MEDIA FAILING MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Posted on May 3, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Haroon Siddiqui, The Toronto Star , 3 May 2009

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Another aspect of the alienation is the widening gap between the expectations of our increasingly sophisticated readers and the cliché-ridden narratives we often deliver, at home and from abroad.

It is argued that newspapers, writing only the first rough draft of history, can only paint pictures in quick, broad strokes; and that the bigger the audience, the more they must fall back on the shorthand of populist stereotypes.

This tried and true formula of mass reach, an entertaining mix of the serious and the sensational, is at odds with the narrow needs of niche markets: tracking the fluctuations of your stocks, the fortunes of your favourite NHL franchise or the latest news from "back home," be it the Maritimes or Mauritius, delivered to your computer or hand-held devices – fresh and instant, not stale and a day late.

But newspapers remain the best vehicle for investigative reports as well as for the insight, informed opinion, analysis and debate that drive public policy agenda. But even here, we are losing ground. There are fewer resources at most newspapers to do the former and a deficit of the traits needed to do the latter.

As our nations become more multicultural, the need for cross-cultural journalism, i.e. telling the story of one group in a way that all others can relate to it, becomes essential. Yet newspapers – nay, most mainstream media – are poor at it.

Our knowledge of the many communities among us is primitive. Our adversarial lingo, combined with outdated notions of immigrants and their cultures, often comes across as racist. And, we are loath to admit, we do treat different groups differently, depending on their place in the social hierarchy. We bow to the establishment, insult the marginalized.

That's life, I guess. But when not just the tabloids but respected mainstream broadsheets become peddlers of prejudice, social cohesion is endangered, as the Quebec commission on reasonable accommodation so bluntly said last year.

The media thus risk failing both as a business and as the essential institution of democracy that they claim to be.

These observations are not a call to political correctness. The media can and should be equally tough on all. But, first, we have to earn the right by being equally fair to all.

Problems afflict our international coverage as well. Our readers have a sophisticated understanding of global issues that we don't.

Take these recent examples from even some high-end publications.

A New York Times analysis of the strained relations between Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili, the pro-American president of Georgia, had this gem: "The two leaders' impact on relations between their countries reflects the intense role that personality plays in governments in the former Soviet states." Personalities do not play an intense role in the U.S.?

The Times Literary Supplement from London, reviewing a book by Amin Malouf, the Lebanese Christian writer living in Paris, said: "Middle Eastern identities are complex." European ones aren't?

A New York Times story, "Feeling secure enough to sin," heralded the resumption of cockfighting and night-clubbing in Baghdad. Setting aside the wisdom of using the return of vice as a barometer of normalcy, the story was oblivious to the obvious: that it took only an invasion, a six-year occupation, at least 100,000 dead and 4 million displaced to get the Iraqis back to the joys they had enjoyed under the secular Saddam Hussein.

The same paper brought glad tidings of a different sort from the Indonesian parliamentary election last week: "Voters retreat from radical Islam." Except that Muslim voters have been doing so regularly – in Malaysia, Turkey, Bangladesh and even Pakistan. Radicals have done well only in oppressed societies, such as Western-backed Egypt and Algeria, or those under attack or occupation, such as Iraq and the Israeli Occupied Territories.

If educating us on the complexities of the world, and advancing mutual understanding here and across the oceans, are the last supposed strengths of newspapers, we are not doing a good job of it.

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