

## The Challenge of an Increasingly Interdependent World - Mike Jempson

**Within the UK, a range of policies and legal frameworks exist which aim to combat discrimination and xenophobia. Nevertheless, according to Mike Jempson, there have been numerous examples of the negative impact certain aspects of the British press have had upon the public in relation to issues ranging from migration to European integration. In a context of financial constraints, where there the risk of decreasing coverage of the 'other', Jempson underlines the importance of political support in diversifying the national media mix.**

A recent study by a former BBC executive suggested that international coverage could disappear from United Kingdom (UK) terrestrial television by 2013, if production and newsroom budget cutbacks continue.

"Over the past three years, a fifth of factual coverage of international issues has been moved off the mainstream channels to digital ... (where it is) seen by far fewer viewers. There is a near-universal belief among those working in television that international programmes get lower ratings and as audience ratings remain the preoccupation of most commissioners and controllers, there is a marked reluctance to commission such programming." (Harding, 2009)

Both the BBC and the commercial broadcasting regulator Ofcom insist that international coverage is important but there has been no public outcry about its gradual diminution, which is bound to have a disproportionate impact on public discourse given the pervasive influence of the print and broadcast media in the UK.

It may also help to explain why almost 85% of UK respondents to the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll did not recall anything in the media that improved their perceptions of people in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The Region would generally be characterised as part of the 'Arab/Muslim world', and is most likely to appear in items about the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, about human rights violations, or in specialist documentaries and features about ancient history, archaeology and holidays.

### **Xenophobia and Discrimination**

As a multicultural society with an imperial history Britain has a ready domestic market for international news, and prides itself on its tolerance and freedoms which have attracted many seeking sanctuary from injustice elsewhere. Unfortunately this reputation for 'fair play' has been besmirched by less than tolerant coverage of 'foreigners' in some sections of the popular press. In recent election campaigns the extreme right-wing British National Party (BNP) -which now has two seats in the European Parliament - capitalised on the xenophobic coverage of some mainstream national newspapers to promote the party's racist, anti-immigration, anti-European, anti-Muslim stance.

Although readership is falling year on year, almost half the population (about 30 million people) still see a national newspaper daily, and the news agenda of the nationals is often taken up by broadcasters. As 75% of readers take newspapers with a negative view of the European Union (EU), the press have been blamed for public antipathy towards Europe by the Centre for European Reform (Grant, 2006). The Times and Daily Telegraph are editorially 'eurosceptical', while four tabloid papers (with combined daily sales of seven million), delight in running stories, sometimes of dubious provenance, ridiculing EU decisions and directives. Unsurprisingly only 30% of Britons saw the EU as a good thing, and only 24% trusted its institutions according to the June 2008 Eurobarometer. But disenchantment with Europe is only one aspect of the problem.

Tabloid xenophobia during the 1998 Football World Cup in France reached such a pitch that the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) had to warn editors that their right "to report on events in a robust and partisan fashion ... must be balanced by responsibility. Editors should

therefore seek to ensure that their reporting and their comment does nothing to incite violence, disorder or other unlawful behaviour, or to foster any form of xenophobia that could contribute directly to such incitement" (Wakeham, 1998).

Later complaints about inaccurate and hostile coverage of asylum-seekers and refugees (Finney 2003; Jempson and Cookson 2004; ICAR, 2004 & 2005) forced the PCC to remind editors that: "pejorative or irrelevant reference to a person's race, religion, or nationality is already prohibited under Clause 12 (Discrimination) of the (Editors') Code. The Commission ... has underlined the danger that inaccurate, misleading or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is not borne out by the facts" (Meyer, PCC, 2003).

The discrimination clause of the Code of Practice, devised by editors themselves, has been controversial since publishers set up the PCC in 1991 as a self-regulatory body. It does not cover 'generalised remarks about groups or categories of people' (Beales, 2009). These remain at the editor's discretion along with mention of a person's nationality. In the 1970s and 80s that discretion had extended to the use of racist terms in some tabloids (Searle, 1989; Borzello, 1998) which today reserve their derision for Arabs, Muslims, Roma and 'gypsies'.

### **Legal Constraints and Misrepresentation**

Britain has strong legal and institutional frameworks to combat racism and discrimination and effect social cohesion. Since 1936 a series of Public Order Acts has banned threatening, abusive or insulting language or behaviour likely to inflame racial hatred. Racial discrimination has been outlawed since the first Race Relations Act in 1965. UK print and broadcast media are bound by these laws, but the press do not have to comply with the statutory obligation of Britain's 'public service broadcasters' (the BBC, ITV, Channels 4 and 5, and licensed radio stations) to supply accurate, fair and impartial news and current affairs.

Contemporary stereotyping of Arabs – and by extension the Muslim world -can be traced back to the oil crisis of the early 1970s, according to the Commission on British Muslims & Islamophobia (Amelia et al, 2007). The press have helped to blur distinctions between cultural and religious norms in the public eye and Islam has come to be associated with forced marriages, honour killings, homophobia, public executions and judicial amputations. The fatwah against Salman Rushdie for *The Satanic Verses* and later reactions to the Danish cartoon controversy, only served to enhance perceptions of Islam as vengeful and violent.

Nonetheless media coverage of the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo was sympathetic to Muslims, and the British press were quick to urge readers not to condemn Islam for the atrocities of September 2001. However, 'the war on terror' has left the public in no doubt that the enemy is 'radical Islam'. To the dismay of Britain's diverse Muslim communities, the popular news media provided platforms for obscure Islamist 'firebrands' as if they represented significant constituencies. The numerous TV documentaries which provide a more balanced portrayal of the cultural, political and historical significance of Islam, reach relatively small audiences. This may explain why the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll reveals only a minute positive impact level of the TV news (6.3%) and documentary (6.3%) coverage.

By the time of the July 2005 London bombings, tabloid scapegoating of 'outsiders' was overlaid with 'Islamophobia' -all the more insidious because the UK is home to some 1.6 million Muslims. According to the Institute of Race Relations, Islamophobic discourse across Europe, constructed and disseminated "by political parties, the media and the 'liberati' in pursuit of an assimilationist agenda", is now "the primary barrier to integration" (Fekete, 2008).

As public discourse about social cohesion in the UK shifted from 'multiculturalism', acknowledging difference and celebrating of diversity to 'inter-culturalism', with its implicit message of homogenisation in which the dominant culture prevails, even those born in the UK have begun to suspect that they are regarded as 'the enemy within'. When police wrongly alleged misrepresentation against Undercover Mosque (Dispatches, C4, 2007), when it

exposed the activities of extremist preachers, damages were awarded to the broadcaster, but the controversy did little to reduce tensions about what was happening within Muslim communities.

Meanwhile, following concern about media mis-representation of minorities, increased hostility to Muslims and a rise in anti-Semitism, the government's Cohesion and Faiths Unit commissioned the Society of Editors to produce guidance about accurate and fair coverage of black and ethnic minority communities. One indicative passage reads: 'Minorities carry the burden of being different. Don't make them synonymous with things that worry everyone, like terrorism, subjugation of women, forced marriage, illegal immigration, fraudulent benefits claims and cruel animal slaughter. Few are. "It is inevitable that some negatives will be reported. All of the above will be the subject of legitimate news stories from time to time. But some sources will be melodramatic, and wary journalists will watch out for them" (Elliott, 2005).

The impact of this guidance may explain why the UK press rates significantly ahead (34.7%) of the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll average (27%) as a source of positive representation of the Euro-Mediterranean region. However, analysts have consistently criticised the negative nature of UK press coverage of both 'foreigners' and 'Muslims'. As far back as 1997 the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (CBMI) highlighted media stereotyping and the failings of the PCC (Runnymede, 1997). A follow-up report seven years later (CBMI, 2004) was equally critical of the media, from whom 66% of people obtain most of their information about Islam and Muslims, according to a 2002 YouGov poll cited in the report. Academic research at the time recorded routinely hostile coverage focusing on Islamic extremists and representing Islam as 'foreign' (Poole and Richardson, 2002).

The All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Anti-Semitism in 2006 also noted links between media coverage and hostile behaviour. In October 2000, coinciding with publicity about the start of the second Palestinian Intifada, one charity providing advice, protection and training for Britain's Jews had recorded its highest monthly total of anti-Semitic The Anna Lindh Report 2010 incidents (105). The number increased to 286 in January 2009, when Israel's military campaign against Gaza was being reported, and by June 2009 had reached a new peak of 609. Editors are always reluctant to admit that their stories might influence public behaviour, but a relentless diet of front pages hostile to 'the stranger in our midst' cannot help but cause anxiety if not antipathy, and influence public discourse.

A study of national papers between 2000 and 2008 (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008) revealed that coverage of British Muslims had increased twelvefold by 2006. Two thirds of the stories stressed 'difference', links to terrorism, or presented Muslims as 'threats' or 'problems'. Anti-Muslim racism and racist attacks accounted for 10% of stories in 2000; but had reduced to 1% by 2008 when such assaults had become commonplace. Stories about Britain 'becoming a place of Muslim-only, no-go areas, where churches were being replaced by mosques, and Sharia law would soon be implemented', echoed BNP propaganda. "References to radical Muslims outnumber references to moderate Muslims by 17 to one", the report noted. The terms 'terrorist', 'extremist', 'fanatical', 'fundamentalist', 'radical' and 'militant' became common descriptors of Islam and Muslims in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers.

Another report, from the European Muslim Research Centre argued: "Islamophobic, negative and unwarranted portrayals of Muslim London as Londonistan [the title of a book by a Daily Mail columnist. (Phillips, 2006)] and Muslim Londoners as terrorists, terrorist sympathisers and subversives in sections of the media appear to provide the motivation for a significant number of anti-Muslim hate crimes" (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010).

This hostile media coverage may help explain Ofcom's finding in 2008 that "Ethnic minority groups are at the forefront of digital communications in the UK, with high levels of mobile phone, internet and multi-channel television take-up". This in turn may be indicative of alienation, especially among young British Muslims. Speaking on the BBC TV series 'Generation Jihad' one senior British police officer warned that UK faces a 20 year threat from

home grown terrorists, which will require "a generation of treatment to prevent the infection spreading". Repeated in the popular press such words fuel the anxieties of Muslim communities already under scrutiny as part of the government's multi-million Euro anti-extremism scheme.

### **Cultural Awareness in the Media Mix**

Equal opportunities legislation and campaigns by civil society groups, including the National Union of Journalists, have helped the UK media to develop a more diverse workforce than elsewhere in Europe. When a Society of Editors study revealed a disproportionately low representation of ethnic and religious minorities in the newsroom (Cole, 2004), a new industry bursary scheme was set up to encourage more members of minority communities to train as journalists. Britain also scored well in the 2009 EU 'Media for Diversity' study which commended structural and strategic initiatives to improve representation of minorities in the media.

Countering alienation and discrimination requires more than a multicultural newsroom. Britain's island status and imperial past may be obstacles to appreciation of the world as others see it, but what is noticeably absent from the media mix, and not just in the UK, is a facility to acknowledge the experience, history and culture of the 'other'. That requires political will to embrace the challenges of an increasingly interdependent world.

Perhaps it is time that vocational training of journalists everywhere should include a period spent far away from the familiar, gaining knowledge and respect for the world beyond their own culture and borders. Then perhaps all coverage of public affairs will become more accurate, rational, and tolerant and encourage an equity in respect and recognition of difference, offering an antidote to the demagogues who threaten to halt progress and security across the globe.

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GOOD PRACTICE:

### **United Kingdom - Multicultural Network**

In the UK one of the most significant institutional initiatives is the CDN which now links mainstream broadcasters and independent production companies in a united effort to improve representation of the UK's multicultural society on and off screen. The CDN works with its members on sharing expertise, resources and good practices, including: modernizing the casting and portrayal of ethnic minorities in mainstream programming; sharing non-commercially sensitive research on cultural diversity; obtaining a comprehensive picture of ethnic minority employment in UK broadcasting; and establishing industry standards for the collection of ethnic monitoring data. Among its initiatives, the CDN has launched the Diversity Pledge that aims to help both independent production, post production and other supplier companies take measurable steps to improve diversity in the industry through monitoring the diversity practices in quantifiable ways. Moreover, in September 2009, CDN has launched an annual Diversity Awards.

[www.culturaldiversitynetwork.co.uk](http://www.culturaldiversitynetwork.co.uk)