

Media challenged to match the public's interest in better coverage

Paul GILLESPIE

Paul Gillespie analyses the information of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey and relates it to significant trends in media behaviour and practice emerging in the region. He explores public interest in news and information between European and SEM countries, how media shape public opinion and attitudes in the region, and the most trusted media sources for cross-cultural reporting. The author concludes by illustrating the elements of a future observatory and recommends more involvement of the media in the intercultural debates.

Media plays a central role in the countries bordering the Mediterranean and in relations between them. The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey on Intercultural Trends in the Euro-Mediterranean Region documents that role. It explores public interest in news and information between European and South and Eastern Mediterranean countries (SEM), how media shape public opinion and attitudes in the region, the most trusted media sources for cross-cultural reporting in that space and related socio-demographic characteristics of the populations involved, including gender, age and education.

This chapter assesses and analyses the Survey's information and relates it to significant trends in media behaviour and practice emerging in the region. The surveys are snapshots at a particular time, in selected countries, which should be related to recent events and wider changes. But they reveal important variations between the most trusted media north and south of the Mediterranean, notably between print (more trusted in the North), and online and social media (more so in the South). Common to both sides of the Mediterranean Sea is the importance of television broadcasting – a reality that those concerned with media performance and practice must take properly into account.

The chapter goes on to examine how these findings can be used to develop a more informed and evidence-based approach to intercultural dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region over the next three years before the fourth Anna Lindh Report is published. The media's wider societal and cultural role can be observed, analysed and discussed by journalists, editors, media analysts, citizens, civil society organisations and policy-makers, all of whom seek to use and influence their communication power and influence. Mapping and understanding media more effectively are priorities for the Anna Lindh Foundation's work in this period across all its intercultural activities. This Survey's findings provide a benchmark for that work.

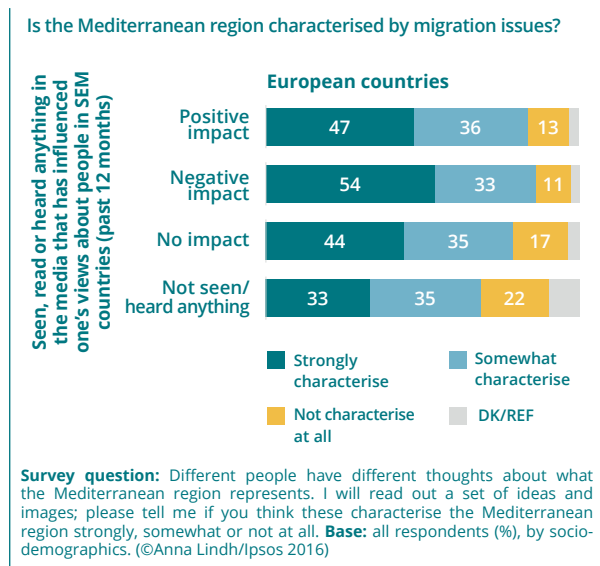
How media shapes perceptions

The Survey asks respondents how interested they are personally in news and information about European and SEM countries classified under five headings: cultural life and lifestyle, political situation, economic conditions, religious beliefs and practices, and sports activities. The findings reveal somewhat different rankings on both sides of the Mediterranean. The Europeans are generally more interested in each of the categories than SEM respondents, combining very interested and *somewhat interested* answers. Religious beliefs and practices in Europe are markedly less interesting for the SEM countries than the other way (46% to 59%). But sports activities are of much greater interest from the South to the North, reversing that pattern (61% to 46%). People in the North with friends or relatives in the SEM countries are more interested in its news.

These findings are worth exploring further by journalists involved in cross-cultural reporting as a guide to public interest in their work. Analyses by individual country, by age, gender and education show varying potential demand for coverage. Whether that demand is being effectively met is a larger question that can be answered only by observing and mapping actual media content. The patterns of indifference shown here show that reporting across the Mediterranean is probably not a media priority on either side.

Content analysis is also likely to show a heavy media concentration on certain aspects of the relationship. The overview chapter discusses how media framing of the migration and refugee crisis in 2015-17 affected European public perceptions of the Mediterranean region. Those exposed to media coverage of the South were significantly more likely to say it has to do with migration issues than those who were not. This is a good example of how the Survey can be used to analyse issues more deeply.

Chart 9.1
Impact of media coverage on views about the Mediterranean region



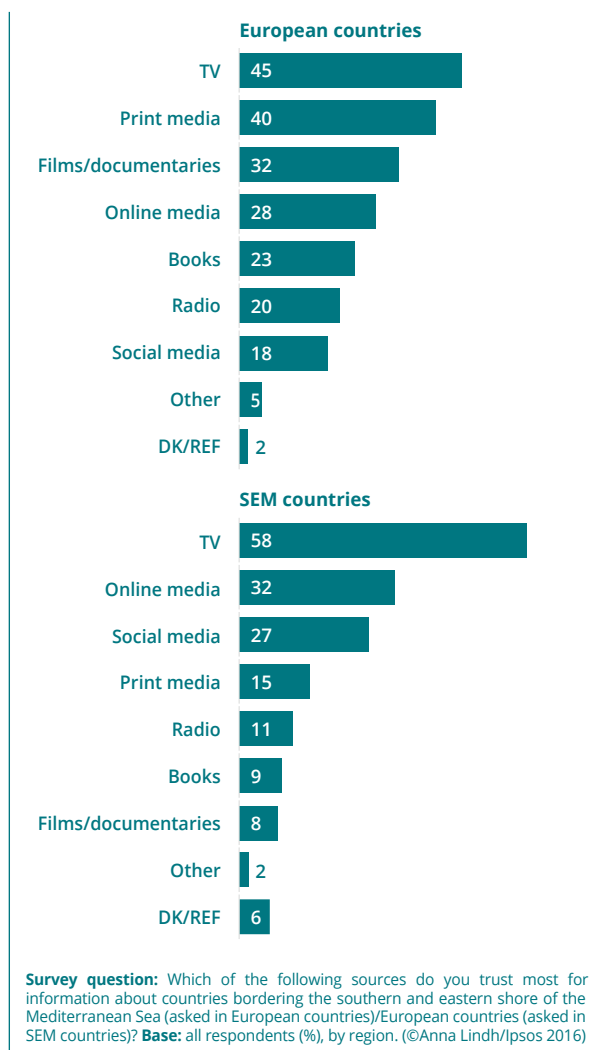
Direct evidence of the media's role in shaping public perception comes from the question which asked whether respondents had, during the previous 12 months, 'seen, read or heard anything in the media that has influenced your view of people' in European or SEM countries. Responses were prompted in a five-point scale ranging from yes in a positive or negative way, through having seen something but leaving views unchanged, to not seeing anything, to not knowing. There is a marked difference between the European side where 55% said they encountered something but their views remained unchanged and the 12% who said this in the South. Twice as many in the SEM countries had not encountered anything compared to the North (38% to 17%); but the South had more than twice the proportion of positive experiences (21% to 8%) and somewhat larger negative ones (26% to 18%) (Chart 9.1).

Interpretation of these results must take account of the dramatic events concerning refugees and migrants over those 12 months as well as the recurrent terrorist atrocities in European cities – some involving young individuals from immigrant communities originating in North African and Middle Eastern countries motivated by Islamic fundamentalism. Such extremist violence captured media headlines, while negative images of the Syrian war, fleeing refugees and brutal Jihadis dominated coverage, crowding out alternatively the common interests and cultural interaction between the North and the South amply confirmed in the Survey. Such impressions of media coverage need to be deepened by research and their findings debated by journalists and editors; but their effect on public perceptions is readily seen. They display a greater closure of attitudes in Europe than in the SEM countries and an awareness of that relative closure in the South. Some similar patterns were found in the 2009 Report, which asked the same question. Then, as now,

the more educated were more likely to say they had encountered news about the others, but they are less inclined to say it was positive.

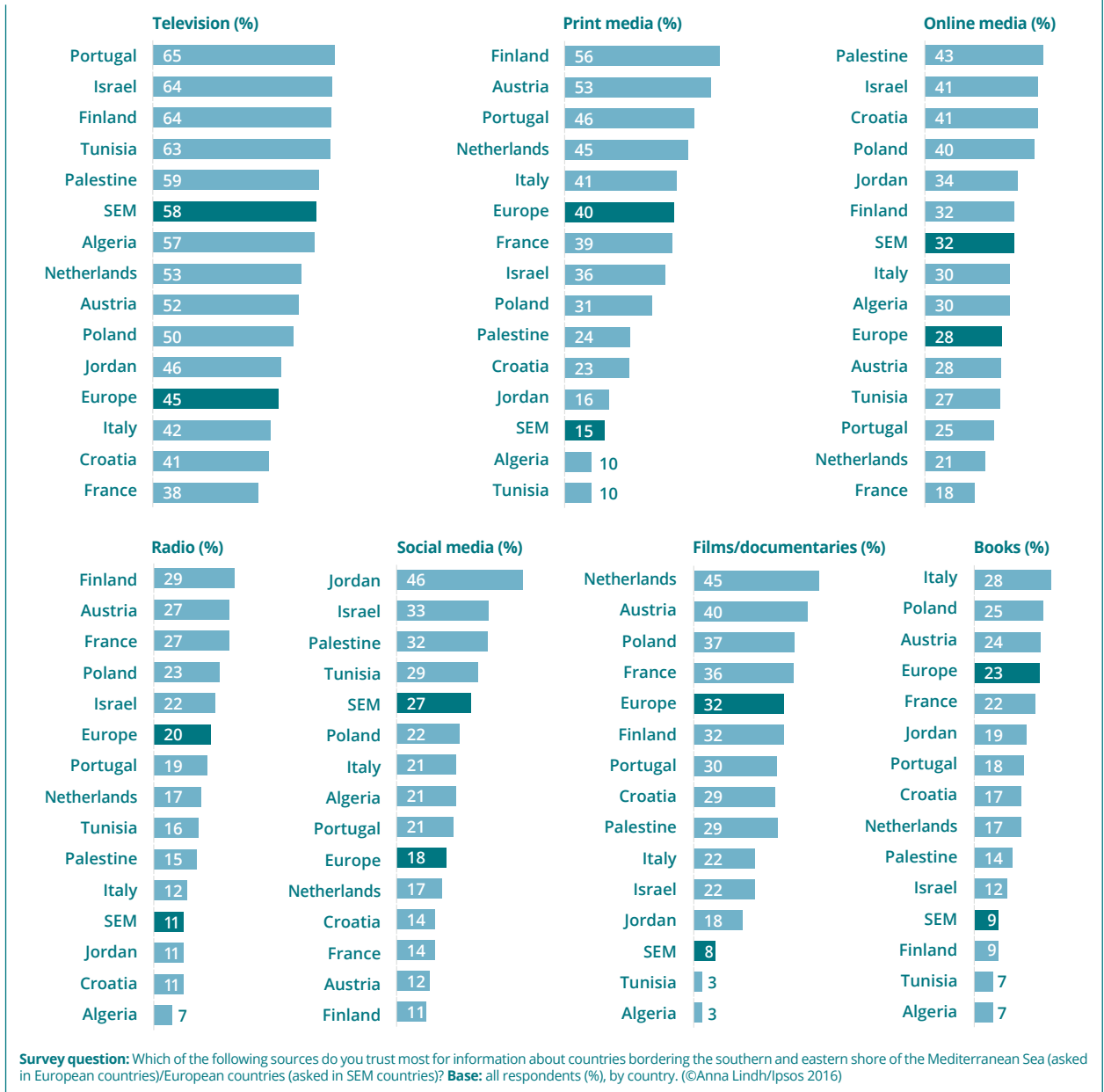
A new question this time probed which media sources are most trusted for cross-cultural reporting. It found a clear predominance of television on both sides (45% in the North, 58% in South); print is much more trusted in Europe (40% to 15%); online and social media are relatively much more so in the South than the North (32%/27% to 28%/18%) and books, films and documentaries are much more trusted in Europe. Age and education levels affect these results (Chart 9.2 and 9.3).

Chart 9.2
Most trusted media sources for information about SEM/European countries



There is a gap between the levels of interest expressed in receiving more news and information about the different countries and cultures involved in the region and perceptions of how media report. The high numbers in the SEM countries who have not seen, read or heard anything in the media influencing their views of Europeans and of Europeans whose views remained unchanged even

Chart 9.3 Most trusted media sources for cross-cultural reporting, by country



though they have encountered such news tells that story. The additional question on most trusted media for that information is revealing because it clarifies what people use as well as what they find most reliable. They were not asked explicitly about media credibility or whether they are satisfied with what media tell them about Europeans or SEM countries. Such conclusions must be inferred from this data and other research. But given the levels of mutual interest expressed, put alongside mutual misunderstandings of the other side's values shown best in the Survey's findings about raising children, there is scope for more engaged and positive media work in this sphere. Analysis by individual countries within the groups and by socio-demographic characteristics bears this out.

There is a lot of variation within the European and SEM groups as well as between them.

Other questions asked in the Survey show efforts to meet and understand people from the other side of the Mediterranean encountering difficulties quite aside from dissatisfaction with media accounts. Meeting people in person or online opens up those opportunities; but it is notable that twice as many Europeans found their views unchanged as changed positively, while in the South there was more openness to such meetings. Asked about barriers to cross-cultural encounters, language, culture and stereotypes loomed large on both sides. Media were not mentioned explicitly in these listings, but they play into each aspect.

Stereotypes are especially – though not only – media creations and require much more attention from practitioners and researchers. That makes the findings on tolerance and living together in multi-cultural environments reported here really significant for journalists and editors. There is both a convergence of values and a greater commitment in the SEM countries to realise multi-cultural living opportunities than in Europe. Much the same pattern emerges from the measures listed to prevent and deal with conflicts and radicalisation. On both sides there is a commitment to educational, youth, exchange, cultural, religious and training initiatives, but with a greater emphasis on them from the South. Media training for cross-cultural reporting is higher on the southern list than on the north's.

Media observatory, research and dialogue

The media is relevant to most of the fields of work of the Anna Lindh Foundation, whether to communicate and report on the initiatives themselves at various levels, or to analyse relevant societal developments bearing on them.

An observatory on how media cover issues of intercultural relations and to provide evidence-based resources for journalists could be developed by the Anna Lindh Foundation and a consortium of partners, including the European Broadcasting Union and the Euro-Med Media Network. The concept originates in the foundational constitution of the Anna Lindh Foundation in 2003 and its recent mapping of media initiatives. It would bring together media analysts, journalists and civil society representatives to map and assess media coverage of intercultural relations, using these survey results as a benchmark. It would highlight good practices and gaps in coverage and leverage this research with senior media executives and owners, practicing journalists and policy-makers between this Survey and the next one. Media dialogues each year would discuss these issues and propose ways to tackle them more effectively, taking account of the most trusted media sectors identified here. In line with the Anna Lindh Foundation's strategic planning a number of 'hot issues' would be included in the research and dialogue, among them migration, cultural stereotyping, mobility, shrinking space for civil society, media freedoms and professionalism, social and online media, terrorism and radicalisation. The region's journalism schools would be fully engaged in the work, particularly its research aspect.

It is proposed to develop a rapid response mechanism for media on the basis of this observatory and using its networks of expertise. Reacting to headline news with a cultural dimension, it could provide a link between practicing journalists and regional experts with access to the database and mapping exercises. They could be its spokespeople, providing analysis on such subjects as migration, social cohesion, media freedoms, religious affinities and radicalisation.

More involvement of the media in the debate

Approaches to the media's involvement in the Euro-Mediterranean region's intercultural affairs vary from the prescriptive to the engaged. NGOs and policy-makers have tended to be prescriptive about the media's role while criticising their actual performance. They often demand coverage of formal positions rather than facilitating access to allow more vivid, sympathetic or personalised reporting. Journalists resist such dirigisme but get defensive when accused of violating ethical norms of balance, fairness, evidence and sourcing inscribed in their ethical codes. They point out that publishers and owners often have different values than the journalists who work for them and that disputed coverage can be contested and criticised from within as well as from outside.

This chapter has argued that a more engaged approach which involves practicing journalists, editors and publishers in discussing and acting on these issues is better for all concerned. That is the spirit in which should animate media dialogue, research and analysis in the proposed observatory. There is more chance of engaging the media if they participate in the discussion, including in their own self-criticism and how they respond to criticism from NGOs and others about their coverage. The values of evidence-based argument and debate, the expressed desire of publics north and south for greater intercultural engagement, as well as the intensification of 'hot topics' in the region create a real opportunity for media coverage in the coming period. If these arguments are best resolved through a cooperative process there is a rich menu arising for it through this third Anna Lindh Report on Intercultural Trends in the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

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