

Turkey's stereotyped image in foreign press (1)

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Turkey is stereotyped by the foreign press into just three words , says BBC College of Journalism Editor Kevin Marsh: The headscarf, generals, and the European Union. He is trying to change this through his college's program.

There is a mesh filtering out any possible news stories that do not confirm with the stereotyped image of Turkey abroad, said Kevin Marsh, editor of the BBC College of Journalism whose goal is to teach BBC journalists a better understanding of the media, balanced coverage, the public interest, and independence on top of journalistic skills.

Three words and images, namely, the headscarf, generals, and the European Union (EU) are used to stereotype the perception of Turkey, said Marsh. Prior to coming to Turkey to give two speeches in Marketingist, a three day marketing event held last week, he studied the portrayal of Turkey in British and French media. "It was just striking how the same words kept coming up again and again: Islam, headscarf, generals, generals, Islam, headscarf, secular, the EU, the EU, the EU... If a story did not have one of those elements or, more importantly, if you could not put one of those elements in it, it was almost as if it just did not get in the paper," he said.

Marsh believes such words and the images associated with them create hostile images in the British psyche. He uses the example that the mention of Islam or Muslims has been so skewed by the media that they result in conjuring images of the 9/11 attacks and the London bombings.

"I started realizing that these key words were taking the mental picture into really hostile places," said Marsh. He said a story needed to go through this mesh and confirm with the "key words" to be able to be printed or broadcasted. "And each of the key words, to the majority, has very bad associations," he said.

The portrayal of Turkey in the Western media has long been a sore spot of both Turks traveling abroad and the country's international image, and confronting the lament is the recently-declared mission of the new head of the BBC College of Journalism who sees Turkey as a victim of "key word" journalism.

"I was quite surprised once I started looking at the way in which Turkey was reported about in the UK press and some of the French press, too. It is an amazingly stereotyped image. It is almost as if only stories that fit into certain stereotype have been getting into the press, certainly on front pages," said Kevin Marsh, who worked for years as a television producer before moving two years ago to establish and become editor of the BBC College of Journalism.

The 'key words'

"It was just striking how the same words kept coming up again and again: Islam, headscarf, generals, generals, Islam, headscarf, secular, European Union (EU), EU, EU. If a story did not have one of those elements or, more importantly, if you could not put one of those elements in it, it was almost as if it just did not get in the paper," he said.

In order to illustrate how the media associates images with various "key-words" and communicates ideas through these images, he gives the example of how Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement on the constitutional changes regarding the headscarf were reflected through BBC World:

"It was a very short report, probably the only report on BBC World that there will be about Turkey for

another three weeks. It had one image, Erdoğan's speech, and then the other image, women in headscarves, and then the third, the Turkish army marching. Even the BBC, which I think is a lot better than most, can put together these really stereotypical images of Turkey that draw from a very small number of mental images."

Such observations are common among Turkish media critics, such as Mehmet Ali Birand, Ahmet Sever, and Aslı Tunç. But Marsh's comments come as a first from a high priest of Western media.

Marsh believes such words and the images associated with them create hostile images in the British psyche. "For example, any mention of Islam or Muslim has been so skewed, especially by popular media in the UK, that the images that immediately come to mind are of 9/11, the 2005 London bombers, Iran. I started realizing that these key words were taking the mental picture into really hostile places," said Marsh.

"The same with the EU," he added. Marsh sees the way some British press reported on the European Union enlargement of 2004 as feeding into stereotypes and communicating reports that were not true, such as people coming from Poland sleeping in parks and eating squirrels. "Here is another word," he said, "If the story is not about EU enlargement and Turkey, it does not get into the paper. But the EU enlargement in the public mind tends to bring up what happened in 2004, or how the media portrayed it."

Confirming stereotypes

This portrayal of Turkey, Marsh finds, is very unfavorable. "Any story, any report has to go through this mesh, which filters out any story that does not have these key words. And each of the key words, to the majority, has very bad associations," he said. He believes this portrayal of Turkey can be considered socially irresponsible. "If the representatives of those newspapers were present here now, they would probably say: 'Well, you cannot expect us to report everything about Turkey. We only report the international stuff, we cannot be too complicated,' not totally understanding that that kind of reporting is almost socially irresponsible because it is confirming stereotypes," said Marsh.

Despite this imagery, the British are still moderately pro-Turkish and around 45 percent of the British support Turkey's EU accession. However, newspapers sustain their negative view. "I suspect that if and when the enlargement process begins to accelerate, the papers will turn their minds to it and you will get a very negative press about the prospect. [Something like] '75 million Turks standing on your doorstep, presumably all wearing headscarves until the generals come and yank them away.' This is the image in the press," he said. He anticipates that this will touch on the sensitive spots in the British psyche, and will start to erode support for Turkey.

Marsh believes the fact that Turkey is rarely portrayed in the British media to be consequential. "When Turkey is pictured in news reports, which is very important because to most people they are the only images they will get, they are not the images of people in Istanbul. They are the images from way in the east. It is women in headscarves. It is the most conservative picture possible of the country," he said.

The reasons behind this portrayal

Marsh believes this portrayal of Turkey is partially a conscious effort on the part of the media. "Fear, anxiety, prejudice sell newspapers better than broad view and comprehensive understanding do. Particularly in the center- right press, you know your readers have got particular prejudices. Therefore the way to sell newspapers is to support those prejudices," he said.

Yet, there is also another reason—a human one. "There is a herd mentality in journalism. So, once a critical mass of journalists goes to one side of the boat, then everyone else piles on that side. Either you have to have a mission to report differently or you are stuck in this peer group pressure. Istanbul struck

me as a city like Barcelona but with minarets. But if some newspapers would try to get that image across, then they would feel wrong. It is not part of the dictionary,” said Marsh.

- *To be continued*

Sources

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