



Within the framework of its "Brussels talks", FEMYSO in collaboration with the Arab section of the Service of Migrant worker - Federation of Brussels CSC Launched its first round table

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE MEDIA

Brussels Talk – 21st January 2006

*Œuvres Sociales Chrétienne
19, rue Plélinckx, 1000 Brussels
Belgium*



*Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations
Rue Archimède 50, 1000 Bruxelles
Tel: +322 280 69 22
Fax: +322 280 69 23
info@femyso.org
www.femyso.org*

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Hadia Himmat
FEMYSO
Executive Committee member
Human Rights and Islamophobia

The Contributors

- **Bashy Quraishy:** President of ENAR (European Network Against Racism) – Belgium; Chief Editor of Media Watch; Member Board of Trustees of More colour in the media – Holland; Member Board of Trustees of Centro de Estudos Multiculturais – Portugal
- **Michael Privot:** Islamologist; vice president of FEMYSO (Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations)
- **Thomas Deltombe:** Journalist, diploma at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris and DEA in contemporary history ; author of *L'islam imaginaire : La construction médiatique de l'islamophobie en France, 1975-2005* (2005), Editions La Découverte.

Media's role in cementing Islamophobia (Bashy Quraishy)

Abstract - In this age of fast information, societies depend on the media for providing instant knowledge. This over dependence gives the media an unparalleled power to form public opinions and a certain mindset. It also moulds the ways, how different segments, especially ethnic minorities and the majority, in a given society interact with each other. This exercise has been very vivid, when we look at the tone and style of debates being carried out concerning the presence of Muslim communities in diverse European countries. In this context, media not only provides tainted information, resulting in the production of prejudices but also is responsible for cementing these prejudices by twisting the facts and repeating these. This has effected the process of mutual integration of a large number of non-European groups living in Europe but coming from the developing countries. High unemployment, societal marginalisation, concentration in socially deprived areas, lack of a dialogue and rise in Islamophobia are the net results of this one-sided media coverage.

In this article, we have looked at the mechanisms which are at play in media manipulation, what type of prejudices are being created, what issues, Muslim communities are facing internally and externally and what can be done to counter the Islamophobic discourse.

As a concrete case study, we have chosen, Denmark which until recently was a model society for human rights and respect for non-Christian religions. Unfortunately, Danish media has played a key role in turning this country into one of the most Islamophobic one.

Biased media coverage

The pressing issue of Islamophobia and the erosion of civil liberty due to excessive linking of terrorism and Islam have somehow not been considered important in the public debates. Through our work with the media monitoring, we know that in today's Europe, we have to look very seriously on the issue of religious discrimination and particularly the situation of various Muslim Communities.

Poor socio-economic conditions, the question of identity, lack of mutual integration in the wider society because of barriers, negative perception of Islam, dwindling inter-cultural relationships and youth alienation are some of the problems, ENAR has identified. Besides, we should also look at the political signals sent by populist parties and the way public discussions in the society are conducted. But we believe that the greatest challenge facing us is the biased media coverage.

There have been many European wide as well as national media surveys, which support our point of view.

Ambassador Ömür Orhun, permanent representative of Turkey to the OSCE in his statement to OSCE Permanent Council meeting in Vienna on 25th March 2004 said: "In the post –Madrid stage, I regretfully notice a repeated tendency to equate violence and terrorism with a religion, namely Islam, especially in the mass media. Terms such as "Islamic terrorism" is unfortunately abundant".

H.E. Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald, representing the Holy See to the OSCE Conference on tolerance and the fight against racism in Brussels on 14th September 2004 also criticised the media. He said: “We are all well aware that the roots of racism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance are found in ignorance and hatred, which may often arise from faulty education and also from the misuse of the media”.

The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) released its report on “Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims in the EU-developments since September 2001” in Vienna on 7th March 2005. Its findings are much thought provoking, both for the European societies and the Muslim Communities. The report not only documents that majority of Europeans consider Islam as the source of terrorism, women oppression and extremism but it also states that unbalanced and stereotypical media reports portraying Muslims as “alien” to EU societies and as “an enemy within”, is creating widespread negative attitudes towards Muslims. July 2005 events in London have further galvanised the issue.

The report identified concerns about "growing distrust and hostility" against Muslim minorities within the EU. "As the fight against terrorism has been stepped up and the perceived threat of religious extremism has become a major focus of public debate, Muslims have increasingly felt that they are stigmatised because of their beliefs", Aaron Rhodes, Executive Director of the IHF, said in a statement.

According to the IHF report, resentment, as well as harassment and attacks on Muslims in the EU, have increased significantly after terrorists hit the US on 11 September 2001. In some countries, the number of incidents has decreased, but in the UK for instance, it has increased significantly since the attacks.

In a 2004 survey, 80% of Muslims interviewed in the UK said that they had experienced discrimination because of their faith, while their number was 45% in 2000 and 35% in 1999. In Spain and Germany the level of hostility against Muslims has increased again after the terrorist attack in Madrid, in March 2004, the report shows. In the Netherlands, hostility rose after the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh.

"Aliens"

The report outlines problems including, amongst others, "unbalanced and stereotypical media reports portraying Muslims as 'alien' to EU societies and as 'an enemy within'", "verbal and physical attacks on Muslims and Muslim institutions and property", "discrimination against Muslims in employment and other areas", and debates related to the use of the headscarf in schools and other public places.

Various examples, same problem

And the report shows that for more than 80 percent of Germans the word "Islam" is associated to "terrorism" and "oppression of women". Furthermore, in some countries, like Sweden, up to every fifth job is closed for applicants with Arabic-sounding names, it says. French debates in 2004 on whether to adopt a law prohibiting religious attire in public schools, are said to have "encouraged" the discrimination against women wearing headscarves. Rightist parties' political rhetoric in several countries like Austria, Italy and Belgium, are said to have contributed to the stigma of Muslim minorities being a threat to national security and values.

The report is based on researches in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK. Currently around 20 million people with Islamic background are estimated to be living in the EU. The highest number of Muslims can be found in France (4-5 million), Germany (over 3 million), the United Kingdom (more than 1.5 million), Spain (about 1 million) and Italy and the Netherlands (close to 1 million). Some estimate that the number of Muslims in Europe will double by 2015, the report says.

In Denmark, **Media Watch Magazine** has monitored media coverage since 1995. Even if Muslim communities are less than 3% of the Danish population, they figure 35% in media debate and 65% of this coverage is negative.

Islamophobia is a matter at hand and it must be dealt as such, not tomorrow or day after but here and now. Dealing with Islamophobia now does not mean that we should ignore other pressing problems. There should never be a scale of discrimination, against which we can measure the amount of racism.

All type of racism is equally deplorable and we should tackle it both on long term basis as well as issue at hand. To do this, we have to look at various factors, such as; stereotypical categories, key issues facing the Muslim communities – externally and internally and what can be done about this situation.

The most common stereotypical categories of Muslims:

1. Religions fanatic and militant
2. Hard-headed and ill-tempered, uneducated and unsophisticated
3. Have many kids to get social benefits
4. Wear headscarves and keep long beards
5. Practice patriarchal family system, oppress women and children
6. Culturally traditionalists
7. Want to live in ghettos and do not want integration
8. Support Jihad and are involved in terrorism
9. Hate all non-Muslims and regard their women as prostitutes
10. Reject modernity and hate progress
11. Want to establish a Muslim Khalafat instead of democracy

Key concerns facing the Muslim communities - internally

There is an on going debate among different groupings and nationalities belonging to the Muslim communities in Europe. Some of the topics that are constantly being discussed but are often unnoticed by the majority society are;

1. What role Islam should play in their daily lives?
2. How far native cultures be adopted?
3. What local customs be accepted?
4. How smooth upbringing of children and their education can be achieved?
5. How to negotiate women's position in the family and society?
6. How to change the pattern of the limited social mobility and high unemployment?
7. What are the consequences of legal restrictions on their daily life?

8. How to have a dialogue with the majority in the host societies?
9. How to respond to media misrepresentation of Islam?
10. How mutual integration instead of disintegration be obtained?

Key issues facing the Muslim communities - externally

1. High unemployment
2. Lack of respectful recognition of their faith
3. Lack of mosques and burial places
4. Linking of terrorism with the religion of Islam and every Muslim being held responsible for criminal and violent actions of the few any where in the world
5. Political harassment, propaganda and negation of individual's right to be different
6. Use of harsh adjectives and degrading language in the public debate
7. Lack of legal protection because of "freedom of speech" concept
8. Media's selection of few extremist persons and movements as true representatives of Islam
9. Hostility of host societies
10. A common platform, able to communicate and negotiate with the host society

What can be done?

Proposals with workable solutions from the civil society must be welcome, and especially those from the Muslim Communities should be encouraged. Legal measures are the State's responsibility but the civil society must demand these changes. ENAR would be more than happy to contribute and assist in our own strategies, contacts and network.

1. A proactive and open-minded discussion concerning the accommodation between secular and religious forces in the society, including Muslim communities
2. A clear understanding that Islam is not a nationality or ethnicity but a faith
3. A closer look at the terminology used by the media in its coverage of Islam, and Muslims in general and terrorism in particular
4. De-linking of Islam and terrorism or militancy in media
5. Clear guidelines against Islamophobia from internationally respected organs, like UN, OSCE, ODIHR, EU, Council of Europe
6. Strong legislation against hatred speech, incitement to religious hatred and propaganda. A monitoring system would be of great help.
7. An ongoing dialogue with the media as how to balance freedom of speech, covering events without prejudice and being sensitive to the rights of minorities
8. Seminar and workshops for the journalistic community and resource persons among diverse Muslim groups
9. More transparency among Muslim communities, quick response to wrong information in the media
10. Invite mainstream journalists to the Muslim community arrangements so that they can see from close quarters, what they write about?
11. Inclusion of Islam in the religious studies at the primary and middle school level. It should be done at par with other faiths
12. The provision of information concerning Islam and Muslim cultures to the employees of diverse sectors of society which normally come in contact with

Muslim communities in daily life, for example; health, education, social and other public services

The UK based Media Wise Trust which promotes best practices in media representation, in its Bulletin of 5th September 2005 very forcefully puts the point across in these words: “The news media, anywhere in the world, bear a heavy responsibility and duty to inform their audiences only with accurate, impartial and balanced information and news. This simply can not take place when the media set themselves up as a judge, jury and executioner. It is a travesty of justice that any news organisation should run a campaign, whatever its aim, based on whispers, rumours and innuendo. Such practices – whether they are driven by a blind pursuit of bigger media audiences and increased profits or other agendas – reduce an otherwise noble profession into an instrument of prejudice and oppression”.

We believe that without the active participation of journalist community to redress the situation, all our efforts to combat discrimination and intolerance against Muslim people will not succeed as we wish. We should be visionary and practical. Instead of constant mention of Evil Ideology (meaning Islam) versus the democratic values of the West, we have to look at the Muslim communities as co-citizens and not as the 5th column or a foreign culture.

Muslim communities are here to stay and we have to integrate them in an inclusive way, and not as a cultural or religious entity which should be Europeanised or looked at as a cultural threat but involve people in the whole fabric of the society.

Notes for a case study : discrimination against Muslim communities in Denmark (Bashy Quraishy)

Background Information

In Denmark, it is not allowed to register people ethnically or religiously. Therefore there are no official detailing religious affiliation in Denmark, but looking at the immigrant and refugees groups from countries with Islam as official religion, one can more or less estimate, how many people have a Muslim origin.

I calculated from the official report published in September 2005 by the Ministry of Integration, that nearly 200000 people can come under the term Muslim.

It is 2.7 % of the total Danish population of 5.4 million inhabitants. It is the second largest religion in Denmark.

The 10 largest Muslim communities are Turks/Kurds, Iraqis, Palestinians, Bosnia, Pakistan, Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan, Morocco, and Syria.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Muslims came to the country as labor migrants from countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco and the former Yugoslavia, and in the 1980s-1990s, considerable groups of Muslim refugees arrived came from the Middle East, Somalia and Bosnia -Herzegovina. Muslims with refugee background currently constitute about 40% of all Muslims in Denmark.

Most Muslims live in and around Copenhagen and in other major cities such as Aarhus and Odense. Denmark is traditionally characterized by a high degree of ethnic and religious homogeneity and it is only as a result of immigration in the last few decades that a greater variety of cultural and religious traditions have become visible in society.

Traditionally, Denmark did manage to project an image of being tolerant, liberal, and humane society. It has projected this image not only to the world, but also to its own people by constantly propagating its own humanism and its virtues. Thus For years, Denmark has been known internationally as one of the model societies in the World.

The support it has given to suffering people in the Third World, the international movement for solidarity, the fight against apartheid in South Africa, the condemnation of the Vietnam War and USA's unjust and discriminatory treatment of blacks, won Denmark world wide respect and recognition.

Racism, most Danes argue, "is a thing of the ignorant past. And Fascism, something which only happened elsewhere, in South Africa, USA, or under Nazi Germany, for example." But today, the Danish mask of decency and humanism has been pulled down by the presence of non-European, non-Christian immigrants and refugees. What we see now is the ugly face of racism and Islamophobia, the growing popularity of right wing movements, and a general passivity among the public. Since 2001, Denmark has been ruled by 2 right wing, anti-immigrant parties with the help of a racist and openly Islam hating, Danish People's Party.

Why has this great change taken place in such a short span of time? Why has the situation worsened with such speed? Why are non-Europeans, especially those who

belong to Muslim communities are living in constant fear of harassment, attacks, and verbal abuse in some of the most "open" and "tolerant" societies in the world? Why are their places of worship being vandalized, children being abused, and their basic human rights being denied by the very same people who give lectures to third world countries about the virtues of Democracy?

There are many reasons for this change of attitude and growing hostility towards non-white, non-Christian people.

The first reason is that up until now, Denmark has enjoyed relatively stable economic growth for the past thirty years. Thus, right wing parties and nationalist movements could not exploit people by playing on their fear of joblessness and the cutting of social services. Even if Danes still have one of the lowest inflation rates, very low unemployment, and relatively small numbers of ethnic minority residents, the racist lobby has still succeeded in blaming migrant workers and refugees, especially the Muslim communities for all the ills in the society.

The second reason for this change in attitude is that Denmark lies outside of the mainstream European cosmopolitan culture. Protectionist, isolationist attitudes have created a false sense of superiority among the masses. This has resulted in cultural racism and arrogance. Danish political parties have for years been telling the public that its social system, education, health care system, as well as life style are unique, and now it is threatened by the presence of "these foreigners" meaning Muslims.

Most immigrants, who came to Denmark looked different, had different cultures, traditions and religions. Even though they worked for low paying and dirty jobs, lived in poorly conditioned housing, and basically kept to themselves, they were still there. Their presence was tolerated initially because they were only "Guest Workers" and "Foreign Workers."

However, as soon as these people used their rights and became "immigrants", they were no longer welcome. They became scapegoats. They were called a "problem," a threat to Danish culture, and good wholesome Christian values. Today Danes do not speak about immigrants but the term Muslim has replaced all other categories.

During the November 2001 national election, one Danish journalist looked at the web sites of various political parties. On the web site of the largest party, the Social Democrats, he found a subject called "Foreigner". The journalist claimed that among all the sites he had explored so far, he found the home page of the Social Democrats (www.socialdemokratiet.dk) as one of the most xenophobic in its contents.

He presented some of the examples, which he picked from the page on 17th of November 2001:

- ❖ "The fucking islamere (a slang expression for Muslims) should be simply thrown out of Denmark. Their religion should simply be torn apart and bombed to pieces. Because Islam stinks of shit."
- ❖ "The bloody perker (another expression from hate-speech for the Muslim immigrants, which is heard and read more often now, after the Danish national TV (DR) popularized it in a couple of comic series, despite the protests by anti-racism organizations) should never have our tax money, for they use it for buying of golden chains and all other sorts of perker-shit. "

(In one of the comic series of the DR-TV, a Perker is shown to be always wearing a golden necklace, driving BMW and chasing blond women).

- ❖ One of the debaters on the web-site suggested that all the legal rights of the immigrants (in Denmark it often means the Muslims) should be curtailed. And another writes that the only thing “they” are good at is to make “pizza and kebabs”.

(The national TV channels often use footage depicting pizzerias and other “exotic” shops, when they present the news about the immigrants and Muslim groups).

One debater suggests that these foreigners-ethnic (the authentic expression) reek of urine.

And yet another had also a solution for the problem: “The human-beings have also previously been involved in genocide, so why to be afraid of eliminating more?”

The journalist concluded that this kind of communication continues on the web-site, despite a complaint to the webmaster and despite the fact that such expression is legally prohibited by the anti-discrimination act (paragraph 266b) of the Danish penal code.

The present situation

Now let us look at the present situation in Denmark for these Muslim communities. First politically. There are 3 members of the Parliament. One with Syrian, one with Pakistani and the third with Turkish roots. Over and above these three, there are nearly 25 local councilors in different cities. All of them belong to political parties thus they have to toe the party line. Since most of them depend on Danish votes; they do not openly identify with Islam or defend Islam in public debates.

Socio-economically, most persons among Muslim communities are doing very poorly. Even if the official national un-employment rate is 4%, the figure for most Muslims groups is nearly 50%. Nearly 70% Muslim women are outside labor market.

Most jobs available to them are cleaning, services and factory jobs. The lack of financial means restricts Muslims to open their own business but some communities like Pakistani, Turks and Iraqis have managed to have small family owned shops. The younger generation is doing well in the education but still find it hard to get a good paying appropriate profession.

Many employers openly ask official employment exchange centers or private employment agencies not to send them foreigners meaning Muslims from third world countries. The government seldom takes any action to stop this discrimination and abuse of an individual's right to work. There has been no challenge to this kind of treatment on the grounds that employers have a right to hire whom they want. The situation is so dire that the Danish state now wants to give economic help to those employers who will hire ethnic minorities.

According to a report in International Herald Tribune of 27 Sep 2005, 33% of foreigners in Denmark are feeling isolated and discriminated. The survey was conducted by Catinet Research on behalf of the Danish Confederation of Trade

Unions. Somalis feel so discriminated that they officially complained to UN to relocate them in some other country. Even cleaning jobs are refused to them. Many young persons with Muslim sounding names and good qualification can not even get an appointment for an interview, let alone get a job.

Graffiti with racist slogans is widespread in large towns throughout Denmark. In parks, on walls, in bus stops and other public places, one can read nasty writings. In busses, trains and other forms of public transportation, people often avoid sitting besides a person who looks like an Arab or have a dark skin. People pass discriminatory remarks without anyone taking a stand against it. In shopping centers and playgrounds, Danes often show hostility to ethnic and religious minorities, or ignore them altogether.

Cultural racism against Muslim communities and Islam as a religion is manifested in newspapers, radio, and television, in churches and in literature. Even in porno magazines, and children's books one can find racist stories and remarks about Islam. The media constantly portrays Muslim cultures as inferior and primitive.

Newspapers do the same in their articles, editorials and in their letters to the editors. Media studies have shown that 70% of all media coverage of Muslims in Denmark is concerned with crime, social problems, honour killings, fundamentalism, terror, forced marriages, lack of goodwill and a hatred of the Western values, democracy and human rights.

Frequently, such coverage is not only exaggerated and distorted, but is filled with lies. It is rare that a foreigner's race, religion, culture and country of origin are not mentioned, whether or not this information is relevant. Islam is often presented as fanatical, barbarian, uncivilized, and medieval. It is often attacked with racial slurs similar to the way Jews were attacked in the 1930's.

Here I wish to give three concrete examples from last few weeks which will show how far Danish society has gone in its hatred against Muslim groups.

1. In July 2005, the second largest National TV station presented in its prime time news, a story with 2 young Muslim boys holding guns in their hands and presented it as an interview. The boys in this interview talked of belonging to a dangerous criminal ethnic gang called Triple X and boasted about taking over Denmark with violence and used filthy language against Danish people.

The police and one newspaper challenged the existence of such gang and asked the TV station to provide documentation. First the TV station tried to talk itself out of this situation but later it became clear that it was a false story. The boys were told that they would be filmed for a music video.

After lots of pressure for a month, the TV station withdrew the story, the news editor resigned and the TV and Radio Commission is looking to file charges against the TV station. But the damage has been done in the shape of negative political fallout, people's reaction against Muslims and a general anger against all foreigners.

2. The second example is also of media. This time a local Radio station Radio Holger which is financially supported by the Ministry of Culture and is owned by a known racist organization, broadcasted a program saying that the best way to get rid of Muslims will be to expel them or to exterminate them. After many complaints, the

ministry withdrew the license only for 3 months. In November 2005, the radio will resume its services.

3. The third example is of a Member of Parliament for Danish People's Party. Louise Frevert is education spokesperson and very active in anti-Islam statements. In one of her articles, put on her web site, she said: "Young Muslim men are criminal and rapists. They think it is their right to rape Danish women and beat the crape out of Danish citizens. Since our law forbids killing our enemy officially, we can only fill our jails with these criminals. Our jails are full of such people, so we should ask Russia to help us by putting them in its jails for 3 Euro per day." She also called Muslim youth as cancer cell on Danish body.

Politics and laws

Political hate has become so fashionable that many prominent politicians have used the Parliament's speaker's platform to utter racist remarks about Muslim minorities. Denmark has three political parties who openly advocate restricting the rights of Muslims. Some go even as far as to advocate sending them back to where they came from, for example, the Progressive Party, the Liberal Party and Danish People's Party in Denmark, are represented in Parliament. Outside the Parliament, there are many political parties and organizations, which work to spread the gospel of hate towards Muslims. In Denmark, we have the Nazi Party, The Danish Union, the National Party Denmark, the Citizen's Party to stop immigration, the Danish Center Party, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Patriots. These are just some of the known racist groups which are active on the political field.

Religious Education and Muslim Schools

Religious education classes offered in public schools deal with fundamental questions common to different religions and systems of belief, but the emphasis is on Christianity. Parents have the right to request that their children be exempted from such classes.

In September 2004, the education minister announced that instruction in Islam would be incorporated as a major component into religious education classes offered at public secondary schools as of the school year 2005-2006.

Religious communities, as well as other groups in society, have the right to establish their own schools. These schools are eligible for state support if the education they offer is in accordance with the objectives set for education in public schools and they are independent institutions.

There are currently close to 20 Muslim schools in the country, half of which are located in Copenhagen. In the aftermath of September 11, there have been heated discussions about Muslim schools, and it has been argued that they do not adequately educate their students in a democratic spirit and that they have a negative impact on the integration of their students into Danish society.

The Danish immigration law gives power to local councils to drop mother-tongue education for the children of third country nationals and concentrate only on the Danish language. This law does not apply to EU nationals living in Denmark. The law is against the Human Rights Declaration, article 6. The UN Convention on Children's

Rights from 1989, article 8 & 29, clearly forbids such practices which hinder the development and affirmation of the children's own identity.

These laws also give power to schools and councils to spread migrant and refugee children outside of their own school district. This is against the Danish constitution, which gives parents the right to send their children to the nearest school.

There is no provision in Danish law which clearly affirms the government's commitment to ensure that the public authorities will not discriminate against persons on the basis of their color, race, descent or national origin. Such a commitment is required by article 2.1 (a) of the Racial Discrimination Convention.

On the contrary, the Danish law allows and sometimes encourages racist speeches and public remarks. Many political parties, popular movements and eminent public figures publicly degrade third world nationals, especially Muslims, without authorities taking any step to stop such practices. Actually, a racist person can take anyone to court just for calling him or her "racist."

And while such a thing is allowed for and encouraged, many liberal politicians and lawyers are always advocating the abolition paragraph 266B of hate speech law on the pretext that this paragraph is not being used very often. The courts and the public prosecutor very often refuses to consider such cases which have racist angel in it or which can embarrass the authorities.

In 1998, Prof. Goul Andersen of Aalborg University undertook an analysis of the Danes attitudes towards Islam, using a scale from 0-10.

46% Danes had no sympathy for Islam, 35% had very little sympathy and only 19% had some sympathy.

It is a well-known fact that in a secularized society such as Denmark, the general population has not much understanding or sympathy for any religious dogma – including Christianity. However, it is also amazing that no other religion is attacked and ridiculed on regular basis by the media and the political and cultural elite in this society, but Islam.

Advocacy of hatred and violence in the name of Islam

But spreading of Islamophobia has also been helped by Muslim groups themselves. In recent years, some imams and other prominent Muslims have become the focus of attention by making comments reflecting a controversial interpretation of Islamic teachings.

Against the background of such concerns, new regulations concerning the granting of residence permits to foreign religious clerics, missionaries and other religious workers were introduced as part of an immigration package in June 2004. According to the new regulations, foreign religious persons are required to have relevant background or education to qualify for a residence permit. The regulations also state that foreign religious workers may be deprived of their residence permit if they are found guilty of certain crimes, including hate speech.

It is very important to emphasize that Muslim communities have to distance themselves from those inside tiny forces who have their own agenda based on ignorance. Socially deprived and unemployed young people fall prey to organizations or individuals that look for simple answers to complex questions.

Frustrations come to surface when Muslim communities see that Islam, as a faith is not recognized by the Danish State. There are no mosques built in the last 30 years and no graveyard for Muslim burials. Law against hate speech covers only Christianity. Even when Denmark claims to be a secular country, its constitution stipulate that Lutheran Christianity is the official religion of Denmark and the head of the state can only be a Christian.

All these practices are discriminatory, and they have resulted in making Muslim communities in Denmark very helpless, afraid and dependent on the good will and mercy of the authorities. The whole aim of these racist and anti-Muslim policies seems to be that of giving a very clear message to people belonging to Islam:

"To those of you who want to live here, be prepared to live like second class citizens.... Without equal rights and equal opportunities. Otherwise, pack your bags and leave. To those of you who plan on coming here, stay wherever you are!" (Basha Quraishy in "Searching for humane Europe", 1998, published by Ethnic Debate Forum – Denmark)

Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi was referring to such ideas when he said: "If you want to judge a civilized society, look at its treatment of its minorities."

Islamic images and terminology used in the Western media (Bashy Quraishy)

Abstract

The role and power of media in spreading information in a modern society is awesome. Once an information - right or wrong, manufactured or factual goes out to public, it creates its own rhythm. One can retreat, amend or correct it but it can not be nullified. A word spoken, written or heard has its own magic and life. In public discussions and in this atmosphere of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and national chauvinism in the West, there is very little space for different religious identities or balanced media coverage relating to non-Christian faiths, especially Islam.

Media monitoring projects in diverse countries in Europe and in USA, the qualitative analysis report from the European Day of Media Monitoring in November 2003, done by Jessika ter Wal, from Utrecht University, research done by Dr Elizabeth Poole from University of Staffordshire and published in Reporting Islam in 2002, the survey regarding Islamophobia done by EUMC –European Monitoring Center in 2003, Runnymede Trust's report on Islamophobia in 1996 and Fair Play's report on "Islam in the Western Media" in 2001 and last but not least, a report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 2004 under the title "Islamophobia – issues, challenges and action", are some of the work done on the subject of media coverage of Islam in the West. Muslims are often presented as foreigners, irrational, antiquated, threatening, extremists and fanatical.

Consequences of this un-balanced media coverage have been conflict between diverse groups of Muslim communities and the societies they live in, derailed mutual integration, dramatically increased racial, ethnic and religious discrimination and the use of media by political parties to put in place stricter immigration and asylum laws.

Documentation and surveys

To get a sense of the enormity of the subject, I went to Google Search Machine and entered "Islam in the Western Media". In less than 0.9 seconds, I got a list of 836000 articles. Under the headline, "Western media, prejudices and Islam" there are 16,800 articles.

In the last many years, media monitoring magazine, MediaWatch, has collected over twenty thousands news paper cuttings and TV news - from the Danish, the European and the international media.

Our research clearly documents that nearly 65 % of the media coverage relating to ethnic and religious minorities in the West, the situation in the developing countries, non-European cultures especially from the Middle East and last but not the least, the general description of Islam, is negative. By negative, we mean the way non-Western countries and people are depicted and how the over all focus of news coverage is always on poverty, backwardness, conflicts, fanaticism, sectarian killing, horrible diseases, catastrophes and lack of progress.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the demonizing of Islam, as a religion and its followers as a bunch of lunatic fanatics has been very obvious in most of the Western media. According to an article published in the student newspaper Daily Texan at the University of Texas – Austin, the author Pricilla Martinez writes:

“The media have been primary contributors to an erroneous image of Islam by stereotyping all Muslims as being fundamentalists or terrorists. For example, after the February 26, 1995 bombing of the World Trade Center, the media depicted American Muslims, in general as the cause of disaster. With circumstantial evidence, the media accused, indicted, tried and found the alleged fundamentalists, thus All-American Muslims, guilty.”

This trial by the media has accelerated after 11th September 2001 terrorist attacks on USA and the start of the Iraq conflict.

The Dutch sociologist and journalist, Dr. Corneilis Hulsman who lives in Egypt and publishes the magazine, **“Arab- West Report”** visited Islamic Christian study Center in Copenhagen in November 2004. In his lectures at the Center and at the University of Copenhagen He described the media coverage of Islam in the West, as very unfortunate. **“Think if the Muslims accuse the Christianity for being Nazist because of what Hitler did in the second World War or because of the actions of few new Nazis today”**.

The Western media according to Dr. Hulsman regularly presents the sporadic local conflicts between Egyptian Christian Coptic minority and the Muslim majority as conflict between two religions. The media does not hold back, in not only taking the side of the Coptic but also manufacturing stories to suite their angel.

Although there have been a great deal of interest and research done by the experts to find the reasons behind this unbalanced media coverage, the study done by the American scholar, Steven Hoffman is very telling. In his book, **“Islam and democracy – micro level indicators of compatibility”**, he is very critical of the way, media ferments a biased picture of Islam. He says:

“Journalists are not interested in good stories but stories with an angel. Behind media, there are powerful lobbies who need conflicts, polarization and misinformation to sell their products.”

Journalist, H. D. S. Greenway writes in the International Herald Tribune of 6th march 2004:

“Certainly journalism is suffering from the demand for instant news. One expects it from CNN or The Associated Press, which traditionally deal in breaking stories, but newspaper correspondents, who once had a bit of a time to reflect before they wrote, are now being asked to feed their web sites at all hours of the day. According to ABC’s Ted Koppel, the demands of instant journalism mean reporters “rarely have time to go out and do any reporting. They are almost chained to that satellite relay point.”

To illustrate, how the Western media uses specific images, misleading headlines and xenophobic linguistic terminology to report events, set the political agenda and wage ideological war, we have selected 3 recent examples.

- **Indonesian President's speech - 20th Oct 2004**
- **Death of 86 Thai protesters with Muslim background - 27 Oct 2004**
- **Killing of the Dutch Filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh – 3 Nov 2004**

Coverage of Indonesian President's speech - 20th Oct 2004

At noon time, on 20th Oct.2004, BBC World Service in its News Bulletin presented a live TV Program from Jakarta where the newly elected President of Indonesia, Mr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was being sworn in.

BBC's Anchorwoman, Lucy Hawkins said:

“The new Indonesian President has pledged to deal with corruption, nepotism and Islamic terrorism”.

The word Islamic was however dropped when Ms Hawkins interviewed Mr. Michael Hithcock in the same news item. But in latter hourly news, it was again reintroduced.

Since to cross check the validity of such news, MediaWatch often records other TV Channels, we turned to CNN and Danish TV Stations. It turned out that not only other channels did not mention Islamic terrorism, but also the President himself never used this term. Even on BBC's own Web Site that day, there was only the mention of terrorism. The same was true for CNN web page.

On the basis of this simple test, MediaWatch, on 21st October, wrote to BBC World Service in London and put two explanatory questions.

- Why BBC inserted the word Islamic in connection with terrorism in its news bulletin?
- What was BBC's official policy in correctly referring to the sources, in this case the President of Indonesia?

Until now, MediaWatch has not heard anything from BBC.

BBC has for years claimed to be neutral in its coverage, but the Muslim communities, all across the globe are increasingly skeptical of this claim as well as, of other Western news production regarding Islam, the Muslim people and the Muslim World at large.

For the record, MediaWatch wishes to mention that this incident is not the first time, BBC has added the word Islamic while referring to terrorism.

Death of 84 Thai protesters with Muslim background - 27 October 2004

Looking at the Danish and international media, the news was headlined in different fashion but the word, Muslim was repeatedly used.

Financial Times wrote:

”Civil Unrest – Seventy – eight Thai Muslims suffocate in army trucks”

One of the largest Danish Daily, **Politiken** headlined:

”Unrest in Thailand – 84 demonstrators strangled and shot”

MetroXpress – the largest circulated, free newspaper in Denmark said:

”Mutiny in Thailand accelerates – 84 Muslim mutineers killed in military’s arrest after demonstration”

Another large Danish free newspaper, **Urban**, used this headline:

”84 Muslim killed after the demonstration”

Killing of the Dutch Filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh - 3 November 2004

The most recent tragic killing of the Dutch filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, at the hands of a young Dutch man with Moroccan roots was covered in many different ways, with a very distinct focus on Islam.

News UK, 3 November 2004:

”Dutch filmmaker, with controversial views on Islam, shot dead”

The Guardian – UK, 3 November 2004:

”Controversial Dutch film director shot dead in street”

International Herald Tribune, 3 November 2004:

”Islam critic slain in Amsterdam”

International Herald Tribune, 4 November 2004:

”Dutch arrest 8 Islamists in Van Gogh killing”

Financial Times, 5 November 2004:

”Dutch plan crackdown on suspected Islamic extremists”

The Economist, 6 November 2004:

”The Netherlands was convulsed by the murder of a film director”

Le Soir of Belgium, 7 November 2004:

”Menace islamiste sur la Hollande”

Looking at the second largest Danish national newspaper, one can read:

Politiken, 5 November 2004:

”Eight held after religious murder. The man who is suspected for the murder of the Dutchman had contact with international Muslim terror groups”

In its editorial, however, the tone was more cautious. It asked for cool headedness and explained:

“The fight is not between Muslims and Christians but between fanatics and moderates”.

The other newspaper **Berlingske** headlined:

“Religious motives being looked at after the beastly murder”

In its editorial, the same newspaper wrote:

“This killing is a bloody expression of a clash of cultures, which is underway in Western Europe these days”

In MW’s opinion, this kind of misleading headlines and a misplaced focus on Islam, is not only harmful to inter-ethnic relations but also against all codes of journalistic ethics. Luckily, not all journalists subscribe to sensational headlines.

The only newspaper, which did try to analyze the background of the whole event for its readers was, **The Guardian**. On 4th November 2004, in a full length interview with the Somali born, Ayaan Hersi Ali, a politician and member of the Dutch parliament for a right wing party VVD and who has written the script of the movie, “The submission”, the journalist explained what kind of filthy and provocative language Ms. Ali and Mr. Van Gogh have been using to describe Prophet Muhammad, Islam and the Muslims.

Guardian described in graphic language that:

“Ayaan Hirsi Ali has called the prophet Muhammad a "lecherous tyrant, a pervert", Islam a "backward religion", and the Quran "in part a licence for oppression". Theo van Gogh dubbed Muslims "goat-fuckers", a radical Islamic leader "Allah's pimp", and Islam a "retrograde and aggressive" faith”.

Guardian also touched upon the issue of freedom of speech and the response it can unleash. The paper wrote:

“In the midst of this tinderbox, insisting on their right to speak freely and with the support of many Dutch people, Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh scattered their sparks - a blistering critique of Islam - with magnificent disregard for the feelings they might be offending.”

Damning Islam as a "backward, 12th- century religion", a "medieval, misogynist cult incapable of self-criticism and blind to modern science".

One of the most respected Swedish author, **Jan Guillou** who has penned many best selling novels including *The Crusaders* told of an interesting experience to the Danish newspaper, *Christian Daily* on 13 Nov 2004. While researching for material, he was stranded in Kazakhstan.

In 48 hours, he watched CNN and Fox News in a hotel room. Every time a Muslim person was shown on TV, he noted it under bad guy or good guy category. In 48 hours, there was 57 mentions of Muslims. According to Mr Guillou, all Muslims were shown as bad guys – jumping like crazies with Kalashnikovs in their hands, throwing stones or burning Israeli and American flags. All women shown on TV wore headscarves.

Jan Guillou was so upset at this anti-Islam media propaganda that he has decided to confront this demonizing of Muslims for the rest of his life.

Western media's hostility towards Islam and its anti-Arab bias also reflect the way it has covered the war in Iraq.

A respected Danish media researcher, **Stig Hjarvad** was very forth coming and blunt in his critical interview on the national TV, DR on 17 Nov. 2004.

“ Most Danish media has been very unbalanced and almost too friendly towards the American attack on Iraq and its subsequent occupation of the country”.

Media knows its power

The rejection of any thing non-European and Christian has stifled the debate, thus has resulted in the polarization of the society. Consequently the tolerance level of the population, vis-a-vis the Muslim ethnic minorities have dramatically dropped. Genuine acceptance of foreigners is now missing. Whether these other people differ in thinking, color of skin, or sexual orientation has no bearing on this attitude.

Looking at, most of the Western media, one can notice that often the Pictures and headlines have no relation to the story. Contents of the articles or stories may even be positive or neutral but are garnished with stereotyped language and images.

Use of negative terminology

Primitive, fundamentalist, Islamist, extremist, intolerant, authoritarian, militant, medieval, women oppressive, radical, menacing, aggressive, patriarchal, backward, tyrannical and lacking the will to reform itself, are some of the adjectives used liberally in front of or after the word, Islam.

More recently, one hears or reads such terms as, Militant Islam, Islamist, fundamentalist Imams, Radical Islamic Cleric, Jihadist movements, Fascio-Islam and Quran-fascism. Even Nazism and Communism are being compared with Islam. One member of the Danish parliament even bombastically declared that “Islam is like Hitler” in an interview on 18.7.04 in the largest circulated weekly newspaper in Denmark, *Søndagsavisen*.

This general description of Islam as a religion or faith is very insulting, derogatory and provocative to most Muslim communities. They welcome criticism of individuals, groups or even whole societies, where Islam is the major religion but draw the line between *Freedom of speech* and *Freedom of hate speech*.

Inayat Bunglawala, spokesman for the mainstream Muslim Council of Britain expressed the inner feelings of millions of followers of Islam in his interview in The News International – UK on 10 Nov. 2004.

“Muslims feel under siege. Their faith is not only under criticism, but there is an attempt to dominate the heartland of Islam. It compounds that sense that Western nations are out to humiliate Muslims”.

Connecting individual acts of violence, committing of crime, lack of integration or not conforming to the customs of the host society, to the faith itself, not only irritates most followers of Islam but puts majority of law abiding, peaceful and well integrated members of diverse Muslim groups in the West, in a very difficult position.

The Western media has failed to report, the struggle between good and bad, tolerance and intolerance, orthodox and moderate that goes on within Islam as well as around it. The efforts of liberals in Islamic communities world over, are not helped by the tendency of non-Muslims to behave as if the only voices of Islam that mattered, were of the reactionaries.

Mr. Seidenfadfen, the chief Editor of Politiken - one of the largest mainstream national daily in Denmark - in his 14th Nov 2004 issue, wrote a very forceful article on the murder of Theo van Gogh and the way West has reacted.

“Reactions on the murder illustrate, how easy it is right now, to mobilise intolerant feelings which hit everyone else except those who have committed the crime or those who sympathise with it. It is worth remembering that when Pim Fortuyn was murdered by a animal rights activist, no one burnt the offices of the friends of animals or hated the vegetarians. But when it comes to Muslims, there is something else at stake”.

This different way of treating and reacting to the same crime – murder of a humanbeing – tells a lot about the sorry state of affairs in the west.

It has not gone unnoticed, among most Muslims that the amount of the negative media coverage and debate they suffer, is missing when it comes to Catholicism, born- again Protestantism, hard-core Hinduism, orthodox Judaism or any other world religion.

Some comparative examples

Besides the direct negative description of Islam, there are other interesting phrases used deliberately by the Western media to paint a rosy picture of the West as well as describe others as primitive and barbarians.

- ❖ Afghan tribal chiefs are routinely termed as *War Lords*
- ❖ In the first Gulf war of 1991, comparison of Iraqi soldiers and Allied Forces was described as – *our boys* and *their soldiers*, our *military vehicles* and their *armoured tanks* (Guardian – UK, 23 Jan 1991)
- ❖ In the second Gulf war of 2004, it looked like this - our *liberation forces* are fighting the *insurgents, rebels and Jihadis*
- ❖ The *Civilised World* condemns terrorism
- ❖ USA is always called, the leader of the *Free World*

- ❖ American Baseball games are dubbed as "**World Series**"
- ❖ The western **democratic** way of life ----
- ❖ They **hate** our humanistic values
- ❖ Documents like British Magna carta, American Bill of Rights and the struggle for human rights under the French Revolution, are always referred to as **first in the world**

The notion of the world outside the Western areas, seems to be absent in the mindset of most people living in Europe, USA or even Australia.

Even the most respected newspapers and publications are often guilty of twisting the history to suit their agenda. Financial Times magazine of 13th Nov.2004 published a strange story. The article was in fact a review of a new book on the great Mongol warrior known in the West as Tamerlane.

The book is called: "**Tamerlane-Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World**" by Justine Marozzi. The reviewer of FT describes the book as "A new biography of Tamerlane finds chess and Islamic theology flickering behind the brutality".

Both the author and the reviewer are trying to explain the roots of this historic savagery in Tamerlane's understanding of the Islamic theology.

The fact is that he was an Uzbek warrior who killed millions of Muslims in Iran, Iraq, Syria, eastern Turkey, in many Caucasus areas as well as in India in the 14th century.

To call such a murderer –Sword of Islam – is not only insulting to the peace loving religion of Islam but also says volumes, the way, most Western scholars and authors have made it a habit to drag the name of Islam in every regional conflict and historical injustice to prove their point - Islam is violent, inhumane and thus can not co-exist with Christianity and the Western values.

Keeping the diasporic identity alive

Most societies in Europe not only demand unquestioned loyalty from diverse ethnic minority groups among Islam, but also submission to the "idea" of a common identity – mostly determined and formulated by the majority.

This unwelcome insistence creates conflicts and a sense of alienation among most Muslim groups who come from non-European hemisphere. These groups have a strong sense of their own identities, which are often constructed by a very long historical process, cultural embedding and religious practices. For them the question of changing, altering or totally adopting the host identity is a non-starter. Of course they wish to be part of the society they live in, but as equal and not as junior partner.

In this endeavor, ethnic minority media has always played a rescuing part – not only to provide information, not covered by the mainstream media, but also to preserve home lands languages, cultures, traditions, religious practices and fostering a sense of belonging.

As the concept of multiculturalism has failed to fulfill the needs of all segments of the society, the role of ethnic media is becoming clearer. With the advancement of

technology, Internet, satellite dish and increasing professionalism, ethnic minority groups are able to keep their diasporic identities alive. Some people will argue against this trend, but I believe, in light of European cultural arrogance, this step is not only inevitable but also necessary. It is high time that the European identity is redefined and re-polished – keeping in mind the new realities.

Violence has no religion!

In International Herald Tribune of 25th June 2004, there was a very interesting and thought provoking news.

“Election force in Latin America. Disillusioned with democracy, the poor turn to violence”

This headline describes a factual situation which has been very prevalent throughout the world. Unfortunately, violence in the face of powerlessness, often becomes the only tool available to those who feel and experience oppression in the societies.

Palestine, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, East Timor, Colombia, Peru, Afghanistan, Ireland, Sudan, Chechnya and now Iraq are some of the visible examples of such hot spots.

When the Western media covers those conflicts where Islam is not dragged in, religion is never mentioned as the root cause or the instigator of the violence. Non-Muslim conflicts are described as socio-economic issues, political differences or at best, left wing rebel movements fighting for their rights or independence.

But when it comes to the areas where Muslim minorities are taking to fighting back oppression, this response is quickly dubbed as “Islamic terrorism”, “Muslim Militancy”, “Fundamentalistic terror”, “Islamic barbarism”, “Jihady struggle”, “Al-Qaeda connection” etc.

The suicide bombing is being described as the new tool of “Islamic fanatics, who hate the Western style of life”.

Why all these labels on Islam?

The Muslim communities are justified to ask: “Why no religious labels were used when a Tamil Hindu girl, assassinated the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi by a suicide bomb in 1989 or when two Sikh body guards of Indra Gandhi shot her in cold blood? What about the killings and bombings in, Ireland, Corsica, Basque region of Spain, Columbia, Peru and Rwanda? In these conflicts, Christians are killing other Christians.

On whose name. One might ask?

It seems that a large part of the Western media, intellectuals and the political establishment are determined to connect, the second largest religion in the world – Islam- with every horrible act, the civilized people every where, would and should abhor and condemn.

Political signals

Politicians also play a vital role in spreading hatred against Islam, through media.

On 10th April 2000, Chairman of the Danish People's Party, Pia Kjaersgaard said on Danish TV:

"Most immigrants today are from Third World countries. And many of them are Muslims who have absolutely no intention of becoming part of 'Danishness'... They despise whatever is Western, Danish or Christian. They often come with baggage full of male chauvinism, ritual slaughtering, circumcision of girls and clothes that oppress women and with their traditions which belong to the Dark Middle Ages."

The journalist never asked her any critical question.

On 29th Oct.2002 in DR-Radio, Minister for Integration, Mr Bertel Haarder said:

"It is the people from the poor countries, those from Third World countries, from non-Western countries who are the problem. They have a low productivity, a low degree of education, bad language skills, and they arrive in a country with the world's highest minimum wages - which they have difficulty deserving - and with the world's highest social security, which for most of them, makes it a bad business for them, to go to work. And then it has to end up wrongly, and it *does* end up wrongly."

Mr Haarder is used to such statement without any intervention from the journalists.

These statements and many more of these type are uttered on daily basis in Denmark and the rest of Europe.

Soon after the murder of Theo Van Gogh and the capture of the suspect, after a shootout with police and who was in a prison hospital with gunshot wounds, the Dutch justice minister, Piet Hein Donner, said:

" He acted out of radical Islamic fundamentalist convictions"

The freedom of speech is often mentioned whenever, Muslim Communities challenge anti-Islam utterances but it would be worth while to remember the words of the late Swedish Ombudsman for Ethnic Discrimination, Margareta Wadstein while discussing media coverage:

"Everybody has prejudices, but only by facing them, can we fight them."

Why the misleading coverage?

There are many reasons as to why most journalists indulge in un-researched and semi-professional writings about Islam. The situation is improving slowly but still, there is a long way to go.

Among the obvious reasons, one can name:

- Ideological upbringing and ethno-centric education system
- Ignorance of non-European cultures, religions and ways of living
- Deadline pressure from the management and editorial interference
- Economic interest of the employers and neck breaking competition
- Cultural arrogance prevailing in the societal discussions
- Lack of prompt and quick response from the victims of media manipulation
- Lack of co-ordination among Muslim communities and non-use of consumer power tool

But whatever way, the media looks at the issue, the journalists have to keep in mind that their actions have profound effects on public's perception of Islam and the whole process of integration. A small part of the media world is critical of the way, mainstream media handles the issues relating to ethnic minorities, especially people of Muslim faith.

In May 2004, journalists at the Daily Express in UK did refuse to write anti-asylumseekers stories against the will of the editors, the journalists at the Danish newspaper Politiken have standing order to refrain from using the derogatory words about Islam, the top management at the International Federation of Journalists in Brussels has co-operated in holding press meetings to talk about media and minority issues. Many journalist unions in EU have established codes of conduct and diverse ethnic relations committees to raise awareness among its members.

Consequences of un-balanced media coverage

- Conflict between diverse groups of Muslim communities and the societies they live in
- Derailed Mutual integration
- Racial, ethnic and religious discrimination has increased dramatically
- Media is being used by political parties to put in place stricter immigration and asylum laws
- Increase in ethnic media outlets – especially local and international TV channels from homelands
- Un-professional journalism is effecting the quality in mainstream media
- Militancy among ethnic populations especially the youth is on the rise
- Financial loss to mainstream media
- Perpetuation of diasporic identity among ethnic and religious groups

Why Media Watching is necessary?

As the media has become more and more sophisticated and commercial over the last many years, it has become important for the victims of media manipulation, to live up to this daunting challenge. Today there are many groups trying to bring media's power to misinform to the attention of the public.

Those who work with and against media distortion of information, know that media in general has become the 4th State power. Politicians, authorities, civil servants and even the common man on the street is afraid of the power, journalists have at their disposal.

This state of affairs has made most of the journalists extremely protective of that power, which the society has bestowed on them. Most of them have developed very large egos, which need constant massage and appeasement.

Professionalism, documentation, analysis and distribution of information concerning Media's portrayal of minorities, (ethnic, cultural and religious), developing countries, migration issues and asylum will give minorities a better access to media world.

Suggestions for NGO to counter the situation

- Media monitoring must be professional and constant
- Provide clear, short and well written, press releases at regular intervals
- Draw the attention of ethnic youth towards journalism as a profession. Convince parents and youth that journalism is a noble and good trade
- Show visibility by participating in media discussions on a professional level, not only on ethnic questions but also issues of common interests to the society. Answer back and comment what you find incorrect but the response must be target oriented
- Arrange courses for members to empower them with knowledge, give them tools to formulate their views and most important of all, encourage them to speak up. Invite critical journalists to speak
- Establish better contacts with those journalists who are willing to listen and invite media to hold discussions, seminars, conferences with NGO's on topics relevant to both minorities and the media
- Send the journalists a list of names of contact persons from different ethnic groups which can give their opinion if need be. It will save the journalists time and they will use this source often. This list should contain important, qualified and competent resource persons among NGOs to be used by the media as resources
- Part information to the media. Many journalists are not used to inter-cultural, inter-ethnic and inter-religious thinking
- Start a "Study Group" to document, analyse and look at the media mistakes. Provide such data to journalists so that they can study it and hopefully use it
- Do not forget to compliment if you see a good TV programme, a well-researched article or even an informative radio programme. If criticism has to be dished out, this must be done in the bounds of reason, politeness and on factual basis
- NGO's and ethnic minorities now have a good possibility of supporting the present net work of alternative media on the internet, establishing their own topic oriented web sites and E-mail chain letters
- Many European countries have grassroots TV-Channels where local programmes can be made both in ethnic languages and host country's national language. Such TV programmes are public funded

NGOs have to come to terms with the fact that in this age of fast information, it is their duty to get their message across. Media can live without them but they can not afford to ignore the importance of media's power.

Instead of constantly complaining, it would serve them well to co-operate, educate and make alliances with journalists. Influence is never served on a platter but is a hard won currency.

“Imaginary Islam” (Tomas Deltombe)

Many Muslims today complain about “the bad image of Islam”. My aim here is not to define what “Islam” is, but rather to describe how the French political authorities and the media have used the term “Islam” in the last thirty years.

Widely ignored by the media in the 1950’s and 1960’s, “immigrants” were considered in the 70’s as part of the “working class” and victims of capitalism. However, because of the unemployment crisis in the 1970’s, “foreign workers” slowly became “Muslim immigrants”. In order to stigmatise these immigrants who ‘stole’ French jobs, they were no longer described as “workers” but as “different people”.

It is in the beginning of the 1980’s, with the recognition of “second-generation immigrants”, the Iranian Revolution, and the Left coming to power, that the stigmatisation of immigration took on a distinctively anti-Islamic tone. In other words, the social and economic vision of the 1960’s -1970’s was replaced by an ethnic and cultural one from the 1980’s onwards.

At that time, the French elite found it hard to consider “second-generation immigrants” as full French nationals and used “Islam” to underline the difference between “the French born and bred” and “the French on paper”. “Islam” thus constituted a symbolic barrier between “us” and “them”. The historian Benjamin Stora analysed the trend of the 1980s and said that, at that time, people used to believe that “North Africans cannot be integrated into French society because they are so different from other immigrants, they are Muslims. They belong to a population which, because of its beliefs, has excluded itself voluntarily from the values established by society.”

With the Front National’s increasing popularity, the mainstream media and political powers decided to use a more acceptable rhetoric and talked of “integration” and “Muslims”. The term “integration” depicts France as a welcoming and generous country and, at the same time, suggests that “immigrants” will never, and cannot, be integrated. On the other hand, when referring to “Muslims”, this hides an ethnical vision behind a religious term, in order for the media not to be accused of “racism”...

The notion of “Muslim community” first appeared in 1989 alongside the scandal

surrounding Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Far from allowing Muslims to define individually their own cultural and religious identity, the notion of "Muslim community" was imposed on them as an undisputable reality. This being the case, the "Muslim community" was divided by the dominating powers into two camps: "fundamentalist Muslims" and "moderate Muslims". It deems to valorise the latter, making them immune to racism and Islamophobia. The mainstream media has waged a tough campaign against "Islamism", but is careful not to define it unambiguously.

Consequently, "Muslims" in France have to follow the example of those who accept "our rules" (that is to say "moderate Muslims") and to distance themselves from those who do not ("Islamists"). In this way, "moderate Muslims" serve as a symbolic weapon in a proxy war of civilisations. Their role is also to screen out certain social realities hidden behind a vague "Islamism", strangely similar to the traditional representations of "Islam" itself.

The media coverage of "Islam" has evolved with the appearance in the media of so-called "Islamic" terrorism in 1995 (attacks by the Algerian Armed Islamic Groups in France) and in 2001 (Al-Qaida attacks in the United States). The general atmosphere of suspicion is such that every Muslim is seen as a potential terrorist. In a nutshell, the fight against terrorism implies the fight against Islam. What is more, mainstream journalism regularly promotes this point of view with television programmes and press articles that lump together many different realities under the same term of "Islamism".

In conclusion, to understand the causes underlying "the bad image" of Islam, we have to analyse the role the French media and the political apparatus have assigned to an "Islam" that it has widely contributed in shaping and in which it has confined a part of the French population. It is also needless to say that those who wish to "improve the image of Islam" probably have to start seizing once again the "Islam" they were once disposed of such a long time ago.

**Representations of Islam in the Media. A pathway to Islamophobia?
(Michael Privot)**

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Management, coordination and editorial/ Direction, coordination et édition
Human right & Islamophobia Department

Chief editors/Direction éditoriale
Hadia Himmat

Editors/Rédacteurs
Sali Shamsivari
Michael Privot

Translator/Traducteur
Aisha Michot