

Media and Racism: a hot debate

Durban conference on Racism

The III World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Connected Intolerance was not an easy one. The debate was caught up by political issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation and the withdrawal of Israeli and US government delegations, in a way, betted for the failure of this world gathering.

Journalists faced hard work during the two weeks of meetings in Durban, South Africa, where the NGO Forum and the Conference took place, from August 28 to September 7, 2001. It was not only the dimension of issues to cover that worried us, but also, for some of us, it was a concern not to be trapped by the confrontations we saw on the surface, that hid underneath many other important issues that affected millions of people around the world.

Many denouncements, diagnoses, reports and personal testimonies that circulated during the meetings, put forward the expanse of modern racism. It affects huge human groups. As independent journalists, we could not disregard the claims coming from 300 million indigenous people, 120 million migrants, 260 million Dalits in India and others in similar situation in Asian and African countries, 100 million Afrodescendants living in the American continent, and the millions in the South whose poverty and low standard of living have much to do with old and new forms of colonialism and slavery.

Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and general secretary of the Conference, said several times publicly that she was distressed by the fact that mainstream media was just focussing on one issue: US and Israeli criticism of the conference, and did not report on the many good things that were taking place in Durban. She stated that countries were arriving at important agreements on significant issues by consensus and that this was not reported properly.

“The news is that 163 countries stayed in the Conference, willing to go on with it”, said Maria Suarez, from FIRE radio station, in Costa Rica, during a debate on “Racism and the Media”, organised by UNESCO during the Conference. Members of the UNESCO panel were Mary Robinson; Rev. Jesse Jackson, US civil rights activist; actor Harry Belafonte, UNICEF Good Will ambassador; Aidan White, general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists; Abid Hussain, Special UN Commissioner for the Protection and Promotion of Freedom of Expression; Maria Victoria Polanco, president of the World Association of Community Radio Stations; and Mohamad Mohamedou, director of the International Council on Human Rights Policies, from Geneva.

The discussion was on the building of the news and the role of journalists; the concentration of mass media and the information market; community media and the need to give room to the voices of the victims. Under the impact of US and Israeli withdrawal from the conference, it was clear that the construction of the news depended on the perspective journalists adopted. But not only this. As Rev. Jesse Jackson put it, "in the big US TV networks, someone decided this Conference was not important, and only the CNN sent reporters".

Hussain considered that "media has to reflect injustices in society" and Mohamedou agreed with him and pointed that when media maintain the invisibility of certain communities, "this is racism". Aidan White tried to defend the role of journalists by saying that people could not expect journalists to campaign for human rights, because their role is to "submit all issues to critical scrutiny". He added that if journalists campaign today for one cause, they could do it for another one tomorrow and this would make them lose their "professional integrity". But Mary Robinson requested journalists to "present information fairly and for the people's service". She added that "many journalists are superficial".

The role of media corporations was also discussed. Members of the panel and interventions from the audience were very critical. "The real problem is mass media concentration", said Mary Robinson. Most interventions on this matter agreed that the real issue has little to do with journalists' integrity, but with the economic and political interests that rule media industry and the enormous power it concentrates. White reckoned that the market would never satisfy the requirements of social and cultural diversity, whilst Hussai manifested that "communications cannot be left in the hands of the market alone. We need to support small media, in order to achieve a rebirth of the values that we consider important".

Maria Victoria Polanco spoke of the need to give opportunities to community media that reflects the voices of the people, specially women, youth, children, indigenous peoples and racial minorities. When asked if community media were not at risk of being coopted by political or commercial interests, losing their independence, she answered that she doubted this could happen. "Community media are tools for social promotion. They are non commercial associations and organisations that belong to civil society. On this matter, their commitment is rooted in the social agenda, so I think it is very difficult that they lose their journalistic independence", she affirmed.

Discussing on racism in the media, Jackson and Belafonte argued that they had to struggle with a stereotyped and prejudiced press in their country. White recognised that there are racist journalists and that media can also be racist. Polanco considered that it is very important for civil society to monitor media and to act as a critical consumer, generating opinion and denouncing racist practices in the media.

The III World Conference on Racism issued a Declaration and a Programme of Action. In the Declaration, there are several articles related to the role of media, including the Internet, in issues

of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It calls on media to avoid, among other things, "the stigmatisation of people from different backgrounds" and the use of "hate language", that circulates mainly in Internet web pages.

The Programme of Action encourages media to produce voluntarily their own codes of conduct and internal regulations with the aim of struggling against racism, eliminating stereotypes, and representing social diversity with equity and balance. These codes should also help to struggle against the communication of ideologies linked to racial superiority or the justification of racial hate and other forms of intolerance.

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Links on Racism

The official Durban conference page is at
<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/racism>

<http://www.indymedia.org> has many alternative links relating to the Durban conference

Recent anti-Muslim backlashes in UK:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/wtccrash>

Recent anti-Muslim attacks in the US:
<http://www.salon.com/news/wire/2001/09/13/mosque/index.html>