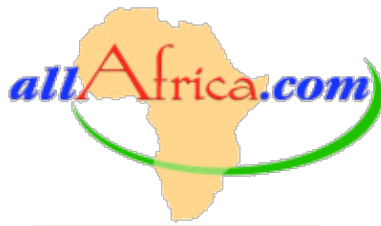


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Western Media Faulted Over Coverage of Islam

The Nation (Nairobi)

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Mugumo Munene
Nairobi

The Western media were yesterday criticised for negative reporting of Islamic issues.

They were accused of propaganda, which were aimed at justifying the actions of Western powers while painting Muslims in bad light.

But Western journalists attending the International Press Institute World Congress defended their positions, arguing they had been misunderstood.

The lively debate was kicked off by a former spokesman of the UN envoy to Iraq, Mr Salim Lome, who gave the main address on "Media Coverage of the Islamic World."

Mr Lome blamed the media for magnifying differences between Islamic countries and the West.

The former UN spokesperson said: "Sections of the Western media are exacerbating such tensions through careless or one-sided coverage, or more dangerously, through portraying Islamic states and groups, or even Islam itself, as a fount of terror."

He added: "I'm afraid that on the whole, Western coverage suffers from a lack of objectivity and independence from their governments' strategic goals."

He said this affected Islamic countries or groups that did not have difference with US, as they too suffer from the negative publicity.

But Alisha Ryu, the Voice of America's Bureau Chief in Nairobi, spoke of difficulties that Western journalists faced in covering dangerous assignments such as wars.

Ms Ryu said that when covering the war in Iraq, journalists who had accompanied the soldiers there were held hostage because they could not venture out on their own.

"I was embedded in Iraq and no one knew how long this was really going to take," she said.

"It wasn't a Disneyland experience to be having to wear heavy the anti-chemical weapon suits. We had to rely on the military for travel, food, water and.... we were held hostage."

In such conditions, she said, it was not possible to talk to the Iraqi people and get their side of the story.

Ms Ryu explained that unlike diplomats who are trained and given background information on the missions abroad, journalists are just parachuted on to assignments.

Earlier, the handling of the Iraqi war by Western media had come under attack by Ms Magda Abu-Fadil in a paper: "Is Coverage of Arabs, Islam Good? Western Media Under Scrutiny."

Ms Fadil, the director of the Institute of Professional journalists at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon, said: "What worries me is the editorialising, pseudo-expert pontificating by TV 'talking heads' and so-called reporting by journalists covering a region which they know very little about and don't have the time or desire to learn about."

She said embedding journalists with US and British troops may have provided striking images, but did not provide opportunities for the journalists to understand the context of the war.

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"Foreign correspondents covering Arab or Islamic countries often lack knowledge on issues they report," she said.

But the scholar also faulted Arabs and Muslims who had failed to provide adequate, correct and reliable information on their countries.

She called on media executives and journalists to review the way Islam and the Arabs were covered. We need to re-think our coverage of Islam and the Arab world. It's not just about good public relations, it's good business. Responsible journalism can go a long way towards minimising the artificially juiced-up clash of civilisation," she said.

She went on to quote the late Pope John Paul II, who talked against using the media to divide the people.

The Pope's message, she said, was based on the book of James, which says: "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."

She added that the Pope had underscored the power of words to bring people together or divide them; to forge friendships or to provoke hostility.

"Journalists should remember these words when reporting on the Islamic world," Ms Fadil said.

Panellist Shams Vellani, the director of Special Project at the Aga Khan Development Network in London, said that journalists needed to study the people and faiths they report about to have more balanced reporting.

Mr Vellani said that prejudices taught in schools had influenced the thinking of journalists, who cover Muslims.

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"Democracies thrive on the grounds that the media have a role to play in making intellectual comment. The media should try to learn those whom they report about," he said.

Turkish journalist Samih Idiz said journalists should always strive to understand those they report about.

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