



مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط

The Middle East Council of Churches

**CCR INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE RIGHTS CONFERENCE
17 – 19 JUNE 2006, TORONTO**

Public Opinion - The role of Media

*Seta Hadesian
Director MECC
Unit On Life & Service*

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Introduction.

There is a growing fear of the stranger, broad generalizations, and negative associations, humiliating and dehumanizing labels attached to refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and immigrants, more and more intolerance, xenophobia and racism are being fostered in host countries towards these groups.

To make sure that extremism, discrimination and racism do not gain upper hand of the majority of the populations, a culture of tolerance and peaceful living conditions a massive public education program should be developed and incorporated in our schools, organizations and systems to cultivate acceptance and better understanding of the reasons for the presence of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and creatively use their skills which they bring together to the host countries. In this perspective formal and informal education on the rights and plights of the refugees and asylum seekers and migrants should be integrated. Educational institutions, schools and universities through their curricula, should integrate programs of refugee and migrant laborers' rights and fight back racism and xenophobia. Through informal education, the mass media, the newspapers and the electronic communication systems masses & communities should be communicated a culture of tolerance and peaceful living with the stranger.

The Role of The Media

Media is the most powerful tool for the formation of Public opinion in contemporary times. It is the Television, the press, the radio and the Internet. (Films, magazines, posters, studies, reports, theater, art, dance, public speeches, hearings)

Talking about the media is like talking about a mission. A source of information and education that will shape the daily choices in people's life. That will shape the thinking, and the perception of things. But Media is a political power and tool, occupied in a way by the big powers, international corporations, big agencies using for their political and economic objectives that control and can pay. Among the most powerful news agencies in the West are the BBC, CNN, Euro-news, Monte Carlo, while, Al Jazira, Al Aarabia, LBC, Al Shark El Awsat are the news agencies in the Middle East. The religious and political leaders of these media agencies are always around to talk, freely and passing news, stands, and positions to their communities, to the public using them to serve their political and economic ends.

By the development, advance and spread of technology the world has shrunk into a global village whereby the remote villages of China, the Pacific island of Hawaii and the deserts of Arabia are on our everyday screens at home at our dinner tables, telling their stories and worries. Unfortunately, family, church and community issues at national or international levels are no more concerns for the educational or moral shaping of the generations to come, it is the war in Iraq, the killings in Sudan, the terrorist attacks in Israel and Palestine, the Talibans in Afghanistan, the Nuclear weapons in Iran, the HIV- Aids and poverty in Africa, the boat refugees at the borders of Europe, Australia or USA. The bloodier, the more violent and scandalous, the more apocalyptic, the more captive and more popular the station is. The beautiful cultural, historical and musical programs are no more interesting, who watches them anyhow? Why aren't they popular, it is either war or sex on the screens and in the papers, both have economic end purposes: to sell weapons to warring countries or to sell human beings in the sex industry, the most rentable of all the businesses.

It is important that the media redefines its goals and mission, for the rule of the jungle, “la raison du plus fort” is the world order today. The role and the mission of the media is to commit itself to values that are imperative for today, and it is possible to achieve this goal only if civil societies commit themselves into risks and understand the need for it and encourage agencies that can play this role.

Both poles of the world have misleading information and negative perceptions and misconceptions of each other. The North does not know enough the South and vice versa, the South has negative perception of the North and rejects every ideology that comes from it. Both need to understand clearly that there are ways to understand & interpret Islam or Democracy, different spirit of understanding religion, a spirit of peace and mercy, and Democracy, a spirit of human rights, and respect for human beings. The South instigated with fundamentalism is burning in war, while, the North generalizing all middle Easterners as terrorists and Africans as unskilled and poor people is closing its doors in fear of an influx of refugees and terrorist attacks.

But is that the real causes of things?

What underlies behind is beyond fundamentalism or terrorist attacks, it is an ideological & political war of the North and the South and not the migration crisis, the numbers indicate the lower rate of entry of refugees or asylum seekers in northern countries for the last years. It is the war of the big corporations running their businesses at the tune of fundamentalism, ethnic killings and racism, sharpening antagonism and racism.

The way refugees are presented to the public is very crucial for harmonious & peaceful coexistence of the emerging societies, because migration is also a phenomenon of globalization. Fear, exclusion, and isolation of the stranger is the tactics of the politicians.

The media’s presentation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants significantly shapes public opinion about these groups. Less than 20% perhaps, of the populations have personal face to face experience with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, Yet most have no or biased opinion of these people.

The media has a massive responsibility in providing factual coverage that does not perpetuate myths, stereotypes or encourage generalizations or spread misinformation about refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Unfortunately, accurate, truthful and factual coverage on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is not the norm, the tendency is to lump together all foreigners into one big category either as traffickers, terrorist, or drug dealers and pour oil on xenophobia and racism and rationalize the policy of closing borders. The topic of refugees is a hot political issue serving political, electoral and economic purposes of leaders.

Refugee Advocates And Media Relations.

For social transformation to take place, Civil Societies, NGOs and international organizations are expected and responsible in bringing to the surface the reality about these groups and dissipate confusions and encourage media agencies to contribute to combat racism and enhance world peace as an urgent need.

To achieve this it is important for civil society activists, lobbyists and advocates to establish relations and promote cooperation with mass media actors: publishers, editors, editorial writers, reporters to enhance the goal of true information about the real situation in the Southern countries, the true causes for migration, about persecutions, killings and poverty, to generate public awareness on refugee issues and provide information and facts accurately. This is the power and raison d’etre of the media.

The relations established with media actors will create a fair balanced coverage when the refugees are in hot water, the media could build support around the issue, influence the public opinion and make them prime targets.

Media relations are important:

- For convincing legislators that their actions are being watched, not only by people in the gallery, but also by countless others reading newspapers, listening to radio and watching TV. and
- For lobbying campaigns to build grassroots support and transform the issue from a non-public to a public issue.

Therefore to create public opinion on refugees, asylum seekers and detention it is necessary:

- To develop personal contacts with media officials, be acquainted with their programs and provide material and motivate cooperation with them.
- Use press conferences to introduce the issue, or settle disputes or bring the issue to the light using photographs, kits and information.
- Use media previews, press releases at public programs, celebrations events facilitate the introduction of the event or transmit the message
- Use audio-visuals: radio interviews, TV talk shows, debates, community calendars, clip sheets and distribute at special events with photos and stories.

For refugee advocates, to create public opinion and to achieve effective media relations it is important that:

- The methods and technology involved are respected: gathering news, collecting data, evaluating it, processing editorially, printing in the best format and providing it to the media people.
- Choosing spokespersons who are frank, honest and responding to enquiries and persuasive in their calls.

Conclusion

Gone are the beautiful old days whereby the neighborhood and communities lived in harmony and trust, children grew with love of the other and in security with neighborhood ethics and values, where the stranger was welcomed and given a place and chance to restart his life. Today's neighborhood is one of complex human association of mistrust & insecurity, exclusion, isolation and fear of the other, loneliness in a multitude of people.

Global village should be inherent of other values as well, it should not incur economic or political hegemony, as the world is not a market-controlled environment for international corporations.

For the emergence of new world society and for the securitization of migration issues it is necessary to grow and spread the understanding of a global citizen, global society with global ethics of human rights values, with principles of democracy that are consistent in words and in practice.

The analysis of such a society would provide information to grasp the geo-politic and socio-economic breakdown of the situation in the North and the South and a better understanding of the migration crisis and therefore better develop dialogue between North and South for dissipation of myths, enhancement of democracy and cooperation of the poles.

“The world community should recognize the failure of neo-liberal system and take cognizance of destructive impact of economic reform. While has the moral obligation of the North to share the global asylum burden rests on its enormous resource capabilities relative to those of the South. And transnational dynamics of social, political and economic conflict in the contemporary world makes the North responsible for the upheavals in the South” says Stephen Castles.

The role of the media thus is the pursuit of truth, to constantly transmit the reality and uncover the 'beneath' and the 'underlying' facts of things, develop a just society that will abide by the rule of law and govern by the ethics of human rights, develop & encourage the idea of world citizenship.

Changing the mentality of the people to be more permissive, understanding and educative is of course a very difficult task for human rights workers and civil society members, however it is for these groups to bring to the surface societal evils that hinder the development and the growth of our society in a peaceful environment, making modifications and changes within our systems.

It is for the media to remind constantly to the ruling powers their role of governing the world justly and fairly, as they have the privilege & the opportunity to make history by creating world order and a global society with universal human rights values and the rule of democracy.

Seta Hadesian
Director of MECC
Unit On Life & Service

Presented to the CCR Conference
June 16-19, 2006
Toronto

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