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Region: Worldwide

Freedom of expression and its challenges in a multicultural world were the main topic of the event organised by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and the Media Diversity Institute (MDI). During an engaging discussion in Washington, panellists and the audience debated what are practical ways for strengthening freedom of expression, as well as what kind of social responsibility the media and journalists have when they report on events such as the attack on French magazine Charlie Hebdo?

MDI Executive Director Milica Pesic joined by dr Verica Rupar from Auckland University and Courtney Radsch from the Committee to Protect Journalists, also talked about the need to have inclusive journalism and reporting diversity included in curriculum of journalism schools? Panel held in Washington on 9 June was moderated by the BBC News journalist and presenter Razia Iqbal.

Panellists agreed that freedom of expression is a universal right that underpins some other rights such as privacy. But CIMA and MDI panel questioned what a good journalism means in today’s diverse and multicultural world.
"For instance, if I was an editor of a newspaper, I would never republish Charlie Hebdo front cover. Journalists and editors do have a right to republish such content, but they also need to think what they will archive by doing that," said dr Verica Rupar.

Rupar who is a MDI Inclusive Journalism Curriculum consultant highlighted that increased social responsibility and critical discussion will not diminish the role of journalism and the media.

"There are many people who don't know enough about Islam or any other religion. That's why there is a need to educate journalists, as well as a need to teach the audience what is a good journalism and what is propaganda," said MDI Executive Director Milica Pesic.

She also stressed that freedom of expression should be enjoyed by all citizens of every age, gender, sexual orientation and ethnic background.

"As a citizen you can say whatever you want, but the role of the media is to give the voice to citizens and to be their watchdog. While you are doing that, you have to be responsible," said Pesic insisting on social responsibility as a principal of a good journalism.

Radsch echoed Pesic's point, saying not only is it fast journalism, but also lazy journalism. Journalists get to choose their sources. Don't just go after the big name, Radsch suggests, or the usual authoritative source. Include other sources that reflect the whole scope of the story.

"For instance," she said, "we rarely hear the opinions of secular Muslims in the media.

"That's a really critical responsibility of journalists not to just create this polarized, binary, black or white situation," Radsch said.

"Journalism doesn't exist outside of the societies we live in," Pesic said. "There are different ways of managing diversity in different societies...Journalism should then reflect the kind of ways diversity is managed in each society."

Discussing where the limits of freedom of expression are, Courtney Radsch gave an example of Egypt where, she said, there was never such a level of self-censorship. "Journalists naturally turn to self-censorship because they don't know what the consequences of their reporting might be," said Radsch.

MDI Executive Director added that "governments and people in power might interpret differently terms such as inclusive, accurate, balanced and sensitive reporting. "But journalists have to decide for themselves on a daily basis where are the limits of freedom of expression," said Pesic.

"When we talk about journalists we talk about dedicated authority. Journalists are these who map our reality and that is why journalism must be responsible," concluded dr Rupar.

So how do we overcome polarized reporting? Rupar suggests a stronger focus on diversity in journalism education.

"It has to be a part of curriculum and it is part of the curriculum in different ways in different countries," Rupar said. For example, as part of the Inclusive Journalism Institute, she's running a course focusing on reporting in Europe and the Asia Pacific region. Universities from New Zealand, Denmark and Finland exchange students, as they all study topics that teach journalists how to report from these countries.

To highlight the importance of diversity and inclusiveness, moderator Razia Iqbal talked about her first job at the BBC. "In the newsroom I was assigned to, although it was an international newsroom, most of the colleagues were white. 25 years later, BBC pretty much still looks the same," said Iqbal.

The video recording of a panel discussion "Strengthening Freedom of Expression in a Multicultural World" organized by CIMA and in a partnership with MDI can be watched here.