

Dutch Journalists Alter Their Coverage of Migrants

In the wake of a politician's murder and the rise of populist politicians, journalists start to report routinely on societal issues related to migrant groups.

By Yvonne van der Heijden and Evert Mathies

Neither in society, nor in the media has the multicultural society been a hot topic in the Netherlands until recent years. It wasn't an issue that the Dutch took particular interest in discussing since groups of immigrants from different cultures had settled successfully in this country for centuries. In the 16th century, Jewish merchants from Spain and Portugal settled here. They were followed by Puritans from England, who as Pilgrims in 1620 sailed to the New World, and then by French Calvinist Huguenots fleeing persecution in France.

In a small country with wealth creation dependent on international trade it always has been a matter of common sense for Protestants, Catholics and Jews to co-exist. Our country's strong historic tradition of religious tolerance also made it easy to ignore the consequences of the huge influx of people with different cultural backgrounds after World War II. The first wave in the 1950s were Dutch with post-colonial roots from the Netherlands Indies, Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. They brought an exotic tropical culture with them, but they spoke Dutch so communication was not a serious problem. That was different with the second wave of immigrants – then called "foreign guest workers," who came from countries around the Mediterranean in the 1960s and 1970s.

Alien to Dutch Values

Tens of thousands of "guest workers" invited to work in low-skilled industrial jobs arrived from Turkey and Morocco with cultural values alien to the Dutch. They came mostly from the poorer parts of their countries, were devout Muslim believers, and were close to illiterate. As is common practice here, these migrants set up associations which took care of organizing cultural events and these became consultative counterparts of the government. At that time, and still years later, nobody in the Netherlands realized what enormous impact these immigrant workers would have on this society that was based on Jewish-Christian values like forgiveness, freedom, justice and hope. Until the rise of flamboyant politician Pim Fortuyn, who at the turn of the 20th century denounced Islam's intolerance and gained an intense following in doing so, migrant issues seldom got front page coverage.

Until then, the nation's lack of interest in issues associated with racism and cultural diversity has been grounded in the horrible experiences of World War II. The large scale murder of Dutch Jews had made a taboo of ethnic divisiveness and this contributed to a delay in the emergence of a debate about immigration and integration. In 2001, Fortuyn's political message and rising popularity broke the taboo. But, as had happened in 1982 when the extreme right-wing Centre Party (CP) propagated xenophobic and racist ideas and won a seat in Parliament, journalists (and politicians) again did not know how to handle what was happening.

A Wake-up Call For Journalists

In the early 1980s, increasing support for extreme right-wing organizations, culminating in the Centre Party's entry into the House of Representatives, served as a wake-up call on the topic of racism for the Netherlands Association of Journalists (NVJ). Disinterest in migrants' lives had changed to negative imaging of ethnic minorities in the media; migrants were now being portrayed and treated as inferior people. Some newspapers printed the full names of foreigners who were arrested contrary to the usual practice of using initials in reports on those who are detained by the police.

To raise interest in the migration issues and tackle unfair reporting on migrants, the NVJ set up a working group called "Media & Racism" in 1984, which developed a proposal for a code of journalistic conduct in the coverage of migrants. The draft code, however, faced strong opposition among NVJ members for whom journalistic freedom is sacred. During an emotional meeting, they rejected this new code and decided to stick with the Code of Bordeaux, which was adopted in 1954.¹ In their opinion, this prior code provided enough ethical guidelines applicable to migrant issues. The result was that all news media would be free to report on migrants in their own way.

At that time, political journalists had to figure out how best to deal with the Centre Party. Would they ignore the party's one member of Parliament? Would they leave Parliament House during his speeches? Not report on his ideas? Or would journalists be the ones to initiate the debate about the acceptability of intolerance?

An agreement was reached among those who covered Parliament that only one reporter – the one working for ANP, the national news agency, would be present at the speeches of the CP member. It was determined that he would write a report when he thought news was made. It took a while to sort out these coverage issues, but in the end reporting would be done on these issues and that was an important step. Ignoring this trend in society – and ignoring an elected member of Parliament – would only worsen the problem.

In 1987, the working group, renamed "Migrants & Media," broadened its scope. It now included topics such as recruitment of migrant journalists by Dutch media and schools of journalism. A year later it was agreed that five per cent of students in each journalism class had to be of foreign origin. This directive has not worked to push numbers higher. Nearly 20 years later, in 2006, not more than four per cent of journalists are non-ethnic Dutch, though close to 10 percent of the Dutch population is of foreign origin and this climbs to a bit more than 30 percent in major cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague.

Instead, what happened is that migrant groups for the most part ignored Dutch media, much as they were ignored by it. Only a local paper in Rotterdam, *De Havenloods*, published half-pages of news in Turkish during the 1970's. And, public radio offered programs in the migrants' languages for a few hours every week.

¹ This international declaration was proclaimed as a standard of professional conduct for journalists engaged in gathering, transmitting, disseminating and commenting on news and information and in describing events. Adopted by the Second World Congress of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) at Bordeaux on 25-28 April 1954.

In May 2002 the Dutch were startled when a white collar, left-wing environmentalist murdered Pim Fortuyn nine days before Lower House elections in which he was running. His was the first political murder in the Netherlands since the 1584 assassination of William of Orange, known as the "Father of the fatherland." Fortuyn's opponents labelled him a far-right populist because of his anti-Islam and anti-immigration stance, but he'd insisted that he wasn't racist and preferred his political views to be compared with centre-right politicians such as former Italian Prime-Minister Silvio Berlusconi. He is probably best considered a nationalist on cultural rather than racial grounds, and in the late 1990s he was the only one speaking out on the problems caused by the widening gap between the ethnic Dutch and the almost one million Muslims in a total population of 16 million. His fast rise to fame is interpreted here as a sign of how widespread the view has become that the idea of building a multicultural society has failed.

Soul-Searching Media

The assassination of Fortuyn set off a soul-searching period among journalists. What had they done wrong or failed to do? What lessons were they to learn? As they wrestled with these questions, they acknowledged that they'd been covering migrant issues from an ivory tower. They'd missed important developments taking place in the dilapidated old neighbourhoods in major cities where a surging number of foreigners from other cultures had moved in, scaring the original inhabitants. In many neighbourhoods, more than half of the people were of foreign origin and were imposing their lifestyle on the community. The fear of the unknown, coupled with language differences that made communication difficult, made these neighbourhoods the perfect breeding ground for what was now being seen as the success of a populist agenda.

Finally, the news media did what the earlier working group had proposed 20 years earlier. The lives of migrants and their communities received more attention, not only when news events happened, such as the murder of outspoken and often offensive critic of Islam, film director Theo van Gogh, by a 26-year-old Dutch Moroccan in November 2004, but on a more regular basis. Journalists began to cover Islamic festivals and wrote stories about so-called "black" schools with a majority of migrant pupils, migrant entrepreneurs and the disgraceful situations of detained asylum seekers. Unfortunately, the working group was dissolved in 2004 because of lack of financial support.

Migrant authors and politicians now play an active role in the debate on the multicultural society – and what they say and do receives the attention of journalists. One of them, Somali-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch Parliament, was at the centre of political upheaval last June when immigration minister, Rita Verdonk, nicknamed 'Iron Rita' for her tough stance on immigration, stripped Hirsi Ali of her citizenship. When she'd applied for asylum in 1992, Hirsi Ali had used her grandfather's name, which according to Verdonk was a false name, to obtain a Dutch passport. This dispute caused the collapse of the Dutch government. Hirsi Ali resigned her seat in Parliament and announced she'll move to the United States to work for the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington, D.C. She got her Dutch passport back in July.

As with the reaction on the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad which sparked uproar in the Islamic world earlier this year, media coverage of Hirsi Ali's

case was huge and responsibly handled as a wide spectrum of public opinion found its way to the public. Indeed, newspaper and broadcasting organizations are keeping a watchful eye on migrant issues today in ways that weren't done even a few years ago. Though no special code of conduct has been instituted, news organizations are adhering to their own high standards when it comes to telling this complicated story. And the common ground journalists now inhabit is an awareness of the vital role they must play in their nation's fragile and ever-changing multi-cultural society.##

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