

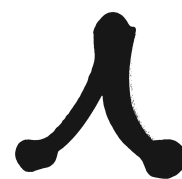


8th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium

Youth, Media and Interfaith:
Sharing Knowledge, Building Trust

In conjunction with the 6th ASEM Interfaith Dialogue

5-6 April 2010 | Madrid/Toledo, Spain



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The media greatly influence the level of trust and mutual understanding among religious groups. In view of this, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) has been engaging journalists on interfaith issues since 2005. In September 2009, the 7th Journalists' Colloquium in Seoul recommended that the younger generation be drawn into the conversation. Accordingly, the 8th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium on 5-6 April 2010 brought together 15 young journalists and religious leaders from Asia and Europe for a two-day dialogue in partnership with Casa Asia in Madrid.

The participants reported that their respective societies face different challenges. Some societies suffer a history of religious-related violence; others enjoy religious peace, but may be letting minority groups be marginalised through neglect and ignorance. While their experiences differed, however, all societies need urgently to address the communication challenges associated with religious diversity.

Even as participants tried to find ways for journalists and religious leaders to improve communication around religious issues, they stressed that they often faced major political and social obstacles outside of their control. Two particular problems were highlighted. First, some states are overly restrictive in their management of public discussion of religion, in the name of preserving stability and harmony. Second, dominant social norms and values in some populations are intolerant of difference, including of minorities within religious communities.

In such contexts, independent media need the freedom to make principled editorial decisions that may sometimes challenge the preferences of governments, religious authorities and even popular opinion. However, freedom of the press should be voluntarily exercised with a sense of social responsibility. Freedom of expression is not absolute. It has limits including the right of minorities to be protected from hate speech.

Participants acknowledged that both journalists and religious leaders had not done enough to provide a balanced and holistic picture of various religions to broader publics. This goal tends to be taken more seriously in societies emerging out of conflict. However, participants felt strongly that journalists and religious leaders should not wait for tragic wake-up calls before they start responding to the challenges of diversity. Countries now fortunate enough to enjoy religious peace have enough evidence from other countries to suggest that such stability cannot be taken for granted.

Therefore, in training and developing the next generation of journalists as well as religious leaders, the opportunity should not be missed to introduce skills and mindsets in tune with the realities of a religiously diverse planet.

The Colloquium recommended the following.

1. News media must build their own knowledge of religion in order to inform and educate the public, and at the very least to avoid circulating erroneous impressions and stereotypes about religious groups. They should recognise religion as a specialised area of coverage requiring the same depth and seriousness of coverage that they traditionally give to politics and business.

2. Conflict and controversy are integral to the definition of “hard news”, and will continue to be so. Yet, coverage of religion need not be limited to times when it makes the news for the wrong reasons. The journalistic repertoire includes not only hard news but also human interest stories, opinion columns, features, photo essays, interviews and so on. Journalists should use their full repertoire more creatively to offer more balanced and holistic coverage of religion. In many societies, people are increasingly interested in personal spiritual growth as a lifestyle. Media that under-cover this dimension of life may be missing an opportunity to increase their appeal.
3. Media should make special efforts to cover the many interfaith projects that are on-going. While these projects do not have the immediacy of hard news, interfaith projects can have positive long-term impact and deserve due attention.
4. Professional codes of ethics should include guidance on how to cover religion. At present, very few do so. The lack of ethical guidance leads to various mistakes, such as being too quick to label a group by its main religion, when other dimensions of its identity may be more relevant to the story and provide better insight into a problem. Independent press councils and associations of journalists should be cultivated as vehicles for promoting better coverage of religion.
5. National and regional awards for journalistic excellence are one way in which the profession pushes for higher standards. Organisations that already give out prestigious awards, such as the Society of Publishers in Asia, should be encouraged to add a category for the coverage of religious diversity.
6. Religious groups must improve their understanding of how media work, in order to reach out more effectively to broader publics. Such training can vary from formal university programmes to short workshops, or meeting editors about the media’s practical needs and priorities.
7. Better-resourced religious groups can consider using professional public relations officers and official spokesmen to engage the media. Government organisations, universities and NGOs could help to improve the media literacy of smaller and less well-resourced religious groups in their societies.
8. The internet, including social media, is an important platform for religious groups and interfaith projects to present themselves to journalists and wider publics. Religious leaders should use this opportunity to provide clear, user-friendly information about their groups. Younger, tech-savvy members of religious groups have a special contribution to make here.
9. On-going, regular dialogues between religious groups and media are essential. Networking should take place in times of stability and calm, and not start only when there is controversy and conflict. Contact building is a standard way in which journalists and newsmakers improve the quality of coverage in other spheres. Religion should not be an exception. Third parties such as NGOs and universities could provide a neutral and trusted forum for such dialogue.

All the above steps require that media and religious groups change their prevailing mindsets. Religious leaders must recognise that the world is more crowded and connected, and that they can no longer limit their communication only to their own followers. They must make the effort to translate their interests and aspirations into universal language that others can understand, and work towards reducing the risk of provoking suspicion and misunderstanding. Media need to recognise the urgent global priority to promote a culture of tolerance of diversity, without which the foundations of social life on which they themselves depend will be threatened. While they are not obliged to promote any one religion and should remain objective and balanced in their coverage, they have a responsibility to help avoid religious conflict.