and insecurity, use compliant media to encourage violence and hatred.

In the 2000s, a new war in the Middle East and the mobilisation of public opinion to

counter the “war on terrorism” contributed towards a more fearful relationship between people coming from Christian or Muslim traditions. It is indisputable that the reaction to the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2000 reignited tensions between communities, particularly in Europe where there was a resurgence of urban conflict, dramatically exposed by violence in the great cities of France, the UK, the Netherlands and elsewhere, all stirred centuries-old resentments about foreigners.

The problem of intolerance is a constant threat to good journalism everywhere. Urban violence in North America and Europe, the rise in influence of extremist right-wing political parties, the re-emergence of anti-Semitism, widespread religious intolerance in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and prejudice and discrimination against national minorities on the basis of language and social status, are all part of the global landscape of daily news reporting.

In this complex news environment, jour-



nalists can become casual victims of prejudice and political manipulation. Too often, ignorance and a lack of appreciation of different cultures, traditions and beliefs lead to media stereotypes that reinforce racist attitudes and strengthen the appeal of political extremists. Certainly that's how many people in the Muslim world saw the row over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

They point to media stereotypes of the Arab world that seem to be greater and more dangerous than they have been for decades. They say that media fail 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.

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

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

The cartoons controversy provides something of a case study on the positive and negative role media can play in turbulent times. What began as a legitimate journalistic exercise (*Jyllands Posten* were following up a story in another Danish newspaper *Politiken* about the difficulty encountered by a writer who was unable to find an illustrator for a book on the Prophet Mohammed) got out of control when it became politicised. Some journalists and media joined the fray and became engaged in editorial activity which provided nourishment for some deeply unpleasant politics.

The argument of editorial legitimacy and relevance for publishing the cartoons, not for reporting the argument, became more difficult the further the story travelled from its point of origin. It became for many a test case for basic democratic values and free expression.

No story in recent history has been more discussed in so many newsrooms. In almost every daily newspaper, television and



online news business, not just in Europe, but around the world, the discussion raged — whether or not to publish these cartoons. Arguments flowed back and forth about how to cover the story — with or without the cartoons? If they are published what will be the impact? How will the community react? Whose political interests are at work? What risks are there — for staff, for the business?

When the dust had settled and the final totals were examined there's no doubt about the majority verdict. In the end, hardly one per cent of publications in Europe and many fewer across the world decided to publish. On television the numbers were even less. Today the cartoons are available for all to see on the net, but the story has moved on.

Was it right to publish the cartoons? Yes, and No. Yes, if the news judgement was that it was appropriate to the story. For instance, when journalists in Denmark were threatened for doing their work and when their fears that free expression was under attack (as was felt by many media in Denmark and some other parts of Europe at the time) many journalists felt it was right to stand up against bullying and intimidation.

On the other hand the vast majority of journalists elsewhere in Europe and around the world at the time considered the issue in different circumstances — would this create more problems? What would be the impact on community relations? Would it encourage dialogue and debate? — and most decided against publication. Many media were particularly aware of the possibility of a violent backlash in their communities.

Regrettably, some who decided to publish, particularly in many parts of the Muslim world suffered most, some being sent to jail, illustrating in the most painful manner the distance yet to be travelled by some countries along the road to democracy and free expression.

This controversy raised a number of serious questions about how media work. How do news media defend themselves from outside pressure? What can journalists do to improve ethical standards, particularly when they are in the crossfire of social conflict? What standards do media professionals need to set to bring balance and equality into the way media work that will, in the process, improve the quality of reporting?

Above all, the row has challenged media professional groups — in both Europe and the Arab world — to establish a dialogue on how best to balance cultural and religious sensitivity and the right to free expression.

To kick-start this process the International Federation of Journalists brought together some leading professional groups, journalists and others, including the European Commission, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, in February 2006 to talk through some of the arguments. The discussions centred on some valid questions:

- ▶ Is religious sensitivity a justification for limiting free expression?
- ▶ Do we need laws to forbid publication of material offensive to religious society?
- ▶ What are the limits of tolerance to be expected in democratic society?
- ▶ How do media make themselves accountable and engage in dialogue with their communities?
- ▶ Is it right for journalism ever to be seen to be giving in to threats of violence?

We emerged, predictably, with no magical or simple set of solutions, but at least with agreement on a rejection of violence, the need for more effective and profound structures for dialogue, a restatement of democratic values, and for journalists to be allowed to work freely without interference. A joint declaration was signed by all professional groups present except newspaper publishers.

Another professional meeting was held at the end of March 2006 in Oslo bringing together journalists and experts from the Arab world, Norway and Denmark.

The conclusions were much the same — that media need to make themselves more aware of the issues, that they need to display more professionalism, and they need to remember that pluralism is about ensuring minority views, framed in an informed context, are heard alongside the consensus voice of the settled majority.

These initial discussions also reveal that freedom of expression is not some inflexible, one-size-fits-all concept. It differs from country to country. We all grow up with taboos, which vary from culture to culture, but when they are applied with widespread and common consent, they do not compromise principles set out in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that everyone has the right to receive and impart information.

But there is much inconsistency in how we apply this principle. In Europe many countries still have punitive laws on blasphemy and there are places where you can be prosecuted for wearing Nazi insignia. As the historian David Irving discovered in Vienna in 2007, there are also countries where you can go to prison for denying the Holocaust. While freedom of expression fundamentalists have no problem in confronting all taboos, without fear, mainstream media in the West do take account of national customs, traditions and cultural thinking in making their news judgements. No wonder some Muslims are confused when their complaints over the cartoons are dismissed as an attack on European ideals of freedom of expression.

## ETHIOPIA

In early 1989 during the transfer of Falashas from Ethiopia to Israel, some European media knew about the operation but they kept their silence until the Falashas had reached a safe haven. They decided that in order to protect the Ethiopian Jews from the military regime they had to delay publication.

At the same time in the Arab world, where organised and violent demonstrators laid siege to western embassies amidst calls for trade boycotts and reprisals against Danish and European media, there were no blushes, apparently, over the fact that Arab newspapers have for years carried vicious caricatures portraying Jews and Israelis in a manner that any civilised person would find shocking and unacceptable. Many journalists asked how this grotesque contradiction sits with complaints about cultural sensitivity.

The reality is that prejudices are easily formed and hard to dislodge, particularly when — as in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict — they are formed over decades and centre around a sense of profound injustice that exists on both sides of the divide.

The meetings in Brussels and Oslo gave birth to an important international debate organised through the Global Inter-media Dialogue, sponsored by the Governments of Norway and Indonesia, which held three major events concluding in June 2008 with a final conference in Bali and, like many other discussions triggered by the cartoons crisis, provoked restrained, professional and balanced exchanges between media people from vastly different traditions and cultural backgrounds.

There is agreement all round, at national and international level, that discrimination within media should be eliminated and that journalism should put populist and dangerous ideas under proper scrutiny. We need standards for reporting which ensure people get the information they need, without lashings of bias and prejudice.

But how? As a modest start, the meetings in Oslo and Brussels and Bali called for new co-ordinated structures for dialogue within media to encourage actions at national level to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding between cultures that led to the cartoons controversy in the first place.

In Brussels the IFJ was asked to play a role in this work and the Ethical Journalism Initiative is one of the outcomes. If the cartoons controversy did nothing else, it at least gave birth to an injection of fresh energy into a professional debate that has been around for decades, but which has in recent times taken a dangerous turn.

The starting point of the EJI is to raise awareness within media about diversity issues

and to promote changes that will strengthen journalism by putting the focus on media quality. Ethical codes will not solve all the problems of intolerance in media, but they help journalists to take responsibility and they encourage journalists to act according to their conscience.

Regulating ethics is the collective business of journalists, not principally of the corporations which commission and carry their journalism, and especially not of governments. When it comes to what news media write or broadcast, governments have no role to play, beyond the application of general law. The debate around the cartoons issue did reinforce opinion with journalism against new codes and supranational rules imposed by governments.

The controversy was positive proof that editorial judgement, exercised freely, is what works best. Ethics, therefore, have to be actively supported, and particularly the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of religion, race or nationality, which is one of the most general features of professional codes agreed at national and international level. But like all the other skills of journalism: it takes training, time and effort to become good at applying ethical codes which direct thinking and permit conscious decision-making.

One conclusion of all this talk, reinforced again and again, is the need to campaign vigorously to recruit more people from different ethnic and cultural groups into journalism. To be effective, journalism must be inclusive, accountable and a reflection of the whole community.

At the outset of this process Norway, which is one of the world's leading democracies and renowned for its traditions of decency, had only a handful of journalists from different social, ethnic or cultural backgrounds working in media. Editors and journalists pledged to do something about this. The argument for internal diversity is not about "do-gooder" journalism, but aims to improve efficiency, professionalism and performance.

If these new initiatives gain support, they will provide some lasting benefits. In this sense the cartoons row is not all bad news. It has, at least, opened the eyes of many in western media and it should reinforce the efforts of journalists and others to support the movement for progressive change throughout the Middle East.