

A call to the media to be responsible in its reporting about Islam

Of course all media has to choose what to report, and in this choice bias or subjectivity are bound to creep in. It is inevitable. But responsible media should keep in mind that there is a limit to what is inevitable. It is for example not allowed to invent or distort facts or to take them so much out of context that they are doomed to give a wrong idea to the public.

Most might nod affirmatively when reading my opening paragraph. But so little are we aware of how quickly this is not taken into account. A BBC article on the 9th of August made me realize this again.

The article "Security tight for Iraqi pilgrims" reported about the Shi'a community in Iraq going on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the 8th century imam, Moussa Al-Kadhim, the Kadhimiya Mosque. The article stated all the needed facts like for example the security being very high and prepared and the thousand pilgrims that had been killed in a stampede during the same pilgrimage in 2005.

Yet the article also mentions that among the hundreds of thousands of Shia pilgrims, "many (were) flogging themselves with iron chains or cutting their foreheads with swords." The Guardian and United Press International also mentioned the self mutilation.

I was of course a bit startled by the little, unexplained paragraphs, caught in between the others as if it did not belong there really. I had not heard of this practice yet. So I looked it up on the net.

But the more I searched, the more I got confused. All I could find about such practices was related to another pilgrimage on the day of Ashura, which is the end of a 10 day mourning period during called Muharram during which Shia's mourn over the battle at Karbala in which Imam Husayn ibn Ali, a grandson of the Prophet, was killed. There is a pilgrimage connected to this event as well, but it is obviously not the same one.

The next day new reports came in. Reuters and the New York Times reported approximately the same but said nothing about rituals in which people would mutilate themselves. The only thing that one could read was, for example in the Reuters article, that pilgrims "chanted and beat their chests in a traditional Shi'ite gesture of ritual mourning."

This practice is in fact called matham, and it is a common Shia display of devotion in remembrance of suffering that was inflicted on Shi'a's in the past. Zanjeer matam on the other hand, is, as far as I could research it, the practice of flagellation with chains, mentioned by the previous articles.

Through a journalistic acquaintance I eventually could get hold of an Iraqi who is based in Qatar and works for Al Jazeera, the English speaking Arab television network. He confirmed what I was already thinking: Zanjeer matam is indeed normally only associated with the day of Ashura.

But although performed by some in Iraq, Bahrein, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, this practice which makes people's heads and backs drip with blood is much debated within the world wide Shi'a community itself. It is disapproved and seen as nonreligious by many Shi'a authorities including the Ayatollah of Iran who banned it in his Shi'a country.

My contact, himself a Shi'a, also strongly condemned the practice calling it something for "the uneducated". He nevertheless said that perhaps there might be a few who do such a thing outside of Muharram.

But a few is obviously not the "many flogging themselves" of the BBC. And if there were a few,

they were in fact such a small group that CNN or Reuters did not remark them. Very strange for a very bloody ritual that is normally performed in the middle of the crowds, for everybody to see.

If you choose to make a sensational piece about matham, a marginal and by many Shi'a's disapproved ritual in the Muslim world, so be it. As I said at the start of my article: news reporters can choose what they report about.

But to simply copy-paste information, in this instance from one ritual to another, without really checking or contextualizing it, certainly in such sensitive issues, is plain wrong from both a journalistic and an ethical point of view.

I of course also send a question to the BBC to verify the factuality of what they wrote. But I got no reply and neither did they remove the sentence from the article.

Even if it is factually true and the use of “many” was just a bit misplaced, there is no real excuse for the paragraph in the article. Through ignorance and prejudice Islam is 'demonized' and 'barbarized' enough all over the world. We do not need the media to that any further. Yet that is exactly what such little unexplained paragraphs do.

People who have read the article will probably not remember the name of the Shrine of the Imam the pilgrims visited, but many will be startled and think that Shi'a's are “weird and uncivilized people that beat themselves with chains and swords.” A Shi'a might very well think the same of Christians if he reads an article about Eastern that casually drops in the flagellants of New Mexico and the devotional crucifixions in the Philippines without any further explanation.

In our contemporary society which is so sensitive to all things religious, a reporter of such issues has to keep in mind that he has a big responsibility to report, and not to distort.

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