



United Nations
ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS



**Second Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations
Istanbul, Turkey, 6-7 April, 2009
Working Session 4
Reporting Across Cultural Divides: Global Perspectives
Monday, 6 April, 15:00- 16:30**

Background

In recent years, tensions and conflicts occurring across cultural divides have gained increased visibility in the media and among the public in general. Journalists and editors often find themselves at the forefront of these debates, facing urgent decisions and immediate challenges. From the publication of the Danish Cartoons and the recent anti-Koran film *Fitna* to controversy over paintings of nude Hindu gods, reporting on issues that fall on cultural fault lines continues to confront media professionals in an increasingly interconnected world.

Some of these issues have degenerated into violence, reverberating beyond national boundaries. As global stability is threatened by conflicts that, in the eyes of many, seem to justify the misconceived idea of a “clash of civilizations”, such issues are increasingly likely to erupt, not only in Europe and the United States, but elsewhere on the planet.

Debates on the limits of freedom of expression, including a proposal at the UN to protect against—or indeed ban—defamation of religions, are often cited as an example of such charged issues. While we are not revisiting these political debates, our broad objective in this session is to explore the challenges inherent in reporting across cultures.

Organization of this Working Session

The session will be structured first by starting with brief remarks from the moderator and each panelist on the question presented in this concept paper (maximum 6 minutes each), followed by a Q&A session with the participants, and a broad group discussion. The session’s format geared toward fostering a creative group discussion on possible solutions and tools to address the difficulties inherent in reporting on divisive issues between communities.

Questions for discussion

- Do journalists have a role in finding common ground on issues that tend to divide societies along cultural or religious lines?
- Are debates over freedom of expression, its limits and issues such as religious blasphemy political in nature, or are they symptomatic of differences between various sets of values that would be better addressed outside the political realm?
- What can be done to widen the discussion and encourage fresh perspectives that bring about a better understanding of the rationale for positions held on both sides of the debate?
- What role can voluntary codes of conduct and self-regulation instruments play in ensuring that religious and cultural sensitivities are adequately reflected in the media?
- To what extent can intercultural training programs for journalists help promote culturally-sensitive reporting on issues that threaten to polarize communities?
- What lessons can be drawn from the experience of regional networks of media professionals such as the Euromed Journalism Network, and how can their experience help inspire the work of journalists networks in other parts of the world?
- What role can networks of media professionals and tools like the Rapid Response Media Mechanism play in expanding the terms of the debate on freedom of expression and ensuring that a broad diversity of views are heard on issues that threaten to divide communities?

Objectives

This session will seek to address a number of key questions relevant to the AoC Rapid Response Media Mechanism: How do we approach the issue of freedom of expression? What can we do to help achieve progress on this issue, beyond the sometimes limited scope of political debates? Would efforts to reach common ground be better served by focusing on and acknowledging the values that lie at the heart of this debate (the sanctity of religious figures and symbols and the role they play in shaping identities and the critical importance of freedom of expression, as one of the founding principles of democratic societies)? What tools do journalists have at their disposal

to address the need to report sensitively and in a balanced way about stories that go to the core of religious and cultural difference?

Some networks of journalists, such as the Euromed Journalism Network, initiated by the European Commission and the Anna Lindh Foundation, have created platforms to help develop constructive approaches to these issues. Their areas of focus include: the portrayal of diverse communities in the media; the development of voluntary codes of conduct on reporting on cross-cultural issues; political factors affecting journalists' capacity for free reporting; and fostering collaboration among schools of journalism. One of the recent outputs of this network is a collaboration between the Anna Lindh Foundation, the European Commission and the Alliance of Civilizations on a Rapid Response Media Mechanism to address intercultural crises in the Euro-Mediterranean region.