Islam in the Western Media

By Bashy Quraishi

"Myths": Source: Medium 2/96

The following article is an excerpt of a text by Bashy Quraishy, Chief Editor of Mediawatch and Vice President of the European Network Against Racism. We were of the opinion, that the author's experiences, his observations, his criticism and suggestions apply, not only to the reception of the Islam in Western media, but should also be discussed wherever journalists have to deal with „the others", with people of different social, ethnic, cultural or religious background, especially in times of conflict. The full version of the article may be obtained from the author through www.bashy.dk.

As a journalist with minority roots, I am aware of the discussions about Islam taking place in Europe and my own country, Denmark. I am not a religious person, nor am I a practising Muslim, but over the years I have learned to respect and admire all religions. Somehow, after living in the western world, one thing has become very clear to me, that no matter how secular and non-practising I am, I would always be reminded by the media, the politicians and the people around me that I am a Muslim, and thus not a natural part of the Danish, European, and/or western culture. It is sad and it hurts to admit that all my efforts to be a normal law abiding, tax paying, peace loving and contributing citizen of Denmark have no value to the society. I am judged by the parameter of my religion. I know that I am not alone in this situation. There are millions of people sharing the same fate in the western world.

I have been working on the issue of the representation of Islam in the western media for many years. But little did I know that Islam in the western media would become such an actual issue after those terrible attacks on American targets on September 11th 2001, which resulted in the loss of many innocent lives and the destruction of property worth billions of dollars. One horrible outcome of this tragedy is the talk of "the clash of civilisations", "the war between Islam and the West" and a New World Order based on American leadership.

Slowly, but surely, the whole focus of the media started to involve the Islam in this discussion. TV reports, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts and Internet chats were flooded with key-words like Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism and war. President Bush declared a "Crusade" on terrorism and Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi went as far as declaring that Islamic civilisation was inferior compared to the Christian West. The leader of the Danish People's Party declared war against Islam from the stage of the Danish Parliament, on October 5th. Mogens Carme, a Danish Member of the European Parliament, said at his party's annual meeting: "All western countries are infiltrated by Muslims. Some of them are nice people, who are waiting to kill us all when they are sufficient in numbers".

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Most of the media published letters, comments, articles and news which were clearly meant to inflame the situation. A reputed British Professor, Micah Dembo, wrote in *The Independent* newspaper on October 5th: "The cultural and intellectual foundations of terrorism in Islamic societies can only be destroyed by westernising them".

All this happened with the help of the media. Flag waving, and emotional and biased reporting replaced objectivity. Highly respected American author and critic Susan Sontag heavily criticised the media in her article in *The New Yorker* on September 19th. She wrote: "The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing."

Immediate results

This uncritical and biased journalism and intentional use of anti-Islamic terminology as a tool of propaganda had, unfortunately, immediate side effects. International terrorism became synonymous with Islam as a religion, with Muslims, and with Arabs and the Middle East. Attacks on Arab-looking people resulted in the deaths of many innocent people. Vandalism and the looting of property, bombing of homes, harassment of Muslim women and girls on the streets and children in the schools and boycott of co-workers has been widely reported. The European Union's Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna published a report at the end of September detailing attacks and harassment of Muslims in the EU. It is not pleasant reading. Many European telephone callers to ethnic minority politicians in Denmark with Muslim background said, "Get ready for the gas chambers".

These attacks on Muslims took on such a momentum that alarm bells started ringing in the halls of Western power bases. Many Arab and Muslim countries complained bitterly and the Middle Eastern communities started raising their voices. After that pressure, President Bush appeared in a Mosque in Washington D.C and appealed to the Americans to show decency and restraint. The same was done by Tony Blair and Romano Prodi. They clearly said that the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam or Muslim people. President Bush even proclaimed that Islam is a religion of peace.

Very commendable gestures, which did lessen the tensions. Unfortunately, in the same breath, these political leaders are also talking about fundamentalism and terrorism as the main enemy. The common person in the West has no way of separating and distinguishing between fundamentalism and fanaticism. Are these western leaders not aware that the mere mention of the word fundamentalism evokes anger among their populations which in turn is quickly and automatically attached to religion - not Christianity, Hinduism or Judaism but exclusively with Islam? Pictures of a few Pakistani women, with the Quran in one hand and a gun in the other, or of a few hundred young men with long black beards shouting "Jihad" or "Allah is great" and other customary emotional slogans, are repeatedly used to illustrate the evils of terrorism and fanaticism. These images settle deep into the psyche of the innocent and ill-informed public and create hate. A hate which has its own cycle, rhythm and logic. A hate which every person among ethnic minorities - Muslim or Non-Muslim - can feel, taste and see.

One of the great American sociologists and linguists, Noam Chomsky, was interviewed on independent Serbian Radio B 92 in Belgrade, on September 25th.* He was asked: "How do you comment on the explanation given by many American media that "the terrorists struck the USA

... fact is, I did actually find a young Yeti here, alone and with no protection in the Himalayan wilderness...

Source: Das Medienbuch, RV 98

*the text of the interview is available under
http://www.uco/ick.org/~de/WTChit/Chomsky.html

because they hate western values [civil liberties, tolerance, welfare, etc]?" He replied: "The second part of the question, about hate, we can simply dismiss. It is self-serving nonsense and its purveyors surely know that, at least if they have any familiarity with the current history, including that of the Middle East. Naturally, these are convenient pretences, which serve to deflect attention from the actual grievances expressed even by the most pro-western elements in the Middle East. As for the media, we have to ask how they dealt with the basic questions that arise in the case of crimes, whether small or horrendous: who was responsible? What should the response be? Why did it happen? There has been virtually no discussion on any of these questions. Apart from a few exceptions like the Wall Street Journal, there is very little in the mainstream media".

Media surveys

Recently I surveyed Danish media's coverage of religions in Denmark. Over a three-month period, from May 15th to August 15th, I looked at six national newspapers and two national TV channels. 75% of media coverage was about Islam and nearly 60% of the material was negative stories.

Prior to the terrorist attacks in the USA, on July 31st 2001, the American news agency APP brought a story about negative stereotyping of Arab-Muslims in the American media. Jack G. Shaheen, author of two books on the subject, said: "There is an unending barrage of the same hate-filled images, portraying Arabs as less than human. Not only are they bashed and vilified on a constant basis, the religion is thrown in too. Hurtful and harmful stereotypes do not exist in a vacuum. Continuously repeated, they dehumanise people, narrow our vision and blur reality". Shaheen told the "Los Angeles Times": "Arab families were never shown on TV or film. You never see people who look like and act and behave like other people."

Runnymede Trust, a British charity organisation, stated in its September 2001 bulletin: "It could be argued that the media portrayal of the alleged perpetrators of these acts of terrorism is racist and Islamophobic. A glance at the media coverage of the last weeks is sufficient to establish that reporting of the event is unbalanced and likely to stir up feelings of Islamophobia". The organisation already published a major report in 1997 under the title "Islamophobia - a challenge for us all". In this report, it was highlighted how the media have a tendency to express false views about Islam, maintaining and, in times of crisis, inciting racist and Islamophobic attitudes.

Why is a response necessary?

As the media have become more and more sophisticated over the last twenty years, it has become apparent that one must be clever to use them. Today there are more groups trying to grab the attention of the media or trying to wrestle with it.

We who work with and against media distortion of information discovered that the media in general have become a fourth state power. One can not just throw stones at it from a distance and hope that one day they will hit the right spot. All media criticism was rejected out of hand with the following arguments:

- The media are just doing their job of informing the public
- Media criticism is a hidden form of censorship, which does not fit in with democracy

Source: New People 11/99

• Ethnic minorities can not expect special treatment from journalists
• Freedom of expression must be upheld at all costs
• If the media do not cover anti-immigrant feelings in society and offer people a chance to vent their anger, it can result in race riots

• If activists and minorities feel misrepresented, they can use their right of reply, complain to the editor, write to the Press Ethic Committee or sue the paper in court.

All these points are valid, make sense and reflect the mind set of the journalistic community, these are based on assumptions of Holiness and smack of professional arrogance. Journalists should know that freedom of speech was never meant for the journalists but for the little man who had difficulty in opposing the ruling class. There has never been, and never will be, any form of absolute freedom of expression. It is always linked with responsibility and common sense.

Source: NZZ 2/11/2001

Four principles of journalism

The distinguished journalist and scholar Edmund Lambeth formulated four principles to serve as the foundations for ethics in journalism. These basic principles, which journalists should use for inspiration and as the basis of media ethics are:

• Telling the truth must always be paramount
• Freedom for journalistic independence must be maintained
• Justice must combine fairness in reporting as well as the exposing of injustices
• Journalists should always address the issue of humanity, and should not be guilty of committing direct, intentional harm to others, and they should, wherever possible, prevent suffering.

There will always be ethnic groups and, for the foreseeable future, there will be many ethnic problems. However, journalists have to show awareness and sensitivity to avoid being an unwitting instrument of the escalation of conflict.

What can be done?

Defending religious identity without the extremes of "cultural minimalism" or violent conflict is possible, providing the Western media accept the condition of democracy and the reality of pluralism. Identity, whether of an individual or a group, religious or political, ethnic or racial, takes on a decisive importance in a violent context if it is not allowed to manifest itself freely and peacefully. It always affirms itself through a struggle for power and domination.

In the case of European media, I believe, the thinking journalist's great contribution lies in helping political leaders to re-examine the path via which modern society gets its pluralistic nature. Tomorrow's European journalists should no longer be obsessed with the idea of a single identity, even less so by the quest for a strong sense of European civilisation. They must advance towards a flexible and open society. They will then become a vanguard in a society where journalism will not focus on race, culture, religion and colour but on the fellowship of human beings. If European journalists really want to have a pluralistic and cosmopolitan coverage then they must do away with Eurocentrism and enlarge the scope of professionalism to be all-inclusive. They must think multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

In the end I wish to present some important practical suggestions to my journalist friends. We propose a few guidelines for the media. They are not intended as a directive, or meant to point
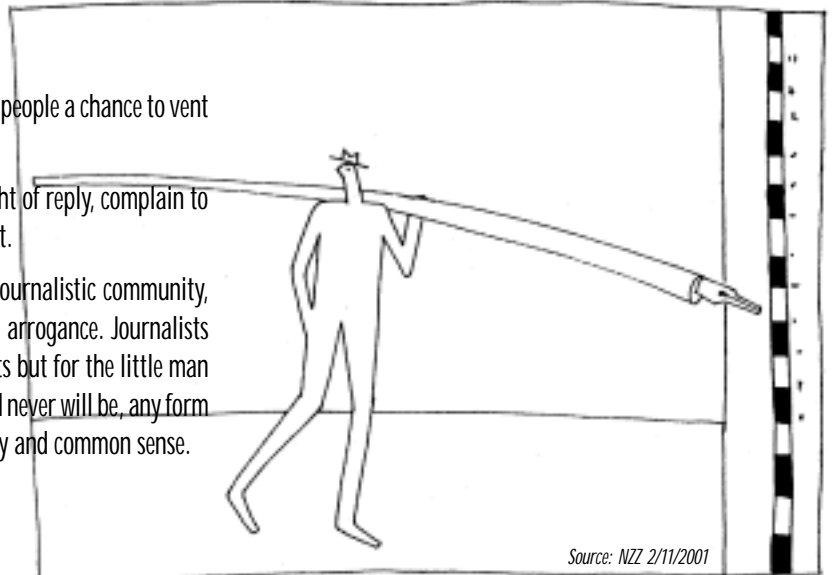
the finger to the media world and the countless decent, hard working and professional people who write stories, produce programmes, compile broadcasts and inform the public about the changes, developments and events in society. Ours is merely a suggestion. Through our work, both with the ethnic minorities and the Danish majority, we have collected information and factual knowledge that we wish to share. It is up to the individual to decide how to use it.

Ten Media Suggestions

1. Freedom of speech is a basic human right and so is the right to be free of discrimination. Any reporting which enhances racism, perpetuates prejudices and divides society must be avoided.

2. Reporting and covering ethnic minority issues should be done with the same objectivity and neutrality which is practised in the case of the majority.

3. Journalists should be aware of the pitfalls of their own Eurocentric upbringing and ideological education when describing other cultures and religions, especially Islam. Use of contacts among minorities can be helpful.

4. Words like nigger, Paki, fundamentalist, ghetto, ethnic gangs, criminal second generation immigrants are derogatory to minorities. One should not use terms which have a negative impression attached to them.

5. The culture, religion, ethnicity, colour or nationality of ethnic minorities should not be used as an explanation model to write or talk about an individual or a group of people.

6. Use of unconfirmed statistics, data or facts can be very dangerous, as they can be misused by anti-immigrant politicians, right wing movements and racist organisations. It can also damage a journalist's own reputation and integrity.

7. While writing about a particular issue among an ethnic group, please use multiple sources so that one sided impressions and information do not dominate the story.

8. Involve the opinions of ethnic groups while covering issues important to society such as environment, traffic, sports, foreign affairs or general development. It will give them a sense of belonging.

9. The ethnic minorities lack socio-political influence and the means to voice their own concerns. Therefore they are not in a position to defend themselves. Journalists are morally bound to give the underdog a voice.

10. The pen is mightier than the sword. A spoken word, a written paragraph or a televised picture has a momentum of its own. It can not be withdrawn. Its damage takes time to repair. Journalists should realise the power they posses and act accordingly.

SUMMARY RÉSUMÉ RESUMEN

Bashy Quraishi, editor-jefe de "Mediawatch" y vicepresidente de "Euopean Network Against Racism" (Red Europea Contra el Racismo) critica en su artículo la percepción occidental del islam. El autor no se refiere solamente al reportaje después de los atentados terroristas en los Estados Unidos, sino que lucha por un periodismo universal en sus orientaciones profesionales — multi-culturales, multi-étnicas y multi-religiosas. Sus diez proposiciones dan a entender una orientación moral del trabajo y no serán exclusivamente aplicables a los medios occidentales o el reportaje sobre el islam.

Bashy Quraishi, rédacteur en chef de Mediawatch et vice-président du Réseau Européen contre le Racisme, présente dans cet article une analyse critique de la perception de l'Islam par l'Occident. Il ne limite pas son approche aux seules suites des attaques terroristes aux Etats-Unis. L'auteur fait un choix clair pour un journalisme ouvert et multidimensionnel : multiculturel, multiethnique et multireligieux. Ses dix « commandements des médias » suggèrent une orientation morale pour l'exercice du journalisme, et ils trouveront un champ d'application par-delà les médias occidentaux et les reportages sur l'Islam.