

## Thematic Session 3: Shaping Perceptions, Challenging Stereotypes — the Role of the Media Today

(Organized in cooperation with the Anna Lindh Foundation)

### PANELISTS

**Mr. Philippe Cayla,**  
Chairman and CEO, Euronews

**Ms. Melody Moezzi,**  
Commentator, for National Public Radio's All  
Things Considered, USA

**Ms. Randa Achmawi,**  
Senior Diplomatic Correspondent,  
Al-Ahram Hebdo, Egypt

**Mrs. Maryam Al-Khater,**  
Deputy Director General, Doha Center for  
Media Freedom and Columnist and writer for  
Al-Sharq newspaper, Qatar

**Mr. Paul Walton,**  
Director of Communications,  
Anna Lindh Foundation, UK

**Mr. Muddassar Ahmed,**  
CEO, Unitas Communications

**Mr. Yen Feng,** Straits Times,  
Singapore, Moderator

**Ms. Stephanie Durand,**  
UNAOC Media Development  
Consultant, Rapporteur

This session brought together media professionals and experts who regularly comment on world affairs to discuss the role of media in bridging cross-cultural divides. Focusing on a number of concrete case studies (such as the Gaza crisis and the controversy over Minarets in Switzerland), the session explored the influence of the media in shaping public perceptions and the role of experts and analysts in improving understanding of complex intercultural conflicts.

The discussion revolved around some of the key reasons for misperceptions across cultural divides and how they are reflected in the media. In that context, panelists underlined the importance of language. Words do not carry the same weight or meaning in different parts of the world and the media can play a crucial role in "translating" realities and values from one culture to another.

In a fast moving media environment, where consumers are offered a wide array of news sources to choose from, the challenge is to identify credible and reliable information. Today more than ever, there is a need for authoritative sources, particularly in situations of intercultural tensions, in order to help dispel misperceptions and stereotypes. The media is also ideally placed to contextualize information, break down stereotypes, and provide historical background to complex stories.



The power of the media to influence opinion is also manifest in the way in which perceptions of a particular situation can rapidly change. For instance, the public perception of Iran was transformed between the time of the elections and recent moves to impose sanctions on the country.

Participants also underlined the challenge of reconciling freedom of expression and mutual understanding. Some suggested that self-limitations on freedom of speech are needed. However, the emphasis should not be on censorship, but on

journalism ethics and on upholding principles of fairness and transparency.

Finally, others questioned the idea that the role of the media should be to promote social harmony. There are occasions, for example, when the media should not shy away from offering criticism of minorities, when that is justified. One should avoid focusing journalism on 'public relations' goals. Indeed, the role of the journalist is also to be critical, to challenge the status quo, in order to generate change on the ground.