

**6th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium:
"Interfaith Reporting in the Advent of New Media –
Exercising Right with Responsibilities"**

*1-2 June 2008 – Amsterdam, the Netherlands
In conjunction with the Fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue*

Summary of Discussion and Recommendations

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) together with the European Journalism Centre (EJC) implemented the 6th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium in support of the Fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue. Fourteen editors, columnists and journalists from media organisations in Asia and Europe attended the informal, closed-door meeting.

The two-day Colloquium was held in three sessions. The first session, organised on 1st June, kicked off with three presentations which incited initial debate on the subjects of freedom of expression, media's role in conflict resolutions and interfaith dialogue in Asia and Europe. The second session in the morning of 2nd June surveyed developments and trends to recent interfaith relations in the globalised digital world. A presentation on blogging and search engines was also delivered, stimulating an in-depth discussion on the impacts of new media in shaping the modern and future society. The Colloquium concluded with the final session in the afternoon where various recommendations to the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue were distilled.

The Colloquium was also graced by the presence of Job Cohen, Mayor of Amsterdam, who shared his experience in managing the city's interfaith harmony on the backdrop of violent incidents in the past.



A lively exchange between Mayor Cohen of Amsterdam and participants of the Colloquium

Summary of Discussion

The aim of the discussions was defined by the over-arching theme: “*Interfaith Dialogue in Practice: Sharing Best Practices*” From this platform the participants worked through a lot of subjects, suggestions, ideas and concepts trying to convert ideas into functional suggestions. Basically the intention has been to create some tools that can be used in the process by media as well as organisations with an interest in this field (identified as anybody seriously interested in an interfaith dialogue).

For the media, the basic assumption from the participants was that there are some universal journalistic standards which should be promoted. It was also agreed that it is important to try to make journalists as knowledgeable as possible about what they report about. A problem is that journalists often are under tremendous pressure when they have to report an issue. Therefore, this kind of knowledge should be provided on a general level. One concern was that journalists are becoming too dependent on the Internet or other “second-hand research” instead of making the person-to-person contact which provides the best tool for correct and precise reporting.

For the organisations – religious as well as non-religious – one basic problem is the ability to react in time. The media works fast in a changing world. And the media are changing rapidly themselves, both in form and in the way they function. An important observation is that religious leaders should be much more visible in the public space when problems connected to religion arise. They should also pay much more attention to the Internet where much of today’s communication takes place in various forms and places.

Recommendations

Among the ideas and suggestions, the following **14** have been chosen by the participating journalists as some practical tools to promote interfaith dialogue:

1. TV to stage open debates on a regular basis like the so-called “Doha debate” format: a group of people and a moderator in front of an audience debating difficult issues. This method can be used by organisations as well and offered for broadcasting to smaller stations or published with minimal cost on the Internet (web-casting).
2. For TV and other media to make programs where different cultures meet. That can be in the form of entertainment or documentaries. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) has for instance made a “diversity toolkit” with ideas suggestions and targets for bring this element into programming. It might not be the same problems facing people in Asia as in Europe, but each country or media organisation could make its own toolkit for making programs that highlight interaction or raise knowledge about other groups.
3. For print media to make supplements to newspapers about minorities or smaller religious groups in a regular basis. Taking example from the existing supplements, such as *Moro Times* (monthly supplement to *the Manila Times*), it may be just four-page extra published every month or can be of any frequency. Newspapers can do this in collaboration with the minority groups; The groups can initiate the process by contacting newspapers themselves with suggestions or even deliver the supplements as advertisement supplements.
4. Media – especially print media – can have difficulties reaching the lower layer of societies with limited reading skills. They should try to make impact through liaison with the people who has a direct influence like religious or semi-religious leaders.

5. A presence on the web is crucial in today's world for media, for organisations, and basically for everybody with a message. Therefore, make websites. Make blogs. Write and comment on other's blogs. Look out for possible other spots where people, especially young ones, are spending their time, like chat-rooms or territories like Facebook and MySpace. In the new world the mobile-phone will be the most important tool for web-communication, as it is evident in countries like China where 8-10 million new mobile phones are sold each month.
6. When major crises arise, websites from media or organisations can act as the gate-keepers for securing the correct information of the situation covering all angles.
7. Create a Wikipedia-kind of web presence with religious materials. This is a place where everybody including the media always can turn to when factual information is needed. The web could include some standards for best practices on reporting on religious issues.
8. For relevant organisations to create an online "toolbox" containing links to credible sources where public and media know where to find relevant information – or to get connected to relevant information. One of the existing websites is UN-initiated www.globalexpertfinder.org.
9. For religious groups to make statements on current issues and mail them to the media. Even when they are not used immediately they will be part of the media-archive and might be used next time the media need an opinion on a certain issue.
10. In general, religious leaders and journalists don't communicate very well. Make some training together to make it easier into understand each other's language and way of thinking.
11. For the religious communities or other communities which traditionally consider each other adversaries (like different newspapers) to make links to each other. Create a possibility for a direct dialog by having links to other religious societies or groups on your websites.
12. Create formalised and closer working relationships between minorities and majority.
13. Create a joint news teams that can create common materials in difficult situations, pool information and share it as broad as possible.
14. For everybody being involved in media to be aware that there exist some journalistic standards and codes of ethics which they should familiarise themselves with.



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