

Satellite Dishes and Internet, a Bridge between Two Worlds

Maria Dolors Massana. Journalist and writer, President of Reporters without Borders

Thanks to the proliferation of satellite dishes, television holds a prevailing position in the configuration of collective ideologies, especially in the Southern countries. Internet is slowly but irreversibly following in its steps. Faced with the will of the political and economic powers to control this immense wealth of information, the plurality of the media and the consensus of a universal ethical code for journalism must be strengthened.

The major technological revolution of the media is opening up the possibility of establishing better mutual perception between the countries on the two shores of the Mediterranean.

“Satellite dishes are prohibited.” This was one of the first measures adopted by the leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front after almost triumphing in the first municipal multiparty elections held in Algeria in 1989. In this way, they stated the purpose to impede the influences considered harmful arriving from the West. It was an objective fully in keeping with that of imposing the *Sharia* or Islamic law through which, in the departments controlled by Islamists, alcoholic drinks – even in hotels – were forbidden along with cinemas, discos and other places and modes of entertainment considered reprehensible. Moreover, the use of the veil or chador was promoted and the miniskirt was dismissed as a way to safeguard a new morality not contaminated, according to the Islamic leaders, by “depraved” secular customs, inherited from French colonisation.

This is another of the many examples occurring in the countries of the so-called Third World, which result in the prohibition

of satellite dishes, refusing access to Internet, and impeding the entrance of foreign books, newspapers and magazines. The obsessive concern of all authoritarian regimes has been and continues to be to control the information flows reaching the citizens. Because with them comes the possibility of introducing different collective imaginaries and very often contrary to customs and traditions that they seek to obligatorily preserve.

We will not mention here the systems used in the first world in order to pressure and even manipulate the press because this is not the subject of this article. Obviously, they are much subtler and do not require drastic prohibitions.

The case of Morocco, to speak of the countries closest to the Islamic world, those of the Maghreb, is paradigmatic as it officially enjoys a freedom of press in contrast with its neighbours, Tunisia (none) or Algeria (very harassed); a legal principle that the government of Mohamed VI fails to observe through the closing of satirical magazines, the imprisonment of their editors and the imposition of strong sanctions. A recent case is that of the weekly



Internet users at the Library of Alexandria.

magazine *Nichane*, suspended for three months and whose Editor-in-Chief, Driss Ksikes, was condemned to three years of prison and a fine of 80,000 dirham (around €7,200) for having published a humorous cartoon strip under the title “How Moroccans ridicule religion, sex and politics”. The suspension of another humorous publication is older but still prevailing, that of the *Dumane*, by the journalist Ali Mrabet, from whom – after having been released from prison – the Moroccan authorities withdrew permission to publish in his country for ten years. Such rage can only be explained because in countries with high rates of illiteracy, like those on the other shore of the Strait, comic strips, jokes and cartoons are very dangerous

given than it is not necessary to be able to read to understand them.

An example of how the media influence the societies receiving the message would be the case of the famous cartoons of Mohammed published last year by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and which provoked a riot in Islamic countries with the burning of Western embassies in Iran, Syria and Lebanon and several angry demonstrators dead in the riots in Palestine. These were reprehensible incidents which in Europe had simultaneous and inexplicable almost condemnatory echoes in the reactions of the Vatican, the United Nations and the European Union; an inappropriate attitude to which must be added the “disappear

for while” of *Jyllands-Posten* to the Danish humorists responsible for the cartoons.

We must therefore agree that the interactions provoked by the power of the media reach unexpected latitudes and amplitudes; in this case clearly undesirable.

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However, in such a globalised world, the moment has come when it is impossible to hold the information flows. When new technologies erupt with force in the authorities, universities and homes, it is impossible to have an information blackout. It would be like trying to put gates on the sea. For this reason, for some – too many – governments, Internet is the great enemy to be controlled. In Cuba, if you want to buy a computer it is necessary to get an official permit. In China, to the shame of capitalist eagerness to capture a market of 1,300 million people, the government has reached an agreement with Google, Yahoo and other major operators to self-censor determined political issues, marked by the government of Beijing. In Iran, cyberdissidents are incarcerated, to say nothing of Eritrea, North Korea and many other countries which prohibit and censor information and harass, threaten and gag the journalist. Repression has also spread through the Muslim world. Last February, in Egypt the first important sentence against a blogger was passed: four years of prison for an article entitled “There is no other god but man”, directly challenging the principle of Islam “There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet.”

Such reprehensible aggressions against freedom of the press are clear evidence of the importance that authoritarian governments give to the media as formers of opinion within

their own countries and the image projected abroad.

But Internet is here. And satellite dishes too. And their strength in the creation of a collective imaginary in the countries that receive radioelectric or satellite signals is enormous. Fabulous. For good and evil. Moreover, at present, the information flow has ceased to be unidirectional, from North to South. Now it moves in both directions since the birth of new channels, new media that broadcast from South to North, or from East to West. In order to understand this situation we must outline the most notable case which has marked a turning point in this field: the emergence of Al Jazeera.

I remember the first Gulf War, in 1991, when the American CNN was the only information source in the conflict, launched by the coalition, led by the United States and endorsed by the UN, against the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein. It was impossible to contrast the news. The journalists who covered that conflict were sold what the current occupant of the White House, Bush senior, wanted. There were no other sources. It was the most media dominated war ever seen but of an almost unilateral orientation.

The second Gulf War, that of the invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein therefore “democratising” the country, has been, and is, another story. From the Arab-Muslim side, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and other channels broadcast plural images, different versions of a war, dirty in many aspects, to which we would never have had access without the presence of the so-called Arab CNNs, especially the powerful Qatar channel.

It is good to have contrasted visions of the same fact, especially in the case of conflicts. But it is also fundamental to explore in depth the mutual understanding between civilisations which share a single sea but which, sometimes, are wrongly interpreted because of ignorance.



During the First Gulf War, CNN was the only source of information.

Whenever we speak of the visibility of the “other”, of otherness, we limit ourselves to cultural exchange as the result of better understanding through visits, meetings, roundtables, seminars, etc., held between the Mediterranean countries. Bearing in mind that these events can only be reached by the educated elites, which represent a small part of the Southern populations, we will immediately realise the great work that the media can undertake to this end, especially satellite TV channels, which reach the humblest homes in all places. I sincerely believe that TV is the most powerful medium of cultural exchange that has ever existed if we bear in mind that access to Internet is also restricted to those educated sections of population which in the case of the Arab world are still very small.

These are new and powerful media outlets for transmitting news, cultural messages, collective proposals, ways of seeing the world and human convictions or needs to very distinct cultures. Whether through news, entertainment and comedy programmes, films, game shows, etc... And everything through a simultaneous exchange of directions. Above all, as I mentioned, North-South and South-North as well as West-East and East-West. It is a phenomenon

underway. Surely, unstoppable. An example of this can be found in the aforementioned Arab station Al Jazeera, which this year has started a new period aimed at foreign viewers who do not understand Arabic, specifically towards the West. For this audience, the Qatar channel has launched transmissions in English, even with the presence of media stars from the BBC itself.

In accordance with this purpose of crossing frontiers and eliminating all kinds of barriers, the association for the freedom of the press, Reporters without Borders, with 12 national branches throughout the world, has incorporated since 1st January 2007 a version of its website in Arabic, until that date limited to English, Spanish and French. What does this mean? That information now offers the conditions to become much more plural and that the battle in this field must be won through these mediums.

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However, this positive side has another very different and dangerous one, which must be mentioned. Where there are possibilities of beneficial intercommunication for useful and advantageous mutual understanding, there are also, unfortunately, those that serve totally opposed twisted ends. In other words: to transmit what divides rather than what unites, in benefit of exclusivist ideological languages that foment misunderstanding and even hostility.

In this context, insidious possibilities are opened of hitherto unsuspected magnitude to determined political, economic and ideological and monopolistic powers of all kinds.

For this reason, it is more necessary than ever to find methods to safeguard codes that prevent the contamination of lies, misun-



Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and other satellite channels guaranteed increased media plurality during the second Gulf War.

derstanding, hate and violence. The line that should be impassable to achieve this is the respect for the fundamental principles of human rights and civil liberties. An ethical base of universal value. This is not about more or less well-intentioned generalisations but very specific current pressures. For example, does broadcasting the complete videos of the beheadings of the kidnap victims by Al Qaeda, as Al Jazeera has done more than once, mean inappropriately accosting consciences? Or the hanging of Saddam Hussein?

They are kinds of behaviour whose nature should also be questioned in determined news outlets of the West, especially on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean. For example, the

slant that can be given – and in fact is often given – to the audiovisual information on the migratory flow that reaches to Southern and Western Europe. The danger that consciously or unconsciously it induces negative value judgements of social alarmism and rejection or, in contrast, unregulated indiscriminate granting of entry for explicable humanitarian reasons. The images of waves of small boats bringing Maghrebian, sub-Saharan and even Pakistani and Indian immigrants to the Canary Island coasts and the consequent drama of sinking can create biased states of opinion that do not exclude xenophobia and racism.

Our era has one of its biggest challenges in the overflowing of migratory movements,

in the most varied directions and for different causes. But they are mainly due to the clamorous contrast between the rich and poor worlds; between the ordered world, in peace, with legal guarantees for the human person and coexistence, and with unequalled historical possibilities for economic development and the consequent provision of work, faced with vast areas where the tyrannical arbitrariness of power, war and all kinds of violence and pandemics dominate. It is the image, in many aspects distorted, of a luminous world that provokes resentment and at the same time attraction of another dark world of generalised misery and helplessness.

The media – above all television – have an extraordinary role in bringing an appropriate approach to this tragedy that has a central role at the start of the 21st century. An essential starting point so that both the source and destination countries can come to fair conclusions about how to deal with it jointly.

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In conclusion, the force of persuasion and seduction that the media possesses in the collective imaginary of the two shores of the Mediterranean – applicable to shores of greater amplitude – should be a tool of considerable efficacy for the sincere understanding of the differences while overcoming the stereotypes that news – too often tendentious

– contributes to the distortion of the truth. The establishment of bridges must prevail to approach and find joint systems of work to eliminate painful and unjust inequalities.

Sometimes walls are erected between peoples like that built by the Israelis to isolate Palestine and by the United States to impede the mass entrance of Mexican emigrants. But there are other walls that are not made of cement but of a material even more impenetrable and harmful because it is invisible. These are those of preconceived ideas, the predisposition against the “other” considered distant and incompatible.

Apart from the countries where freedom of the press is impenetrable, as we mentioned before, we must agree that the audiovisual media would be extremely efficient champions of the rapprochement of cultures as long as they are independent, objective, resistant to the influence of the economic, political and ideological powers that sustain them. This is quite clear in international television channels with large audiences such as CNN and Al Jazeera. We have received clearly tendentious messages from the first, and at least “manipulated” messages from the second on the war of occupation of Iraq from 2003. Perhaps this offers an advantage: at least now the inputs that come to us from one party or another can be balanced.

Leaving aside the occasional field of coverage of armed conflicts, the fact that the cited channels have come to broadcast both in English and Arabic could also be interpreted as the possibility of an approach to models of society that unfortunately appear all too often distanced and conflicting.