International principles of journalism ethics stress the duty of professional communicators to seek truth and to provide fair and balanced accounts of events and issues. With this in mind, conscientious journalists try to serve the public with honesty and integrity - the cornerstones of their credibility.

The independence of news outlets rests on high standards of accuracy, fact-checking, and impartiality. Their obligation is not only to inform the public, but to engage people in the practice of good governance and to serve as a voice for those who have been denied a voice. Not everyone will agree with every editorial decision taken, but ethical standards help guide journalists and enable them to be held accountable.

In short, the basic functions of the media in a democratic society are:

- To encourage democratic choice by clarifying complex issues, particularly in an age when information is the driving force of economic advancement and global events impact people's daily lives as never before;
- To provoke public debate leading to greater participation in important decisions;
- To uncover abuses and campaign to rectify them;
- To alert and mobilize public opinion to humanitarian causes/injustices;
- To promote political pluralism by publicising different views/ideological approaches to certain issues;
- To keep politicians and decision-makers attuned to public opinion.

Consequently, while totally impartial media are neither possible nor desirable, it is essential:

- To maintain a distinction between facts and opinion, reporting and analysis;
- To use only trained, professional reporters who are knowledgeable and who check sources;
- To explain issues without trivializing or sensationalizing;
- To publish corrections;
- To avoid using information likely to be harmful to national security or to endanger individuals.

So much for the theory. In reality, media practitioners are subject to the economic constraints facing the industry in which they work, to the demands of the market, and often to the dictates of government or corporate interests. Editorial policies need to cater to a broad range of tastes so that "giving the public what they want" often becomes an argument for dubious, salacious or inflammatory content. In such cases, freedom of expression is used as a camouflage for "anything goes" and satire can be confused with incitement.

In recent years, and for a range of reasons, Islamophobia has "hit the headlines". At times like these independent media have to be especially sensitive and vigilant and to take steps to present balanced coverage, to counter discrimination and stereotyping, and to defuse tension.

Islamophobia has many causes. It can be deep-rooted historically, culturally, and socially. It can take the form of an understandable reaction to an act of terrorism or an irrational prejudice towards migrants. It can reflect ignorance or a fear of the unknown. Often it is seized on by malcontents for political or economic advantage. In such situations, the role played by mass media, but also by community and social media, becomes crucial and, on occasion, a matter of life or death.

In "Islamophobia plays right into the hands of Isis" (*The Guardian* 25 November 2015), Owen Jones pointed out that:

"Some of the media's attacks are beyond sinister. A *Daily Mail* cartoon provoked understandable comparisons with 1930s Nazi propaganda after portraying gun-toting Muslim refugees entering Europe amid rats. It is generally more subtle than that, of course. But it helps create an atmosphere where anything goes; where bigotry seems officially sanctioned and legitimised. Muslims become

seen as the enemy within, a fifth column, a near-homogenous group defined by their hostility to western values – or indeed the west full stop. 'Muslim' becomes synonymous with 'extremist' and 'potential terrorist'."

Many reputable (and responsible) media outlets make a point of offering balanced views of Islam, Muslims, and the difficult situations in which they are caught up – for example the war in Syria, the Israel/Palestine conflict, Hindutva in India, and the struggle in Mindanao, Philippines. Others are deliberately inflammatory and provocative.

The current crisis of Syrian refugees is a case in point, in which some media outlets have stoked public anxiety and intolerance by reporting the words and deeds of certain politicians without offering more moderate or sympathetic views. And then there is political intervention. In "The Elephant in the Room: Islam and the Crisis of Liberal Values in Europe" (*Foreign Affairs*, 2 February 2016) Alexander

Betts makes the point that:

"The simple fact is that European member states don't really want to welcome Muslim migrants. This has been explicit in the case of countries with vocal far-right parties and in central European countries with Christian nationalist governments. But the liberal political elites of Western Europe have steered clear of admitting that the biggest single barrier to coherent asylum and immigration policies is public anxiety about Islam. Far-right parties have pandered to these fears, stoking xenophobia."

Predominantly negative and racist reporting in the media strengthens an increasingly dangerous anti-Muslim mind-set, which reinforces stereotypes and leads to an escalation of violent attacks on Muslims. False or inaccurate stories about Muslims are routinely used by far right groups to legitimise their "case" and to gain followers. The Internet is full of

forums using mainstream newspaper reports as "proof" that their intolerant views about Muslims are true.

Silence, of course, is deadly. But some journalists are trying to persuade others to act more responsibly. In "5 Ways Journalists Can Avoid Islamophobia In Their Coverage" (*Huffington Post*, 14 December 2015), Senior Media Editor Gabriel Arana noted that, "It is the duty of journalists to inform and educate. But when it comes to Islam and the Muslim community – in the U.S. and across the world – news outlets have far too often served to spread misinformation and perpetuate prejudice."

Arana proposed the following remedies:

1. Visit a Mosque: The heart of the problem with the media's coverage of Muslims is that most of us simply do not know enough about Islam.

2. Be careful whose views you promote: Far too often, "balance" in news coverage has meant providing a platform for ideologues to spew racist garbage. Don't give bigotry a platform.

3. Challenge prejudice and debunk outright lies: The reason it's so important for journalists to arm themselves with information is not only so they themselves make sure not to perpetuate prejudice, it's also so they can challenge it.

4. Choose your words carefully: When journalists use phrases like "Islamic terrorism," they are implicitly conflating two concepts. While this term is in common use, it is the duty of those of us in the media to be more precise in our use of language than the general public.

5. Provide context: In the age of the Internet – with conduits for information like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube giving the public direct access to raw information – the role of the media has changed. It's no longer just to "report the facts", which the public is bombarded with on a daily basis. We must contextualize what's out there.

The articles in this issue of *Media Development* address these questions from a variety of perspectives in an attempt to open up dialogue and to pave the way for greater understanding. ∎