

The Search for Common Ground Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media

*Introductory statement on behalf of the Insted Consultancy,
City Hall, London, Tuesday 13 November 2007*

On 30 September 2005 twelve caricatures were published in a Danish newspaper featuring the Prophet Muhammad. Over the next three or four months all UK national newspapers decided, independently of each other, that they would not reprint the caricatures. In more than 50 other countries, however, including most other countries in western Europe, the caricatures were reprinted in the national press. In France, the decision to reprint was defended on the grounds that 'picking on the parish priest' is a longstanding, and harmless, national sport.

The report published today – *The Search for Common Ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* – commends and, indeed, celebrates the decision which all UK editors made not to reprint the caricatures, and the principles underlying their decision.

It notes also, however, that the UK media do not always live up to the high standards they themselves observed and proclaimed on that occasion.

The report is centred round four separate studies:

- a quantitative study of all items in the national press in one week
- a qualitative study of four separate stories that had in common a) they were attacks on British Muslims b) they were combined with attacks on so-called political correctness, and c) they were seriously distorted and alarmist
- interviews with six young or youngish journalists on national newspapers who happen to be Muslims, about the tensions and pressures they experience in their daily work
- a close analysis of a BBC television documentary about, mainly, the Muslim Council of Britain.

What did we find? In the quantitative study we found that 91 per cent of all items in one week were negative in their depictions of Islam and Muslims.

In the qualitative study of four stories we found much distortion and inaccuracy, with trivial little events being blown up out of all proportion. For example, the decision of a single branch of NatWest in a single Lancashire town to shift its current advertising campaign using the motif of piggy banks was portrayed throughout the world, and in a range of other languages as well as English, as the consequence of a concern amongst all British banks, in all towns and cities, not to offend Muslims.

The interviews with Muslim journalists showed vividly the professional and personal tensions and difficulties they experienced as they went about their daily work. 'I'm a professional journalist,' one of them said, 'not a professional Paki.'

The analysis of a single television documentary noted that the declared purpose of the programme was to foster 'full and frank debate', but concluded that the programme seriously over-simplified key issues, and in consequence did not foster the levels of debate that are required.

The report's conclusions, on the basis of these four studies, include:

- The recurring view in the media is that there's no common ground between the West and Islam, and that conflict between them is accordingly inevitable.
- Muslims in Britain are seen in the media as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life.
- Alternative world-views, understandings and opinions are not mentioned, or are not given a fair hearing.
- Facts are frequently distorted, exaggerated or over-simplified.
- The tone of language is frequently emotive, immoderate, alarmist and abusive.
- The coverage is likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims.
- The coverage is likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way may weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism

Principal recommendations

In the light of this report:

- News organisations should review their coverage of issues and events involving Muslims and Islam, and should consider drawing up codes of professional conduct and style guides about use of terminology.
- News organisations should take measures, perhaps within the framework of positive action in equalities legislation, to recruit more journalists of Muslim heritage.
- News organisations should consider also, however, how best to give Muslim staff appropriate professional support and to prevent them being pigeon-holed as specialists in minority issues rather than concerned with the full spectrum of an organisation's output.
- Organisations, projects and programmes concerned with race relations should see and treat anti-Muslim hostility as a form of racism, and as serious as other forms of racism.
- The new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) should focus explicitly on, amongst other concerns, combating anti-Muslim hostility and prejudice, both in society at large and in the media in particular.

The report is not intended to be a last word on its subject-matter.

But as a contribution to a debate that is much overdue.

Robin Richardson
13 November 2007