

Public perceptions about minorities and immigrants: the role of the media

Policy Dialogue – 31 May 2011

Summary

In an EPC Dialogue, organised with the kind support of the US Mission to the EU, practitioners from both sides of the Atlantic discussed experiences and best practice on how the media can better promote public understanding of the benefits of diversity. They all shared the view that the way media handles migration issues has to be seen in the context of the broader political and economic crisis, with widespread unemployment and unrest, public budgets being slashed, and right wing politicians exploiting insecurity. Furthermore, there are concerns among journalists about limits on freedom of expression, and their ability to address very challenging issues.

Full Report

Oliver Money-Kyrle, Assistant General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), said that there is link between the working conditions of journalists, their working environment and the quality of their product. Without quality working conditions it is difficult for journalists to produce quality, ethical journalism, and difficult to report in a professional manner on difficult topics like migration issues.

The IFJ has worked on a series of initiatives such as campaigning to recruit journalists from ethnic minorities, training programmes for journalists to raise awareness of their roles and responsibilities, and developing reporting guidelines for journalists on difficult and sensitive issues.

The main work has been to raise awareness. The way media deals with migration issues does affect public perception and journalists need to be conscious of how the story they are working on impacts on community relations and public perception. But it is not the journalist's role to fight discrimination, promote particular policies to promote a multicultural society; it is their role is to seek out truth and tell it in a manner that minimises harm to individuals and society. Truth telling on its own exposes discrimination, corruption, and abuse of power that enables these problems to be countered. The question of ethical standards is very important and journalists must apply them to the stories they are working on.

Some of the stories are very difficult and highly emotive. The journalist must ask if the story is true, consider the agenda of the people involved, and find appropriate spokespersons for the community. However, because journalists often need to meet a deadline, they may face a challenging story without the time or resources to deal with it properly, in a thoughtful and well-balanced way. And the reporter does not write the headline - the headline writer is under pressure to write a dramatic headline that will sell the newspaper.

Journalists today are more conscious about ethical responsibilities and the choices they make. So why is there the perception that media coverage has deteriorated and there are problems with the way media handles migration issues?

The problem has to be seen in the context of the broader political and economic crisis, with widespread unemployment and unrest, public budgets being slashed, and right wing politicians exploiting insecurity. The insecurity in the Middle East and the ongoing war on terrorism also exacerbates tensions between communities in Europe. These are challenging subjects for journalists.

At the EU level, the EU defence and security industry is receiving huge sums of money to develop new instruments and new surveillance techniques, and politicians justify this investment with a strong narrative of insecurity and threat. At the same time not all coverage of terrorism is scaremongering. When British nationals are committing acts of terrorism at home or abroad, journalists have to ask uncomfortable questions of the communities these people grew up in. This task is made less easy by new laws to protect communities that feel under threat from excessive public and media scrutiny. Religion, for example, is an idea that needs to be subject to open debate without being stifled by anti hate legislation. There are concerns among journalists about limits on freedom of expression, and their ability to address very challenging issues.

The economic and political conditions being faced today have created a situation where journalists have to be on guard about being exploited by right wing politicians who are able and trying to exploit public anxiety. Associated with this, is the financial crisis facing the media. The economic model that has traditionally underpinned journalism is now under threat. Media companies are disinvesting in journalism, which has a long-term impact on reducing its quality. Public policymakers need to respond, and recognise that journalism is a public good, essential for democracy. Provision has been successfully provided in the past by the market, but now it is under threat, and governments must intervene to create new conditions to ensure the continuity of the public good of journalism across Europe.

Raymon Dassi, Journalist and Member of Italian Intercultural Journalists Association (ANSI), said that politics and journalism are closely related areas. They are representations of ideas and concepts, having a relationship with the truth, and they are also inevitably associated with lying. In Italy the perception of immigrants and minorities lies between truth and falsehood, with a greater inclination towards the second.

In Italy there have been three media paradigms on migration over the past three decades - in the 90s the main story was invasion by immigrants from Albania, in the 00s crime emanating from immigrants, and in 2010 the effect of immigrants on public services. The political message to society is that Italians are last to benefit in their own country.

The perception of a migrant invasion paints a doomsday scenario, but also suggests that people from all countries are heading to Italy. This is based on a hedonistic vision of Italy as better than the rest of the world, whereas the reality is fewer than 5 million immigrants in Italy. These are an important resource for the country, galvanising many economic areas and enabling renewal of the social fabric by their contribution and presence. The perception of criminality places immigrants in a violent social context where women are devalued. These ideas are based on the conviction that immigrants are a public danger. The perception of immigrants using up public services sees immigrants as occupying social housing, stealing local jobs, and being a drain on the economy. The reality is that immigrants create jobs and new opportunity for local people.

Over the years there have been two consistent and contrasting perceptions: immigrants are a problem, and immigrants are human beings. Resolving this dualism is an opportunity for European freedom. If journalism is a public good it is because of freedom. Freedom is not lessened by immigration. Intercultural journalism will be a major innovation in the field of journalism during the next decades as, thanks to the internet and social participation, immigrants' consciousness is growing, and their political participation in Europe will soon oblige others citizens and the media to see them differently.

Alexandra Moe, Washington DC Director of New America Media (NAM), said that the combined circulation of ethnic media in California is far greater than traditional media. NAM has published a directory of more than 20,000 ethnic media in the US, about 60% of what exists. It is the fastest growing media element in the US.

The role of the ethnic media and how immigrants are being portrayed in the mainstream media is changing as immigrants are seen as a political force. The US State department is now focusing on diaspora and immigration reform, as the diaspora is seen as a political and economic force in the US, sending \$50 billion remittances home every year, and as a positive force for the future.

In the US, the main public media is more polarised than ever before. Millions of Americans are influenced and get their feelings of the day from cable news. These voices make the most noise, but mainstream media is changing and shrinking, so people get their news in different ways - online, social media, newspapers, or ethnic media. The media is very variegated.

Ethnic media reaches 60 million adults daily. The largest US TV station is a Spanish language station. The voice for immigrants has been the ethnic media, which enables the concerns of immigrant communities to be told.

How can ethnic media inject the concerns of their audience into the mainstream media when it is a segment and an energy in society that many people have not been aware of? US politicians are beginning to understand that they cannot move forward without appealing to the Spanish language audience in the US. The danger is that less attention is then given to Asian language audiences.

A major issue has been partnering with ethnic media to get them more of a public role. Journalism of ethnic media is often seen as sub-par because it serves the ethnic sector. Many public organisations do not want to have to translate their information into many languages appropriate to different ethnic groups and using the ethnic media can be an effective means of getting the message out. On issues of the day NAM tries to do polling in different languages so other voices can be measured and these results can then be fed to the mainstream media.

Communication is a way to build community in a changing world. The ethnic media point to these changes and connect the multiple corners of the globe, unlike the mainstream media, which is living in the past.

Discussion

Asked to comment on why bad news sells over good news, Mr Money-Kyrle said that it is not so much bad news as sensationalism. Dramatic headlines sell newspapers. Race-related crime and emotive language are prime targets, which leads to isolation of minority communities. The mainstream media has failed to reform to make itself representative of the whole community. Mr Dassi added that the European model of information was not universal; African news sources often focus on positive community news. People are searching the internet for good news.

In response to a question about how journalists should handle extremist far-right parties, Alexandra Moe said that there is a debate in the US about the liberal bias of national public radio, but the real issue is what is journalism? There is a blurring of news into infotainment that stirs up public opinion to create audiences, but not all people watch the mainstream programmes - the country is polarised like the media. Oliver Money-Kyrle added that polarisation in the US was partly a consequence of lifting the obligation to fair and impartial news coverage.

Asked to comment on whether making migration experts available for media would be a good initiative, Mr Money-Kyrle said that media developed their own sources from minority communities, but the question raised the issue of ethnic minorities normally only commenting on topics related to their ethnic community. There is a need to mainstream the image of migrant communities in the news by seeking their views on regular issues.

Asked if it was possible to improve the ethical performance of journalists, Mr Money-Kyrle said the question of how to enforce codes of conduct for the media has been debated for years. There is a crisis in the self-regulatory system of press councils as private media groups are reluctant to support this work financially, and it is in danger of becoming a toothless instrument for reinforcing conduct. There have been initiatives in ethical journalism, trying to debate the issues, but one of the problems is that journalists are increasingly office bound - rewriting press releases and not getting out to talk to real people.