

## New Initiatives to Reflect Cultural Plurality

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There has been a trend in Morocco in recent years related to the promotion of cultural diversity issues, a factor which has had an impact on the national media landscape as well as on cross-cultural reporting at the Euro-Mediterranean level. Mona El Hamdani highlights recent positive case-studies in the domain of electronic media, inspired by the increasing recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity. At the same time, the author proposes areas of action which can support the media's capacity to present balanced information of the 'other'.

In Morocco and in other countries, the debate about diversity and its relationship with the media has been growing and attracting more attention from different segments of the society. The issue of diversity was not recognised until recently because it was perceived as a dangerous concept that could create chaos and shatter the unity of the Kingdom. Before 1999, the concept of diversity was not accepted at all because the state policy was that all Moroccan citizens were the same and they constitute a homogeneous group sharing the same values and perceptions and expectations. However, this tendency changed due to a new political will and diversity was recognised in the context of the new values associated with globalisation. The Moroccan media began to benefit from an unprecedented freedom in treating a variety of media and new media organisations emerged.

The issue of cultural diversity in the media is a very recent debate in Morocco given the gradual development of the Moroccan press in terms of numbers of media outlets, regulation and openness since 1956. The key question has been: is the Moroccan media really reflective of the rich cultural diversity in their country? Many voices are trying to give answers to this question by trying to assess the current situation concerning diversity. Towards this end, many conferences and national debates have been held to discuss this issue and try to come up with positive approaches to represent cultural diversity in the Moroccan media. However, there is a shortage of written records or references for recent and credible studies regarding this issue in Morocco.

It was possible to find only certain short articles that superficially discuss this issue. Yet the general direction and policy in the country are pushing towards the execution of credible studies and researches that examine and discuss the different aspects of diversity and media in Morocco. Nevertheless, certain obstacles have to be recognized, mainly the absence of specialized media research institutions that can carry out credible studies concerning diversity. Morocco does not need to import already made policies in the domain

of diversity and implement them blindly into the current situation. This country needs to learn from different foreign experiences, consider its own characteristics and then come up with a customized approach that can serve Moroccan expectations.

### Moroccan Media and the Mediterranean

The debate now in Morocco is only focused on national diversity within the borders of the Kingdom and Moroccan media does not treat the issue of cultural diversity in neighboring countries. To get more information and facts about this issue, a first step was to carry out research within the programmes that are presented by the Moroccan TV channels and radio stations. It was not possible to find that there is no specific programme that is directed towards uncovering the cultural diversity of the Mediterranean countries or other countries in general. The only news that is broadcasted in this regard is the one related to international events and updates such as elections, agreements, or other incidents. There are certain documentaries, but they only treat political and economic issues in other foreign countries. Concerning films and entertainment programmes, which are additional vehicles for cultural diversity, many of them are American and other films are from France or Egypt, usually portraying a distorted image of these societies.

At the level of written press and electronic media, the results were found to be the same. Having examined all the best selling and most popular publications, they do not have any sections that are dedicated to discussing the issue of cultural diversity outside Morocco. Therefore, the only sources of information for Moroccans to get an insight into other countries are films and cable channels. The Moroccan public accesses information about cultural diversity in other countries through watching their satellite channels, although the obstacle of language usually prevents people from getting all the content, with most Moroccans watching satellite channels of countries broadcast in French, Arabic or Spanish.

In general, the perception of Moroccans towards the Mediterranean countries can be summarized in two general perspectives. First some of these countries are close to Morocco because they share the fact that they are all Arab, Muslim and developing countries in spite of the existence of certain political conflicts especially with Algeria. The other countries, especially the ones in the European continent, are perceived as Christian white communities, former colonial powers, a dream destination for immigrants, and strategic economic and political partners for the government and business people. All these perceptions are very general and they are based on stereotypes and pre-conceived ideas. There are no credible or accurate statistics that can serve as evidence in this field, and there is therefore an absolute need, more than ever, for professional research in this field in order to generate credible statistics and get reliable output.

### Media as a Source of Knowledge about the 'Other'

Trends in Morocco in recent years are moving towards recognizing cultural diversity inside the country first. Many new legislations were adopted by the King and the government in order to liberate the field of media. The level of freedom of expression has also increased to very important levels that has allowed journalists to discuss many taboos. The sensitivity with regards to the issue of diversity led to the adoption of new media agendas that push for a fairer representation of all segments of society. Local dialects such as Tamazight are recognized as languages that should be included and used in the media. These are the main trends that are taking place and they are eventually opening the door for the adoption of more policies that promote and illustrate the diversity of the Moroccan society. These shifts will eventually lead to more openness to the cultures of foreign countries, but this has to be accompanied with research and encouragement from local and international powers and experts in the domains of diversity and media. The Anna Lindh/Gallup Survey carried out in a number of the Mediterranean countries is a crucial step towards examining and assessing the situation of cultural diversity and intercultural relations in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

In the case of Morocco, the results of the Survey enabled the verification of many of the assumptions that have been set out at the opening of the article.

The eleven core questions which were directed to various Moroccans who represent the majority of social segments exposed to the media, revealed a number of interesting facts about the perception trends toward Europe. Answers to the largest part of these questions revealed that the majority of Moroccans still do not consider the media a source of positive information about Europeans, although in comparison with other surveyed populations 38% of Moroccans could recall listening or watching something in the media that changed into a positive direction their impression of Europeans.

The Poll also highlighted another particular difference between Moroccans and other populations of the Euro-Mediterranean region concerning the media 'as sources of knowledge', with 38,6% of those who replied affirmatively to the above question stating that films are the main vector to know the 'other' better. This data is interesting if we take into consideration that television news is considered in the main media source of information other surveyed countries. The Survey answers and statistics also prove that Moroccan media, through TV news, press, radio programmes, could still do more to be a vehicle for non-biased information about Europe or European values, and to support work for intercultural dialogue. From another perspective, it is my conviction that this is the same situation on the other side of the Mediterranean, and that European countries ignore many aspects of Morocco due to the absence of accurate and balanced sources of information.

### Language Diversity and New Media Tools

If we would like to give good examples of how the Moroccan media deal positively with diversity and minorities inside society, we can consider the example of the Laayoun regional TV Channel and the new Amazigh TV channel. In Morocco the official language is Arabic, but there are four main dialects that are spoken inside Morocco by different groups of people and in very specific geographical locations. Tarifit is a dialect

### Morocco - Talk Radio

Online media initiatives present new free outlets that allows many Moroccans to openly express their views. Websites and forums are one of the most popular media outlets in the country since they group different people with different backgrounds and conviction to discuss and write about issues that are still considered taboos by Moroccan society and which cannot be necessarily discussed by national press. They also represent a perfect ground for cultural exchange between Moroccans and other people who share the same interests. A good example of a newly created online forum that has been attracting growing attention and engaging Moroccans and non Moroccans in discussing a wide variety of topics is 'Talk Morocco' ([www.talkmorocco.net](http://www.talkmorocco.net)). This website is a forum that stimulates weekly debates about different issues that are of big importance to Morocco and invites journalists, civil society activists and anyone who has a view to express to debate these issues online. The forum has won the 2010 'Best English Weblog People's Choice' and 'Jury BOB Awards'.

[www.talkmorocco.net](http://www.talkmorocco.net)

spoken in the North of the country, Tamazight is spoken in the Middle and High Atlas, Tashelhit in the Small Atlas and Hassania in the South of the country. The diversity of these groups is not only about spoken dialects, but it includes also customs, traditions and other cultural dimensions. These languages have practically not at all been represented in the Moroccan media apart from some local newspapers or some short news flashes that are broadcasted on occasions in national television. These groups had to be represented through the media as they constitute 8.4 million habitants out of a total population of more than 30 million habitants (2004 Census).

In November 2004 the regional Laayoun Channel was launched in the south of Morocco to broadcast programmes about the issues that are of relevance to the population in the south. It is considered to be the first regional television channel in the Maghreb region, although the broadcasting services of this channel are restricted to the South region and cannot be received in the rest of the country. In March 2010, and following months of delay, the first ever Amazigh channel was finally launched. The channel is part of the SNRT group and it required a budget of 5 million Euros to be founded. The state launched this project in response to the growing complaints of the Amazigh communities about not being represented in Moroccan Media. This channel came to answer to the expectation of the three Amazigh groups which speak Tamazight, Tashelhit and Tafaït. It broadcasts programmes and news in these three dialects with Arabic subtitles, and with the support of a team of around ninety journalists and technicians (SNRT). Even though this initiative was very much appreciated by many Moroccans and many Amazigh, the question remains whether one television channel will be enough to represent three groups that have different interests and different priorities.

Another type of media growing in popularity is the electronic media due to its use in terms of representation of minorities and marginalized social groups. The electronic media is not subject to state interference or censorship so it presents a free platform to discuss a wide variety of topics. It also allows the public to participate in debates and express their opinion

about the broadcasted issues which make it very popular. The electronic media is mainly used by young Moroccans who are considered as a marginalized group despite their large number. Young people usually use news websites and blogs to express their views about fashion, sports, society, economics and even politics. As a proof of the popularity of electronic media, the most visited website in Morocco is a news website called [www.hespress.com](http://www.hespress.com). The current debate in neighboring European countries is focused on minorities and especially those composed of immigrants. This debate is almost absent in Morocco, but not for long since Morocco is a transition place for many Sub-Saharan immigrants, with many immigrants staying in Morocco and making their place inside society. The urge of representing these minorities is transcending and the Moroccan media will have to deal with this issue sooner or later.

### Areas of Action

An appropriate and positive treatment of cultural diversity by the Moroccan media requires first the establishment of certain important mechanisms that can organise the sector and lead to more professionalism and more balance in treating such important issues. In the first place, establishing a national chart of ethics for media in order to better define the liberties, rights and obligations of journalists. At the same time, to ensure a complete detachment of state authorities from the domain of media, and the regulation of media by an objective and independent body. In addition, it would be recommended to establish more professional media institutions that can carry out studies and research, as well as supporting the enhancement of professional training for media practitioners. The adoption of visible policies that encourage cultural diversity would also represent an essential area of work.

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## Morocco - Inclusive Journalism

The conference 'Inclusive Media for Inclusive Societies' took place on 17th July 2009 in Rabat, Morocco, which was an opportunity for media decision-makers to discuss media sector's responsibility, as well as the legal, ethical and financial reasons for inclusive reporting. It opened dialogue on issues around diversity and the need for a national code of ethics as related to inclusive journalism. The main objectives of the conference were to encourage social and cultural inclusion through responsible reporting on diversity via media and to advance journalism education and journalism skills through hands-on production training for practicing journalists and through development and implementation of specialized university curricula related to responsible reporting on social and cultural diversity in general, and religious diversity in particular. Outcomes of the conference were mainly focused developing the implementation of specialized university curricula related to responsible reporting on social and cultural diversity in general, and religious diversity in particular.

[www.media-diversity.org](http://www.media-diversity.org)