Institute for Media Responsibility
IMV Institut für
Medienverantwortung
gUG (haftungsbeschränkt)
Goethestraße 6
91054 Erlangen
Germany

Fon +49 9131 933 277-8
Fax +49 9131 933 277-9
www.medienverantwortung.de
info@medienverantwortung.de

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Islamophobia[1] and the Media

After the heinous killings in Norway a very critical debate about Islamophobia took place in most of our media in Germany. Important discussions arose, particularly on the radio and in the editorial pages of the newspapers. However, the debate also showed the limits of (self-)critical discourse: As the murderer of 77 young people in Oslo and Utoya had adopted many "arguments" from blogs and well-known islamophobic authors, the coverage was limited to these aspects. Although I had the chance in some interviews to mention that the development of islamophobic discourse is related to the development of the discourse in the mainstream media over the past decades (sic!), providing examples, this didn't attract attention or give rise to a debate, unlike the racist claims of banker Thilo Sarrazin, who blamed the decline of society on Muslims on many chat shows.

Islamophobia and its impact, however, have not been a topic on the chat shows. One, to which I was invited, was never broadcasted. On the contrary, having glossed over the catastrophe in Norway and the questions that have arisen around the murderer and his obsession with anti-Muslim conspiracy theories, our talk shows have now returned to their favorite topic: the targeted group of Turkish immigrants, who started coming to Germany 50 years ago. Imagine: after all of this, our media are back to "business as usual," returning to the pre-massacre discourse that has increasingly morphed "the Turks" into "the Muslims".

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[1] Definition S. Schiffer: Islamophobia means generalizing and assigning real and imagined attributes to "Islam" and "Muslims" as an entity (a *pars pro toto* relationship). This special form of racism fulfills the same function: to confirm hierarchy and established power-relationships and is therefore part of (neo-)colonial discourse. The victims of Islamophobia are not Muslims alone, but also those considered as "traitors of European culture". The fear of a coordinated "islamisation" shows that the phenomenon, which replaces classical xenophobia, has become a conspiracy theory. Islamophobia more and more resembles the old anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the 19th century, but does not impede new forms of anti-Semitism.

As many analyses have shown, media coverage of foreign affairs is the most important factor for the construction of our ideas about Islam and Muslims. Islamophobic prejudices are promoted by a stereotypical choice of subjects and facts and their framing: although most Muslims in Germany are of Turkish descent, they are seen in the same frames as Arabs and Iranians. A recent study from Jena University by Wolfgang Frindte and Nicole Haußäcker shows, the increasing number of terror warnings and terror coverage doesn't so much affect the sense of danger and fear in German society, or lead to greater acceptance of control and supervising, but has an important impact in terms of promoting Islamophobia. This fits into the dominant framing of Islam and Muslims as dangerous, backward, anti-democratic, and oppressive – especially towards women – which sounds very modern (exploiting modernist concepts like enlightenment, feminism and freedom, especially freedom of speech), but which isn't modern at all as it distracts from own defects, while contributing directly to the stigmatization of Muslims and to more and more aggression against them in daily life, which is a violation of human rights.

This framing was revealed in the course of a debate at the German Bundestag on the Arab Spring, as our politicians were as astonished as the public to see Muslims asking for democracy and freedom. But the religious framing is still dominant, so that there is a risk of misinterpreting the developments in those countries now as mostly influenced by religion and not by economics, as is the case all over the world (see e.g. Greece). While our leading politicians still fail to give clear signals against Islamophobia (to this day, there has been no public statement on the murder of Marwa El Sherbiny!), many racists feel legitimized in their hate speech and hate crimes (like attacks on mosques and women in headscarves) – the blogs that got so much attention following the Norway attacks remain untouched and unwatched by our authorities.

The reactions of the groups concerned – Muslim and non-Muslim members of the public alike – are like a self-fulfilling-prophecy: polarization and loss of cohesion. Prejudices on "both" sides, Muslim and non-Muslim, are reinforced, especially with the upward mobility of the Muslim minority and their visibility in more areas of society (as shown in a study by Wilhelm Heitmeyer of Bielefeld University in 2010). But non-Muslims feel threatened by terrorism or "islamisation", both in their individual, subjective views and in the discourse promoted by the media. On the other hand,

many Muslims feel and are excluded. Some react by resignation and withdrawal, some with aggression (especially those young people who lack access to society) and other, very socially engaged Muslims, react by trying to rectify the image others have of them and the image of Islam, which is, of course, a weak, defensive position – responding to the frames others have created rather than setting the agenda.

As already noted, our leading politicians fail to condemn anti-Muslim racism; indeed, some seem to welcome the opportunity to exploit anti-Muslim bigotry: to promote systems of control, to promote the notion of "good wars" e.g. for women's rights in Afghanistan, or at least to divert the attention from their own powerlessness in the face of the economic collapse.

What has to be done? We need...

- concerning the media – more awareness and self-reflection, especially on subjective selection processes: the question of **relevance** should prevail in daily broadcasting – even the mere mention of facts, the stereotypical choice of the facts mentioned and combination with symbols of a group identity may give rise to stereotypes and prejudices, and may cause a feeling of hatred and perceived self-defense. (Teaching about perception, prejudice, racism and real freedom of the press, which includes knowledge about the work of think tanks and the PR industry, should be given particular attention in journalism schools!). Media must broaden the limited framework in which Muslim life (amongst other things) is perceived, and apply their professional standards to Muslim issues as well, which should include an evaluation of whether the issue should be framed as a Muslim issue, or is in fact not specific to Muslims. And journalists must (re-)learn to be skeptical of governmental agendas (e.g. terror alerts...), in order to act in their classical role as a check on power! Of course, with the exception of a few hate-mongerers, most journalists appear to be victims of a big misunderstanding induced by the repetition of plausible-sounding narratives by lobbyists like Daniel Pipes and others).

- Diversity mainstreaming shouldn't be discussed only in cultural frames (as is the case in the so called National Integration Plan in Germany), but should include all categories concerned – to get away from the marking of

culture (as a problem): see my article for the Anna Lindh Foundation[2]: "The fiction of a homogenous national culture"; entertainment programming, in particular, should acknowledge the reality of (cultural) diversity.

- Education at school should include (1) media education (Indeed, this subject is completely absent from our education and, by and large, from the training of journalists, too! (sic! – semantics vs. esthetics), (2) Islamic history in the field of science and its influence on European culture (see e.g. 1001inventions.org) and (3) psychological and sociological knowledge about group dynamics, self-fulfilling prophecies and manipulations through hierarchical discourses.

- a European Center for Research on Islamophobia/Prejudice/Racism (equal to the Center for Research on Anti-Semitism in Germany) – to show that this is the problem of those with bigoted attitudes towards Muslims, and not that of the Muslims themselves, and to document hate speech and hate crimes (which is still not yet the case in Germany). By making use of the knowledge from research about anti-Semitism we can learn more about Islamophobia – and, as a result, to make clear that what is currently in course is not a (so called) "Islam-Debate", but rather a debate on our own image of Islam. We all must learn that the issue is not about Islam, but about our construction of "Islam" and "the Muslim" – as we have learned about anti-Semitism, which is not a "Jewish issue" and can't be dealt with by explaining Judaism. We must understand that our attention has been drawn to Muslim issues by those interested in us discussing those issues rather than the geopolitical interests revealed to the public by Brzezinski. (This means that the promotion of interreligious discourse and explanations about Islam (alone) are counterproductive, because the secular societies are mostly not interested in it and feel "overislamised". For the future: The observable promotion of anti-Chinese attitudes shouldn't lead to discussions of their cultural issues; The cultural issues are already there; our attention just hasn't yet been focused on them.)

- an honest and open discussion about the limits of freedom of speech, which was supposed to be a concept to challenge power and not to

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[2] http://www.euromedalex.org/trends/report/2010/fiction-homogeneous-national-culture-sabine-schiffer

enforce the status of those who already have power and cut off critical discussions from civil society, a trick perfected by Thilo Sarrazin: He attacks his critics, claiming that they are violating his freedom of expression, when in reality, *he* is the one violating *their* right to criticize his ideas, a classic attack on freedom of expression. In other words, we should concentrate on strengthening freedom of expression by challenging those who abuse it!

To draw the line between freedom of speech and incitement, we must learn from anti-Semitic discourse: in particular, about generalizations and homogenizations that play into the ongoing demonization of targeted groups, e.g., speaking of "Islam" or "the Muslims" as monolithic entities lacking internal diversity, or the dehumanizing use of terms such as "cancer" or "parasites" or a "demographic time-bomb", as well as loaded questions like "How long will we allow this to go on?

- to strengthen the role of media as a true fourth estate by solving the economic question and filling in the missing link in all media theory: media has to be commercially successful while being a responsible source of public information – our goal must be to have media institutions that are truly independent and able to act as a check on the state power, rather than failing to challenge – or even actively supporting – the actions of the powerful (who themselves have no problem with intercultural cooperation when it comes to business).

It could and would work, but there seems to be no political interest in establishing quality control mechanisms and in taking the problem of Islamophobia seriously (and not merely when it comes from the far right) – perhaps, because it is useful, as Liz Fekete explains in her important book "A suitable enemy".[3]

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[3] http://www.irr.org.uk/2009/march/ha000012.html