

# Mirror Images in Daily Life Coverage

RASHA ABDULLA

With the emergence of privately owned satellite channels and the spread of online information tools, the Egyptian media sector is in a process of diversification. At the same time, as Rasha Abdulla points out, there remains a significant lack of guidelines on how to treat issues of cultural diversity, as well as limited coverage of issues on the other side of the Mediterranean. Abdulla explores further this situation as well as positive ways in which the media can play a pedagogical role in terms of giving an insight into the daily life of the 'other'.

For the Arab world, cultural diversity is now more than ever an increasingly important issue. Particularly since the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States (US), the Arab world, principally Muslims but also non-Muslim Arabs, has lamented the false and inaccurate image of Arabs in the West, and the lack of understanding of this part of the world's culture and religions. The problem reached crisis point with the publishing of twelve Danish cartoons that portrayed Islam as a terrorist religion and Prophet Mohamed as a terrorist, igniting massive anger all over the Arab and Muslim worlds. It has never been more important, therefore, for the Arab world to exert an effort to make sure Arabs have enough information about the outside world as well as to present the world with accurate information about the Arab culture.

At the same time, cultural diversity seems to be suffering within the Arab world. The dominant paradigm appears to be a duality of extremes, whereby you either see the very religious or the very non-religious, the too conservative or the too liberal, the too dogmatic or the too compliant. Middle grounds and moderation seem to be lost on many fronts. It has to be noted, however, that Islam, the dominant religion in the Arab world, encourages cultural diversity. "O mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another" (The Holy Qur'an, Al Hujrat, 49: 13).

This article will analyse some aspects of cultural diversity in the Egyptian media, particularly in relation to countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region. It has to be noted, however, that most images of the 'other' or of the West in the Arab media refer primarily to images of the US. This is due to the important stance that the USA represents with its foreign policy in the Middle East as well as to the large supply of US media content that airs regularly on Arab satellite channels. Such content has managed to acquire a large audience following, in particular among the youth of the Arab world.

## Guidelines on Cultural Diversity

There is a tremendous lack of guidelines on cultural diversity in the Arab world in general, and Egypt is no exception. Despite its huge importance, the concept of cultural diversity is not part of the everyday language of people in this part of the world. Recently, this author has been involved in training media and communication university professors on the importance of cultural diversity and how to integrate it into their syllabi and classroom teaching, and has been struck by how little even the highly educated think about this important concept. Media laws in the Arab world do not mention cultural diversity, and neither do codes of ethics for journalists or media professionals. Even the highly controversial Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter that was approved by Arab Ministers of Information (with the exception of the Ministers of Qatar and Lebanon) at a meeting of the Arab League does not include a single reference to cultural or media diversity.

There is also a lack of organisations that act as media watchdogs in the Arab world. Most efforts done in this regard are minimal, and are usually in the form of projects funded by international agencies and foundations rather than on-going monitoring efforts conducted by local non-governmental organisations.

During the last few years, one of the more significant developments on the media scene has been the introduction of a few private-owned satellite channels to compete with the plethora of government-owned and controlled channels. This, by definition, has led to more diversity in the media. Internet use and the introduction of interactive websites (Web 2.0) have also helped a great deal, as every individual now has the potential of being a publisher (Abdulla, 2010). However, Internet penetration is relatively low in the Arab world, and diversity remains a haphazard phenomenon, not regulated or formally encouraged through any media entities or documents.

Credible scientific research is a rare commodity in the Arab world, and therefore, there is also a lack of scientific studies regarding media diversity or the image of the 'other' in general, with the rare exception of studies regarding the Arab image in the Western (particularly US) media, and the image of the USA in the Arab media. This is almost dictated by the massive amounts of American content on Arab television screens, whereby several popular satellite channels are dedicated to airing only American movies or series and sitcom episodes. As an illustration of this point an unpublished doctoral dissertation conducted at Cairo University compared coverage of the US, France, and the United Kingdom in Al Ahram newspaper from September 2001 to 2003. The study found that coverage of the US constituted 66% of the items analysed, while coverage of France constituted 10%, and the UK only 7%. Given the time-frame of the analysis, coverage of the US focused on September 11 and the events leading to the war on Iraq. Coverage of France was positive in light of its opposition to the US political actions, while coverage of the United Kingdom was negative and portrayed the country as a mere follower to the US foreign policy (El Said, 2008).

### Representations in the Arab Media

In terms of actual media coverage, Europe gets more of a share in newspapers than on television. However, in a country where illiteracy still plagues one third of the population (UNDP, 2009), newspapers are mostly read by the educated elite. And even then, the coverage of Europe in Egyptian newspapers mainly focuses on political or economic aspects rather than cultural or everyday life aspects, and is therefore dependent on the general political climate and economic relations between Egypt or the Arab world and particular European countries. At certain times, this has led to a positive portrayal of Europe, or parts thereof, in the Egyptian media. For example, the French and German anti-war positions when the 2003 war on Iraq started was received very warmly among Egyptians, unlike the British stance on the same issue. The successful economic model of the European Union is also usually positively portrayed in the Egyptian media, and framed as a model for the Arab countries to follow. In recent years though, when Europe has been an integral

part of television and newspaper coverage, it has mostly been in relation to negative treatment of Islam in European countries, which was naturally only negatively portrayed in Egyptian media. Ironically, France and Germany both had a major share of such coverage: France over its stance against the Islamic headscarf, and Germany for the infamous Marwa el Sherbini case, the Egyptian Muslim doctor who was stabbed to death 18 times by a Russian man inside a German court. Denmark had another major share for the Danish cartoon crisis, as did Pope Benedict XVI for his controversial remarks about Islam that were perceived very negatively all over the Arab world, and the Swiss referendum that resulted in a ban on the construction of Islamic mosque minarets. The case of Marwa el Sherbini was the one topic that, in this regard, got major television coverage in 2009. Dubbed 'the headscarf martyr' by local and international media, el Sherbini's brutal murder brought feelings of Islamophobia in Europe to the forefront of Egyptian print, broadcast and online media. What made matters worse was a feeling that, as the Guardian reported, Germany reacted 'coldly' to the case, and saw it more of a problem of lack of security inside a court room rather than an anti-Islam racist crime (Connolly and Shenker, 2009). When such a major issue is being covered, Egyptian media, particularly television, do integrate European sources. For example, El A'ashera Masa'an (10 pm), one of Egypt's most popular evening talk shows, sent a delegation of reporters to Germany to cover the Marwa el Sherbini case, headed by its star presenter, Mona el Shazly. The programme conducted several interviews with German officials and citizens, some of whom were against the crime, and some who had never heard of it or who, at best, saw it as a mere incident of lack of security inside the court room.

The lack of European media content on Arab television screens only leaves room for news-orientated coverage of Europe in Egyptian media. Such coverage has focused in recent years on Europe's reactions to Arabs and Muslims, which have been largely negative. Incidents such as the Danish cartoons, Pope Benedict's controversial remarks, France's reactions to Muslim headscarves, the Swiss ban on the construction of minarets, and the killing of Marwa el Sherbini have been heavily covered in Egyptian media; naturally, such coverage

## Waves of the Mediterranean

Launched in Tunis at the start of 2010 with the support of the Anna Lindh Foundation, this media project has established a partnership between leading radio bodies across the Mediterranean, including Tunisian National Radio, Radio France, the Algerian Broadcasting Company, Morocco's National Radio and Television Society, and the COPEAM based in Italy. The context of the initiative is related to the key challenges facing radio cooperation at the Mediterranean level such as cooperation between professionals and the exchange of products, a factor which hampers the development of production standard practices offered to each radio. In this regard, this Network of partners has set out to do is develop new media co-productions related to the Region's historical, social and cultural life, and to broadcast on a rotational basis the series across the Euro-Mediterranean space. At the same time, the partnership is supporting radio professionals through training on co-production initiatives, as well as delivering workshops on media production to young professionals.

[www.copeam.org](http://www.copeam.org)

has been negative. There is a general feeling that Arabs and Muslims are not welcome in Europe, and that Islamophobia is prevalent in European countries. The recent Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll showed that almost three quarters of the sample (72.4%) said they have not encountered anything in the media that has positively affected their perceptions of Europeans. In my opinion, the percentage of respondents who said they did encounter such material (27.6%) is inflated because many Egyptians are 'too nice' to say otherwise. Among those who said they were positively influenced, news on television was their main source of influence (63.1%), followed by movies (18.9%). It would have been interesting to know the sources of influence for those who were not positively influenced as well. However, the overall results show the importance of television as a medium in affecting the perceptions of Egyptians towards Europeans, and a general lack of positive influence in this regards.

### The Media as Agents of Knowledge

Intercultural dialogue is of utmost importance to the well-being of societies. To enhance diversity and the image of the 'other', efforts should be exerted on the parts of both sides of every dialogue. In the case of the image of Europeans among Egyptians, both Egyptians and Europeans have some homework to do. The first 'p' in the '4ps' of the marketing mix is 'product'. Image is merely a reflection of the actual product. It is difficult to enhance the image of Europeans as long as Egyptians perceive of them as Islamophobes, and it is equally difficult to eliminate Islamophobia as long as Muslims are not doing enough to spread accurate information about their religion. Education is key on both fronts, and the media, particularly television, could be a major agent in this regards, while other different cultural approaches, including music, theatre, and all kinds of art, can also help. A number of important steps should be taken to enhance intercultural dialogue between Egypt and the Euro-Mediterranean countries. The first relates to 'Education'. Entertainment media productions should be used to 'educate' people of different cultural backgrounds about each other. Media content that portrays the everyday lives of Europeans is lacking in the Arab world compared to American

content; Content that educates Europeans about the everyday lives of Egyptians or Arabs is non-existent. Funding should be allocated to producing drama content (sitcoms, series, etc) that incorporates elements of the 'other' on national television screens. Secondly, monitoring of diversity and news values: non-governmental organisations should act as media monitoring bodies to assess news content in terms of diversity as well as fairness, balance, credibility, and objectivity. Media outlets on both fronts should be encouraged to uphold the values emphasized in universal codes of ethics. People of different cultural backgrounds should be integrated in media coverage of events touching upon their lives or their societies and cultures. The media on both sides should be trained to stay away from stereotypes depicting Europeans as Islamophobes or depicting Arabs and Muslims as terrorists.

There is also the issue of culture to address, where funding should be made available to help independent musicians, painters, actors, producers, and artists of every kind to showcase their talent outside the borders of their own countries. Finally, concerning New Media, information and communication technologies should be used to educate the 'other' about one's own culture and background. The Internet is a wonderful tool for creating friendships among different cultures and different peoples. It could be a wonderful venue for Arabs to spread their cultures to the world and for Muslims to educate non-Muslims about the true essence of Islam as a peaceful, accommodating religion. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace could play a major role in bringing the hearts and minds of Egyptian and European youth closer, and spread a spirit of understanding and mutual respect.

RASHA ABDULLA serves as Chairperson of the Journalism and Mass Communication Department at the American University in Cairo.

## Egypt - Radio Cairo's European Service

The Local European Service of Radio Cairo provides transmission in six languages, namely English, French, German, Armenian, Greek, and Italian, therefore catering to foreign expatriates and foreign-language speaking communities throughout Egypt. The Service has always had a large Egyptian youth following, although that has been affected lately by the introduction of private radio stations. The main reason behind the popularity of Radio Cairo's Local European Service is the fact that it broadcasts a good dose of Western music, much of which is actually American rather than European, but that distinction is rarely made. Other than music, the station also presents news, sports and a variety of shows. Even though the overall content of the station says little about European life, it offers an opportunity to non-Arabic speakers to get information about the national Egyptian news, as the news bulletins presented on the Local European Service are usually comprised of the same news items broadcast on other Radio Cairo stations translated into different languages.

[www.annalindhreport.org/goodpractice/radiocairo](http://www.annalindhreport.org/goodpractice/radiocairo)