



GETTING THE FACTS RIGHT
**REPORTING
ETHNICITY
& RELIGION**

A STUDY OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF ETHNICITY & RELIGION IN
DENMARK, FRANCE, GERMANY, GREECE, HUNGARY,
ITALY, LITHUANIA, SLOVAKIA AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

SUMMARY
REPORT

01 | INTRODUCTION

The interest in the way media report on ethnic and religious issues has increased in the last decade. The examples of unethical reporting on immigration, globalization, economic insecurity, and multiculturalism have raised the burning question of whether journalists have done more harm than good when covering events and issues that touch upon ethnicity and religion. The ground rules of factual, fair and balanced reporting have been evoked to highlight the growing concern over the media's role in reproducing prejudices, stereotypes and hate speech in an increasingly diverse Europe.

This document is a summary of the study **Getting the facts right: reporting ethnicity and religion** which explores how the core values of journalism, inscribed in international and national codes of ethics, are applied in everyday journalism practice as related to coverage of ethnicity and religion.

Newsmakers' awareness of the danger of discrimination based on, ethnicity, religion, and national or social origins, as well as their responsibility to avoid stirring up tensions, stimulating confrontation and intolerance is discussed by addressing the following questions:

- What professional norms guide editors and journalists when reporting on ethnicity and religion?
- What newsgathering tools are most commonly used?
- What are the institutional constraints in producing reports?
- What could be done better?
- What makes excellent coverage?
- What type of journalistic work fuels intolerance instead of providing information that supports intercultural understanding?

Europe is changing and journalists' engagement with that change has become one of the pressing issues of today. The implications of media representation of ethnicity and religion are significant because it fuels nationalism, spreading fear and tensions instead of promoting tolerance and compassion.

The study is based on critical analysis of 199 news reports and interviews with 117 journalists and editors in nine European countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

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MAIN FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Editors and journalists agree that the media have a responsibility to represent different social groups accurately and fairly in order to support good relations between people with a wide range of identities.

The study found that the main obstacles to good reporting are the poor financial state of the media, overloading of reporters, lack of time, lack of knowledge, and lack of in-house training.

WHO ARE THE JOURNALISTS COVERING ETHNICITY AND RELIGION?

- The majority of journalists (64%) interviewed in this study cover not only ethnicity or religion (beat reporters) but a range of other different issues (they are 'general reporters').
- They usually have a university degree, and half of those interviewed have a postgraduate degree.
- The majority of interviewed newsmakers are male (58% of reporters and 75% of editors).
- Their average age is 37.

All journalists have a heavy workload, but British journalists suffer the most from under-resourced newsrooms (producing more than 15 stories per week).

Newsmakers say their own ethnicity and religion do not interfere with their work, stressing a notion of detachment when it comes to reporting ethnicity and religion. Journalists and editors agree that newsroom diversity is not a goal in itself. They strongly emphasize that journalistic skill is the most important qualification, and that it also takes good journalistic skills to make use of one's specific ethnic or religious background.

There is a difference between general reporters and those who specialize in reporting on ethnicity and religion when it comes to professional norms and standards. **Journalists covering diversity issues demonstrated significantly higher ethical standards than the majority of general journalists interviewed.** However, grounding principles of objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance lead journalists in all nine EU countries surveyed, regardless of specific journalism culture.

WHAT THEY KNOW

Newsmakers are generally well aware of the fact that the majority of their audience have a very poor level of knowledge about minority social groups and that few of them have personal relations with persons of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. This poses a dilemma about whether to give the issues of ethnic and religious groups, immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers a special status as an area which ought to be covered more often and with more caution than other areas.

The study has shown that journalism and human rights interact at several points. Journalism can be seen as a human right - right to inform and be informed - but, in the case of hate speech, can be seen as an instrument for human rights violations. Journalism provides the means for promoting human rights by reporting about events where violations occur, analysing, interpreting and providing space for commentary on acts of discrimination and generally increasing audiences' knowledge and understanding of these issues.

All journalists expressed a clear belief that journalism has a strong and important role to play in tackling stereotypes and misinformation about ethnicity and religion by reporting in a professional manner. A need to balance two main tasks in reporting diversity issues were underlined:

- informing the public about the issues and events as they occur and
- interpreting reality in a way that provides a platform for a constructive public dialogue about the issues of public concern.

Knowledge about EU legislation relating to anti-discrimination is significantly higher among those in old EU member states than new member states. There is a varied awareness of legislation relating to equality between nations, with UK journalists being the best informed about anti-discriminatory policies and legislation.

HOW THEY REPORT ON THESE ISSUES

The analyses of case studies of news coverage focused on journalistic tools used in gathering, selecting, organising and presenting stories about ethnically and religiously diverse societies. It revealed how journalism practice contributes to the way media represent immigration, asylum seekers, refugees, members of minority ethnic groups, and members of different religious groups.

The majority of stories that touch upon ethnicity are nowadays framed within five broad themes:

- immigration
- poverty and crime
- discrimination
- playing politics
- ethnic minorities

The majority of stories on religion were reports on contested issues such as:

- the veil issue
- teaching Islam in schools
- integration
- places of worship
- abortion
- islamophobia
- religious extremism
- homosexuality
- sexual scandals in the church

All phases in news production pose challenges in journalism work from finding topics and approaching sources of information, to providing background information, finding an angle, and presenting a story.

The good examples of media coverage of ethnicity and religion are based on journalism practice that includes:

- in-depth reporting
- providing background information
- explaining legal contexts
- considering the impact
- giving a voice to the voiceless
- showing respect
- raising awareness about diversity
- avoiding stereotypes
- taking a stand on discrimination
- moving beyond the event
- minimizing harm

There is a rise in using undercover reporting, first-hand experience, and testimonials as powerful narrative tools to present stories about minority groups and the problems they face in everyday life.

OBSTACLES TO GOOD REPORTING

The Study revealed the following obstacles in reporting on ethnicity and religion:

- *Lack of knowledge:* reinforcement of stereotypes in the media comes as a result of inadequate knowledge about ethnicity and religion; many journalists expressed willingness to attend courses that would help them understand the issues and support their approach to these themes in their everyday work.
- *Lack of in-house training:* the majority of those interviewed would like to undertake some form of training that would support better handling of these issues.
- *Poor financial state of the media:* this is a problem in all the surveyed states but is particularly acute in new member states.
- *Overloading of reporters:* The economic crisis has had an impact on news organisations by increasing the number of stories journalists have to cover per day (particularly in Italy and Greece).
- *Lack of time to prepare reports:* related to the poor financial state of the media and the workload of journalists.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The interviews and case study analysis have generated a number of ideas aimed at supporting ethical, value based journalism. Variations in journalism cultures, identified in newsmakers' responses to the questions related to journalistic norms and values, as well as particularities in using different journalistic tools when reporting on religion and ethnicity, do not and should not prevent journalists from applying universal ideas of good, accurate, fair, balanced, responsible and trustworthy journalism.

What can journalists do? The study has generated a list of things journalists could do to improve the way they report on ethnicity and religion. They should aim to:

- get to know anti-discrimination legislation
- use a dialogue-oriented approach
- use a broader network of expert sources
- provide background information
- put facts in context
- investigate documents in the public domain (archives, libraries, local offices etc)
- interview people with knowledge
- portray people as human beings instead of representatives of religious or ethnic groups
- avoid negative labels
- separate facts from opinion but treat opinion as relevant

Telling the truth, providing equal access to media, being responsible, respecting privacy, adhering to the normative set of journalism rules and values as well as providing information necessary for the functioning of democracy and making the significant interesting are listed as the main journalism duties along with duties to a news organisation, colleagues and her/himself.

What can editors do? Editors can improve overall media performance by:

- organizing in-house training for journalists
- inviting members of religious and ethnic groups to come to the newsroom
- encouraging more senior journalists to support younger colleagues in these matters
- supporting best journalism practice
- creating a culture of tolerance within the newsroom
- working with human resource departments to take into consideration newsroom diversity
- developing internal editorial guidelines that take in consideration national and international codes of ethics

What can newsmakers expect from CSOs? Civil society organisations who highlight anti-discriminatory practices could support newsmakers by:

- providing regular updates on activities in the field
- giving professional advice and background information in matters of disputes
- providing support in finding sources for information
- functioning as an advisory panel for the most contested issues
- providing ideas for stories that highlight the issues of religious and ethnic groups

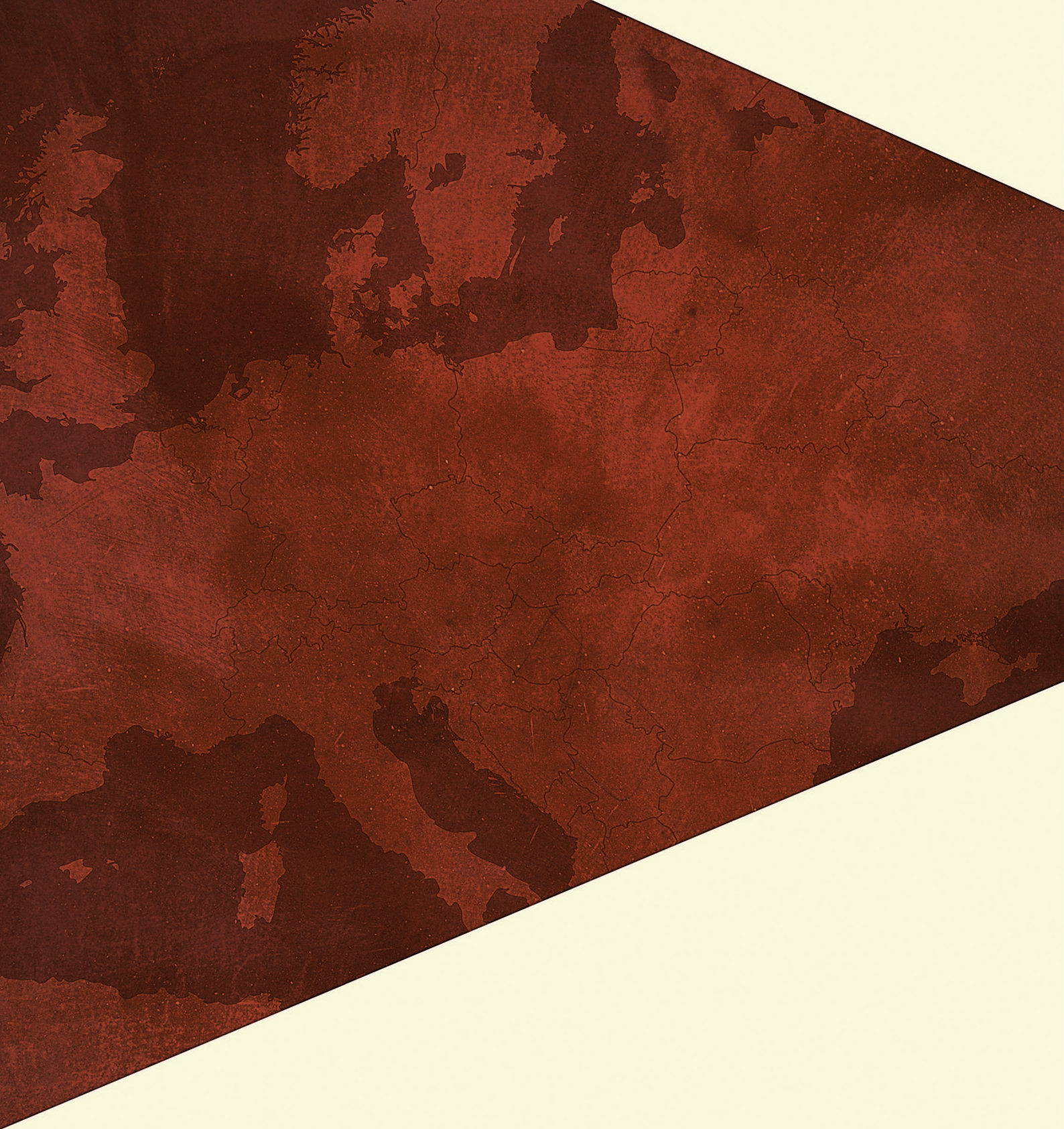
What can newsmakers expect from universities? Universities could also play a significant role in improving media treatment of diversity issues by:

- developing inclusive journalism curricula that better prepare students for challenges in the real world
- organising more post graduate training for mid-career journalists
- introducing courses on journalism ethics if they don't exist already

What can journalists' unions and associations do? The study also highlights the role of journalists' unions by listing a number of possible courses of action they could take:

- adopt and promote an ethical code for journalists
- organise training and workshops for journalists on issues related to tolerance, religion, security policy, rights of minorities, and reporting on vulnerable groups
- establish an equality council or a working group within the union to deal with the issue
- develop guidelines on reporting on ethnicity, migration and religion
- develop a specific charter or code of conduct for reporting on ethnicity, migration and religion
- initiate campaigns and debates among journalists, unions, publishers and civil society
- adopt and enforce a conscience clause in the collective bargaining agreements for journalists
- develop social dialogues with media organisations/owners to defend ethical and quality journalism
- examine the case for establishing a press council, or question the value of the existing one
- support public discussion on the work of journalists and, for instance, media coverage of issues related to tolerance, religion, security policy, rights of minorities and vulnerable groups
- establish an ethics commission to discuss cases and review the code of ethics

The Study argues that good, responsible, reliable and ethical journalism contributes to promoting intercultural dialogue and fighting discrimination in Europe. It is important to demonstrate how high quality journalism can provide the ground for rational debates of intercultural issues in society.



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