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Braving the new media

Can the Internet help us overcome faith-based conflict, or will it fuel the fire?

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Amid the criticism of the mainstream media, that it stirs up resentment from cultural differences rather than promotes understanding, can "new media" bridge the gap through the global network of the Internet?

Ask professional journalists this question and many will cringe.

True, the Internet has empowered people across the globe to communicate and to exchange news and information at byte speed. But don't we care about credibility any more?

The Internet is also at the fingertips of fanatics. What to do, then, when they use the Internet not only to spread hoaxes and lies to fan up anger and hatred, but also to organise violence?

What about the digital divide? Internet use may be rapidly expanding but it is exclusively in the hands of the haves, leaving the have-nots probably more vulnerable than ever to the local leaders' abuses of Internet hoaxes and hate speech that travel across borders at the blink of an eye.

When a group of journalists from different countries recently gathered to mull these questions, they reached a common answer: Like it or not, the Internet is here to stay and it would be suicidal for the mainstream media not to embrace new media technologies.

The mainstream media, however, must try harder to uphold journalistic ethics and standards to safeguard its credibility as an asset in the Internet world.

The same applies to social movements. If they are unhappy with the way they are portrayed by mainstream media or the government, it would be a big mistake for them not to use new media to present facts and information to counter biases and misconceptions.

The conference, titled "Interfaith Reporting in the Advent of New Media: Exercising Rights with Responsibilities", was co-organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef) together with the European Journalism Centre (EJC) to give media input to the fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue in Amsterdam.

According to Wilfried Rutten, director of the EJC, new media has brought about a major change in communications structure.

New media is about a more level playing field in communications, he said. The Web marks the end of top-down, written-in-stone information. "It is about free flow of information without one person controlling it. Everyone can have a voice and interact. This is big paradigm change. We can never go back

to the old model. The Internet will never go away. And journalists must embrace it."

While journalists must learn new media skills to package different forms of digital content to appeal to the Internet generations, the problem is not merely about teaching "traditional" journalists how to blog.

The crux of the problem remains how journalists approach their work. Many newspapers have now embraced new media technologies, but it is primarily to boost declining profits. Being an interfaith bridge is probably never in their agenda.

Although the journalists can no longer function as traditional gatekeepers of information, they still cannot ignore their social responsibilities "to improve life, to give voices to those who don't have them, to be part a democratic process", said Rutten.

One way of doing it is to foster democratic debates, separating facts and perceptions and promote peaceful co-existence, urged Wonil Cho, Asef's executive director.

The reality on the ground, however, is full of difficult challenges.

In the Philippines, for example, the mainstream media is largely responsible for creating the idea that Mindanao is aflame with terrorism, that it is about Islam being against Christianity, that the Muslims are backward, and that liberation movements are linked to terrorist organisations in the Middle East, said Muslim journalist Amina Rasul, editor of the Moro Times.

All those claims are false, she said.

The media's serious lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge in the history of the conflicts deepens stereotypical misconceptions and exacerbates violence, she added.

Such a problem is not exclusive to the Philippine media, however. The same can also be said about the media's definition of news and the belief that violence sells.

A study in 2000 on the media's news sources showed how heavily the Philippine media relied on the government and armed groups for information, leading to a slanted portrayal of news events. According to Amina Rasul, out of some 1,400 sources cited in the news about the Mindanao problems, over 1,000 were from the government or armed groups.

The views and sufferings of ordinary people caught in the violence are being seriously ignored, she pointed out. To present a more comprehensive picture, the media need to pay attention to other dimensions of the problem, she said. They also need to go beyond traditional sources and report more on other players who are trying to make a difference through peaceful means.

"The problem is the media mindset and the media owners' vested interests. What's lacking boils down to the lack of independent and responsible journalism."

But she was quick to point out that the Internet as an alternative media cannot be the answer in her country just yet.

Indeed, what change can the mainstream media bring to the web world when their cultural biases and their definition of news remain intact? As for social movements, utilising new media channels remains far-fetched. "The literacy rate is still very low," she explained. "And people still don't have the money to

buy a computer."

This does not mean there are no problems in the affluent West.

In western Europe, tensions intensified when a large influx of traditional Muslims immigrated into secular, democratic countries with a long history of separation between church and state. The Muslims insist on their right to express their beliefs publicly, while the secular society of the host countries insists religion must remain in an individual's private sphere.

In addition, the secular media tend to view religion with suspicion while many Muslims view critics as heretics. When the media embraces freedom of expression like a religion, tensions can easily explode.

Jan Lund, a Danish journalist, should know. He was foreign news editor of the Jyllands-Posten, which carried a set of satirical cartoons to raise debate on freedom of expression and self-censorship on Islamic matters. Although the Mohammad cartoons broke no Danish laws, the controversy eventually led to worldwide riots, deaths, the burning of embassies and the boycotting of Danish products.

Responding to the crisis, the Jyllands-Posten set up web sites in different languages to explain its case and to point out that many of images used to fan Muslim anger were not from its paper.

Whether or not it was too little too late, the scenario highlighted the power that the Internet has to ease conflicts or speed information in a crisis.

Speed and eyewitness reporting are crucial when crises strike, religious or otherwise. The citizen journalism that has spawned from the growth of new media can offer event coverage faster than professional journalists have been able to work in the past.

Still, professional journalists have an important role to screen and check information and ensure credibility, stressed Fritz van Exter, former managing editor of Trouw, a Dutch national newspaper.

The changing reading habits of the Internet generation, the declining profits of newspaper businesses, the need to join the new media bandwagon when there is little money in it - all these have led to cost-cutting policies forcing journalists to depend increasingly upon cheaper and quicker online research.

How to strike a balance?

Examples abound. Amina Rasul, for one, has found her own formula. While traditional print journalism remains a force in the Philippines, she has succeeded in creating a Muslim presence in the Manila Times, a national broadsheet. It carries a monthly section called "The Moro Times", edited by Amina Rasul herself.

"But in the future, we have no choice but to join the blogging world," she said.

In Thailand, the Thai Journalists Association has set up the Isra News Centre, a joint online news team to cover the predominantly Muslim deep South, in an effort to cope with cost-cutting measures in various newspapers and to counterbalance the violence with a peaceful journalistic slant. While it offers its services to news organisations for free, the news centre has played an important role in giving a voice to the southern Muslims caught in the violence.

In the Netherlands, which is home to more than 170 different nationalities, there also have been efforts to

broadcast regular multi-cultural programmes on television, allowing secular and traditional religious values to meet publicly in democratic spheres.

Realising the power of the Internet, journalists at the meeting agreed that the availability of web sites offering credible information on religion and news sources helps them produce balanced news reports and analyses. But what will maintain the credibility of journalists in the world of new media is their own professional standards.

Multi-culturalism and religious diversity have become a reality in society and journalists cannot excuse themselves for not knowing basic religious facts, said Otto Friedrich from Die Furche, an Austrian weekly.

For Dutch journalist Fritz van Exter, new media is just a tool. "Whatever the tools, our job is to bring people together, to give facts, to avoid misconceptions."

Telling the stories that matter also requires journalists to leave the comfort of their offices instead of relying on phone interviews and online research, he added.

"We can do it if we think it is important, to get the story that interests the readers, and get it right. And the stories are out there.

"Also, in the world of new media, there are so many voices, so many opinions that people are hungry for facts. That's what us journalists can offer."

While traditional journalists fiercely take pride in their profession in the advent of new media, women groups in Amsterdam have found that the most effective communications method to promote interfaith understanding is through the most basic one - person-to-person interaction.

Through the interfaith women network, a group of Dutch women from different nationalities and faiths are working together to help struggling immigrant women adjust to their new life in Amsterdam.

Their various programmes provide a chance for women from different faiths to meet, and "to have less fear of the unknown", said Ank Veenstra, a group leader.

Deep listening is key to empathy and mutual understanding, she added. "It's an art. By creating a safe environment where one can talk and share openly, by listening and hearing each other, and by asking meaningful questions, prejudices can be removed.

"Through sharing, we've found that our goals in life are not different - to help make our families happy, to have good relationships with neighbours, friends and society.

"We started out wanting to help and to learn about our differences. We've ended up finding that faith is only part of our identity and despite our different faiths, we are much alike."

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