

DIGEST OF KEY POINTS FROM BERLIN CONFERENCE, JUNE 2007

Working groups

- Working group 1: media landscape – context and mechanisms
- Working group 2: governance and management
- Working group 3: red lines, taboos, self-censorship, personal threat
- Working group 4: reporting and representing the other

Participants were asked to consider the challenges of intercultural understanding for the media and what responses could be offered to meet these challenges.

Aspects of challenges identified

Acceptance of need to improve intercultural understanding:

- between Islam and the West
- between EU and Arab societies
- between diverse groups in European and Arab societies.

The journalist's role as affected by the media environment in the region:

- respective owner interests in public and independent media
- under-developed commercial media structures restricting independent funding
- the effect of poor resources: lack of political or cultural context, leading to stereotyping
- general lack of enthusiasm for topics of inter-cultural relevance.

The journalist's role as affected by political factors in the region:

- politicisation of Middle East news coverage
- government restrictions on journalists' capacity for free reporting.

The journalist's role as affected by professional factors:

- difficulty in providing information without feeding prejudice, e.g. when reporting acts of violence or the ethnic origin of those involved.
- unsure of value of regulations (public) and codes of conduct (internal) on promoting tolerance: are they less binding in foreign reporting?

Potential responses offered

Suggestions made for media professionals:

- Talk about ordinary people rather than about abstract ideologies or themes, e.g. Lebanese rather than Lebanon, Palestinians rather than Palestine.
- The need for pan-Arab media to tackle local issues, e.g. hospitals and education or how public funds are being spent, rather than focusing on grand themes and regional issues.
- Develop a code of conduct or guidelines on reporting the 'other' and on cross cultural issues. Revise or build on current codes (e.g. IFJ / EBU guidelines) not recreate.
- Bi-lateral ventures in joint coverage of 'stories' by Arab and European journalists and simultaneous publication on both sides.
- Attempt to harmonise terminologies used; cooperation to find a common language.

Suggestions made for media owners:

- Cultural diversity should be reflected in the number of Arab journalists working in mainstream European media and not only in Arabic services or in ethnic media outlets.
- Arab news media should learn how to reflect the rich cultural diversity within the Arab region, e.g. covering and giving voice to ethnic and religious minorities.
- Encourage new and different topics in EU news coverage; positive angles of the Arab world instead of focusing on the 'usual' negative aspects.
- Create partnerships for exchanging news / journalists / editors / local experts on media debates.
- Support journalism (training, editing manuals, exchange of skills) on intercultural matters. Joint training for European and Mediterranean partner journalists in intercultural competence, to improve the newsroom culture.
- Develop Training for Trainers courses on issues of cultural relevance, how to deal with crisis and stop the spread of prejudices (e.g. IFJ/FRA manuals on anti-discrimination).

Suggestions made for governments:

- Support public service broadcasting, which is facing a financial crisis in many countries. Make sure it is public and independent from the state. Editorial independence is crucial.
- Encourage commercial broadcasters not to sacrifice quality journalism. Consider joint ownership with journalists.
- Support the emergence of Community media – valuable in building bridges between communities/cultures.

- Foster networking projects among schools of journalism to ensure that the new generation of journalists are knowledgeable on Euromed issues.
- Avoid over-regulation – it should be restricted to the most extreme cases of incitement to hatred.
- Create a cross-country portal/forum for debate on intercultural matters, or build and expand on existing portals.
- Encourage private media owners and editors to be involved in the debate.
- Publicise current projects and expand them, e.g. the current initiative of exchanging TV programmes and features among French, Algerian and Lebanese TV channels.
- Consider the need for a Euromed ombudsman who can implement new shared ethical rules and ensure that European and Arab media adhere to them.
- Create a European sponsored prize in excellence in cultural dialogue.