

David Iohr Bueso

Reporting RELIGION

Religion is frequently linked to headlines that scream of shame. But often enough we also don't see contextual or accurate reporting on religion. More likely, one finds journalists whose writing relies on stereotypes and bigotry.

By Yazeed Kamaldien

It was while I was reporting on the Arab Spring in Yemen that an online workshop on religion reporting connected me with journalists of different nationalities with a common cause.

It was early 2011, and we were engaged in discussions on how to articulate better the stories about faiths. We knew that writing about religion was not always easy. And we agreed that we could all do a much better job of it.

One of the workshop facilitators, David Briggs, who is an experienced religion reporter, guided us through the dynamics of writing about the beliefs that so many worldwide hold close to their hearts and defend passionately.

That workshop, offered online by the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) based in Washington DC, was the foundation for the launch of the International Association for Religion Journalists (IARJ) in Italy in March 2012.

The IARJ was the brainchild of Briggs who, by the time of the IARJ launch, had already talked with journalists worldwide. He said he had worked "with some 200 journalists from 90 nations in a series of six-week ICFJ dialogues, to listen to their needs and to learn their ideas about how to best serve global reporters and editors covering religion.

"What emerged from those conversations was an overwhelming consensus for the need for an international association sharing global resources for religion coverage, including the indispensable insights each of us can offer from our professional experience in our own countries," said Briggs.

By the time I'd left Yemen, we had laid the foundation of a common understanding that we needed

to work towards for improving religion reporting.

We had elected a diverse group of men and women to our board of directors from Africa, Asia, Australia, North America, South America and Europe. And among us lived various beliefs, including atheism.

Our work had begun and we needed to now let our colleagues know about our insights. This already includes offering a small fund to journalists who want to work on joint reporting projects. A conference in Latin America is in the making.

And the IARJ envisions hosting workshops, conferences and contests for journalists to improve reporting on religion. It has already run some online workshops since the launch in Italy.

We are engaging funding partners with the intention of launching reporting projects that would enable our members to build networks and spend time to focus on creating examples of best practice.

We have partnered with the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), which offers our members access to the best international research on religion.

One of the first conferences that I was sent to on behalf of the IARJ was the Highway Africa gathering in Grahamstown in 2012.

It was a challenge explaining particularly to European media professionals that one actually does not have to follow any religion to be an excellent religion reporter.

African journalists were interestingly but not surprisingly more receptive to the idea of the IARJ and cited religion as an integral part of their societies.

My mantra throughout the conference was that the only objective one should have when joining the IARJ, irrespective of your religious affiliation or belief in God, is to report accurately and fairly on religious affairs.

It is known that religion is a topic that easily falls prey to sensationalism and scandal. Religion is frequently linked to headlines that scream of shame. But often enough we also don't see contextual or accurate reporting on religion. More likely, one finds journalists whose writing relies on stereotypes and bigotry.

But we are making strides in showcasing examples of better reporting on religion. The ICFJ recently held a joint reporting contest and a number of IARJ members entered this competition.

An IARJ colleague and I worked on a feature about Islamophobia in Europe. I'd spent a month in Paris and my colleague focused on her Italian surrounds.

While this contest was not for religion reporting, we won the top prize, showing that religion reporting is part of everyday journalism, just like sports, education, health or crime reporting.

The IARJ realises though that not enough newsrooms or journalists focus on honing the religion reporting beat, alongside their sports or crime reporter counterparts. There are hardly any journalists in newsrooms that focus on monitoring and reporting on religious communities and their affairs.

But we hope that with more workshops, awareness and contests that the religion reporting beat would be considered more seriously in newsrooms.



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The IARJ's membership has grown in just over a year. At last count, we had 400 members from 90 countries signed up. Our website attracts more journalists each month, seeking resources to improve their reporting.

We remind them that the "ultimate goal of the IARJ is not to promote religions, but to foster better journalism about religion worldwide".