

Mutual Empathy against Ignorance and Misunderstandings

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We hold as a truth that this Mare is truly Nostrum. Some Northern Europeans own fashionable 'riyadh's in Marrakesh, others buy summer houses on the Croatian coast; in some parts of North Africa, many still leave families and loved ones for a piece of the economic wealth they see in Western Europe. Al Hambra and the numerous Crusaders forts testify to this long and often tumultuous history of interaction and we all equally enjoy recipes that the expansion of ingredients such as olive oil has made accessible beyond the geographical limits of where olive trees grow! Our common culture unites us despite the stark imbalances between the North and the South of the Mediterranean. So is it too naïve to ask: why can't we all just get along? What do we really know about each other? And what role can the media play? The Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll sheds invaluable light on certain realities: for example, those who have actually seen the other side of the Mediterranean, or been directly exposed to people from the other side of the Mediterranean, are in fact a surprising minority. This explains to a large extent the real lack of knowledge of the 'other', which leads to increasing reliance on media for that knowledge, which in turn points to the media's potential shortcomings.

Inside the Media Landscape

It may seem that there is so little understanding of one another in view of the flood of information with the advent of new social media, much of which could play a constructive role. In Jordan for example, most of the bloggers play such a role, and are defined more as 'bridgers', made essentially of young, educated English speakers who write to communicate who they are and the values in which they believe. But perversely, the speed and the sheer quantity of media outlets can magnify misconceptions and misperceptions. Like almost everywhere in the world, on all sides of the Mediterranean, the media will focus on the most tragic or sensational events. At times, as with the Danish cartoon issues, it often fans the flames of conflict and tensions and ignores the bright spots that do exist – or even the simple fact that we are all connected: how many Europeans realise how much of the natural gas they consume comes from North Africa?

George Terzis, writing about reporting the 'other' (Terzis, 2008) explains how prejudices are formed: the media use these 'binary oppositions' (us vs. other, good vs. evil, moral vs. immoral, etc.) in constructing these prejudices. At the outset, "the media make these oppositions an integral part

of the seeking, collecting, assessing, writing, editing and layout/programming, reporting policies in all, political, economic and societal spheres". A vicious circle emerges of ignorance of the 'other': media not only reflect perceptions but then go on to perpetuate or reinforce these perceptions. Recently an article from a well-respected European news outlet referred yet again to so-called honour crimes as an 'Islamic practice', which it is not, even though it happens to be practised, sadly, in many majority Muslim countries. It is a common misperception but not one expected from seasoned European journalists. The fact that so much misunderstanding prevails despite all the potential benefits of the media demonstrates the value of face-to-face contact and a presence on the soil within the culture of the 'other' to foster mutual empathy and cooperation. So while we do all hear about one another through the media, the quantity of reporting versus its quality or accuracy is misleading, and we're somehow led to believe we actually know much more about one another than we actually do. Finally, what little communication efforts exist are usually unidirectional. Western European media outlets that communicate with the Arab world are quite numerous (e.g. the BBC World Service, Radio Monte-Carlo Doualiya, Deutsche Welle, Euronews in Arabic, etc.) while the only Arab media outlet which is communicating to the same scale with the rest of the world is Al Jazeera International - and for all its financial weight, even that network finds obstacles in getting distributed in the West.

Another factor which fuels misperceptions is the image of Northern Europe as conveyed: movies and news reports show a wealthy and relatively powerful continent, where there is not only less poverty but also more political freedom than in many of the countries in the south. The governments as well as their peoples are seen as not in direct need of anything, which leads to the assumption that if Europe is not opening its doors to more immigrants and if it is not pressuring Israel -financially or politically- it is not because it cannot, but simply because it won't. This perception alone goes a long way to explaining the multiple conspiracy theories and myths which abound in our part of the world about the 'West'. Some of the images broadcast will overshadow what good faith or efforts do exist: those immigrants risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean to arrive in Italy or Spain, some of them in holding camps surrounded by chicken wire, overshadow all the less publicised efforts of some Spanish towns to integrate immigrants in a constructive and dignified way. But there is a

limit to which one can accuse the media of being responsible for misperceptions which lead to conflict or tensions. There are other, real and serious hurdles on the way to achieving understanding, cooperation and real peace - of the kind the French and Germans reached after World War II. These hurdles just cannot be wished away by more positive images.

Changing Perceptions on the Ground

Racism, isolationist attitudes, narrow-mindedness, nationalism and religious tensions and extremisms exist on all sides of the Mediterranean. And of course, there is the stalled peace process in Palestine. Its causes and consequences are often timidly referred to by many Western European media outlets; many of which hesitate to use words like occupation, settlements, apartheid, war crimes and gross human rights abuses without qualifying them. Under international law settlements are illegal. Yet although this is a fact, it is covered as though it were just a matter of perception - "settlements which Israelis see as legal but many other countries don't" is one common turn of phrase- placing a doubt in viewers or readers' minds as to how illegitimate they really are. Here the media's depiction of events not only reflects but entrenches the international community's refusal to deal evenhandedly with the issue. For perceptions to truly shift, realities on the ground would have to change. Inundating the airwaves for months on end with pictures showing bloody and dismembered Palestinians bombed in Gaza can sometimes feel as if stories of death and destruction on some Arab networks leave little space for anything else. But a war in which women and children are killed with complete impunity cannot be made less real by somehow 'balancing' the airwaves with other images of 'success stories' no matter how inspiring or real. Those stories alone will not distract an audience whose families have for generations witnessed dispossession, humiliation and violence, especially in today's internet age, when news travels so fast and realities, good or bad, transmitted through mobile phone cameras, are difficult to dispute. This may explain why so many media-related initiatives to build ties between Palestinians and Israelis do not yield the positive results expected: in the former Yugoslavia, whatever peace-building efforts may have been attempted, they were never attempted while refugees were being forced out of their homes. So when it comes to the Middle East, one can hardly expect journalists from either side to attend common media training when the peace process is marred by ongoing killings, occupation, continuous building of settlements. This does not mean that nothing should be done or indeed attempted when it comes to working on changing perceptions that could pose a risk to peace and acceptance of one another, on the contrary, there should be a sense of urgency to do so.

One outcome of the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll is the importance and the positive influence of culture to rally people and bring about common understanding. Festivals should receive as much support as possible, be they music, film or other

cultural events. Festivals that would rove from one Roman theatre to another in various countries could bring about a sense of shared historical heritage. Easier access to films - whose rights are extremely expensive -from around the Region would be a huge help. But these efforts should be combined simultaneously with more targeted and efficient initiatives in a variety of fields including education, research and training, for greater impact.

Noha Mellor believes that Western media professionals tend to look superficially at Arab problems (Mellor, 2007). "The result is that the vast majority of journalistic accounts, and even the majority of academic accounts, inflict a typified identity upon all Arabs. Arab scholars' work should be made available to western scholars and students, and should serve as the bedrock for further studies. We also need more in-depth analyses among Arab journalists and audiences." It is worth noting in that respect that when Amin Maalouf wrote 'The Crusades Through Arab Eyes', for example, no other Arab authors could be found on the reading lists of students of the Crusader era. Upstream, there should be closer attention to the quality of media training and its continuity. One of the many peace-building media interventions consists in an exchange of journalists, whereby media professionals from the South are invited to work in newsrooms of Western media and conversely. However, to be effective and truly transforming, efforts should be long term to include exchanges among reporters working in newsrooms on the 'other side' for at least a year (effects of two-week workshops usually fizzle away quickly). They should also not be limited to journalism education but address other areas to include an enabling legal and social environment. Widespread media literacy is also important. In Jordan, for instance, the presence of knowledge stations with training provided for those who would like to learn about the internet in remote areas of the Kingdom shows a determination, with very little means, to be a part of this equation. Finally, one could imagine several Mediterranean capitals hosting newsrooms that would gather journalists from all the countries in the Region to produce, in various languages, a Mediterranean TV, and publications (including a women's magazine and a children's magazine highlighting our common heritage for example) which could serve as a concrete implementation of training programmes. The Anna Lindh Foundation, with its wide Network of participating non-governmental organisations in practically every country around the Mediterranean, has already contributed to the growing awareness of people in this vast Region. Others will hopefully emulate it, doubling efforts to promote, through a more holistic approach, understanding and cooperation around 'Our Sea'.

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