**Media Diversity Institute Submission: Report to the United Nations General Assembly on Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16)**

*Media Diversity Institute (MDI) works internationally to encourage accurate and nuanced reporting on race, religion, ethnicity, class, age, disability, gender and sexual identity issues in media landscapes around the world. While our work is grounded in the principles of freedom of expression and values of diversity and inclusion, our day-to-day work focuses on cultivating practical skills to combat negative stereotypes and disinformation, improve media and information literacy, and influence the conversation on diversity and the media.*

In response to the call for submission for the report to the United Nations General Assembly on Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), Media Diversity Institute (MDI) hereby submits information and experience on some points mentioned in the call which relate closely to our work. Specifically, we will be providing insight into patterns and examples of discrimination against minority religious or belief communities, touching on gender-based discrimination and the effects of this discrimination. Since we primarily focus on the media in our work, we will be sharing examples and experiences within the context of this industry. We will also be sharing our experiences with good practices in this realm.

*Patterns and examples of discrimination against minority religious or belief communities*

One of MDI’s projects, [Get The Trolls Out](https://www.getthetrollsout.org)!, looks to combat discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in Europe. Our consortium of partners stems from 6 European countries: The United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Greece, France, and Hungary. A significant element of this project is media monitoring; all project partners monitor their national media for religious hate speech on a weekly basis. Through the project, we react to these cases and file complaints where relevant, as well as deliver counter and debunking narratives. The cases outlined below are 15 significant examples of discrimination against minority religious or belief communities in the media which we have observed through the Get The Trolls Out! project. Their significance to this submission is outlined below, and to read a more in-depth analysis of each case, please follow the links:

**1.** [Boris Johnson claiming Muslim women who wear the full-face veil to “letter boxes” and “bank robbers” in the Daily Telegraph](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/troll-of-the-month/item/243-boris-johnson-troll-of-the-month-august.html) **- UK (2018)**

Boris Johnson, the former British foreign secretary and current British Prime Minister, has compared Muslim women who wear the full-face veil to “letter boxes” and “bank robbers” in his previous role as a journalist. In a column published on The Daily Telegraph on the 6th of August, Johnson warned against implementing a “burka ban” in Britain similar to the one that was just approved in Denmark. In expressing his opposition, however, he mocked women who wear the niqab and the burka. Apart from remarking that women in full-face veils “look like letter boxes”, he said he found the Islamic garment worn by some Muslim women "oppressive". He also added it was "weird" and "bullying" to "expect women to cover their faces”. This resulted in a [steep rise of 375%](https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Tell%20MAMA%20Annual%20Report%202018%20_%20Normalising%20Hate.pdf) in anti-Muslim hate against Muslim women in the UK in the two weeks after the publication of the article. This is a clear example of how hate in the press leads to real life cases of discrimination.

**2.** [Sensationalist and deceptive xenophobic headline in Bild](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/troll-of-the-month/item/155-bild-ousted-troll-of-the-month-january.html) **- Germany (2018)**

On 7 January 2018, a headline on Bild.de said “four out of five refugees do not pass the German language test”. The preview page of the article continued: “the goal of the federal government is for the refugees to learn German as quickly as possible. But the results are sobering. With BILDplus you can read about how much taxpayers are paying for the German language courses and why, after 1300 hours of lessons, their language isn’t at the level to satisfy even helper-status jobs.” But for those with a subscription, or those willing to pay 0.99 euro to gain access to the article, the full text would uncover the answers to those accusatory questions and show how misleading the headline was. Statistics of the Governmental Agency for Migration and Refugees show that, in reality, about 76 percent of the refugees who took the language test passed it (126,868 out of 165,997). This unethical case of misinformation can further discrimination against a group which already faces harmful stereotypes.

**3.** Rod Liddle column in The Sunday Times inciting violence against British Muslims **- UK (2018)**

Rod Liddle wrote a column for British newspaper The Sunday Times discussing the then recent release of Anjem Choudary, imprisoned for inviting support for the Islamic State. In the piece, Liddle urges “British Islamists” to “blow themselves up – somewhere a decent distance away from where the rest of us live. Tower Hamlets, for example.” Tower Hamlets is one of the UK’s most diverse boroughs, with an estimated 38% of Muslim residents and an established Bangladeshi community. Whilst indirect, this can be interpreted as a call to violence and is a clear case of discrimination against the Muslim community of London, with potentially dangerous impacts. No action was taken by the self-regulatory body in the UK (IPSO) against this publication.

**4.** Der Spiegel pseudo ‘investigative’ article perpetuating antisemitic stereotypes **- Germany (2019)**

German paper Der Spiegel published an article which suggested it was an 'investigative piece', but which actually used well-known antisemitic tropes to push an anti-Jewish narrative. In particular, the article referenced two lobby groups which they suggested had influenced German politicians. This article furthered already existing and very dangerous antisemitic stereotypes and played into the already existing discrimination against this group.

**5.** [The Spectator article by Rod Liddle suggesting Muslims should be prevented from voting](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/complaints/item/516-get-the-trolls-out-condemns-rod-liddle-for-his-anti-muslim-column-on-the-spectator.html) **- UK (2019)**

In November 2019, columnist Rod Liddle had an article published in The Spectator which suggested that “Muslims should be prevented from voting in the next general election”. Liddle proposed that holding the general election on a day when Muslims are forbidden by their religion to vote, in order to improve the Conservatives’ chances of victory. As a result, this article caused outrage on social media for its clear Islamophobic comments. Following the backlash, Riddle defended himself by saying that his suggestions were ‘patently a joke’, despite the multiple examples of Islamophobia in his work prior to this. This case is a clear form of discrimination against British Muslims, by calling for a restriction to their electoral, and human, rights.

**6.** PI News using dangerous ‘Great Replacement’ narrative **- Germany (2019)**

PI News (‘Politically Incorrect News’), a far-right German news website, discussed the latest birth rate figures and suggested that the rise in foreign-born babies reflected the ‘Islamisation’ of Germany and Europe. It also stated the number of ‘true’ Germans is lower than what the figures reveal. Using these far-right tropes, the article spreads strong anti-Islam ideas and encourages its readers to agree with them about the scale of the ‘problem’. Such tropes are dangerous as they play into the hands of those discriminating against minority groups.

**7.** Politicalite pushed violent xenophobia and anti-Muslim ‘Great Replacement’ theory **- UK (2019)**

British far-right news site Politicalite published an article which read like a conspiracy theory and used many of well-known far-right tropes, such as the ‘Great Replacement’ theory. It is written by Bethany Helmsley, who also writes for a blog called ‘Spotting The Serpent’s Tail’ which recently published a post calling for ‘the “cleansing” of those who make Britain multicultural.’ As with the case above, such unethical pieces of news only further the notion that discriminating against certain minority groups is acceptable.

**8.** Antisemitic article in Thüringer Allgemeine claiming a festival director to “benefit from the humanitarian debt from World War II” **- Germany (2018)**

An antisemitic article accusing a festival director of benefitting “from the humanitarian debt from World War II” was removed from a local newspaper Thüringer Allgemeine after several complaints. The now deleted article, published on 23 July 2018, was about the Yiddish Summer Weimar, a month-long festival on the study, creation, and presentation of traditional and contemporary Yiddish culture. But within the piece, the journalist and critic Ursula Mielke, included antisemitic tropes of “guilt” and “Jewish money”. She stated that this festival is happening in Germany, and not in the United States where its director Alan Bern is from, because no money available in Germany due to "humanitarian debt from World War II." The journalist also wrote “artificially you have nothing, nothing to keep alive”, but it was not clear if she was referring to the festival or to the Yiddish culture.

**9.** ‘Athens’ magazine spread established anti-Semitic conspiracy theories **- Greece (2019)**

Greek lifestyle magazine ‘Athens’ published an article where the author suggests that ‘Jewish banks’ are partially a cause of the Greek national debt. This article displays blatant antisemitism, promoting dangerous antisemitic theories and furthering well-established conspiracy theories.

**10.** Hirado repeating Hungarian government press conference's fabrication **- Hungary (2019)**

Hungarian public service website Hirado reported on a government press conference which discussed the distribution of migrant cards in Brussels (read European Commission). Despite the government spokesman suggesting that the recipients of this financial assistance were ‘anonymous’ and that there might be some ISIS members involved, Hirado decided not to critically report on this discriminatory rhetoric, thus allowing the Islamophobic statements to appear factual. By not countering such statements made by officials, news outlets are facilitating greater discrimination to take place.

**11.** Online newspaper ‘Atlantico’ making sensationalist unfounded claim **- France (2019)**

French online newspaper Atlantico published an article about the controversy around the sports chain Decathlon which created a running hijab in order to offer more inclusive options in their activewear range. This move caused backlash on social media with people claiming it was an example of the ‘Islamisation’ of France. The article’s headline suggested the hijab was a ‘victory for the Muslim Brotherhood’, thus spreading anti-Muslim sentiment.

**12.** [Melanie Phillips writes in the Jewish Chronicle that claims of Islamophobia are bogus](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/troll-of-the-month/item/541-melanie-phillips-troll-of-the-month.html) **- UK (2019)**

Phillips wrote a piece for the Jewish Chronicle, titled: “Don’t fall for bogus claims of ‘Islamophobia’. The piece took the position that claims of Islamophobia are a “taunt” and “profoundly anti-Jew.” Not only does this disregard any victim of Islamophobia, but it also pits Jews and Muslims against each other in the fight against religious hate speech. Phillips has a long history of spreading such ideas. In 2006, she published a book titled: “Londonistan: How Britain Created a Terror State within.” This book makes many alarmist claims with strong anti-Muslim undertones. Continuing to give a platform to someone who has repeatedly fuelled discriminatory rhetoric is not only unethical, but dangerous.

**13.** TV channel LCI giving platform to hate **- France (2019)**

French TV Channel LCI broadcast an episode of ’24 Pujadas’ where they invited Robert Ménard (known for his racist, anti-migrant and anti-Muslim stance) along with Guillaume Tabard (editor-in-chief of Le Figaro) onto the show. On air, Tabard said: “We had lived through deadly Islamist terrorism in France, so if we want to keep score, we are not yet even”. LCI’s decision to include these guests and this statement is insensitive and wrong, and the statement can easily be interpreted as a call to violence and constitutes a clear act of hate speech.

**14.** Daily Mail claiming that hate crime is a ‘hoax’ **- UK (2019)**

A Mail Online article published on 26 October claimed that hate crimes in Britain are a “great hoax”, and it did so without providing any evidence, thus belittling the impact hate has on victims as well as the work of charities who support them. The author, Douglas Murray, uses anecdotal information to argue that hate crimes are not a significant problem and should not be classified as such, relying solely on the unsubstantiated claim that Britain is the most tolerant country in the world. Statistics on hate crimes that are put together by charities and police are disrespectfully referred to as “bogus statistics” by the Mail Online, but no supporting evidence is provided. Articles likes this are a clear attack on the fight against discrimination.

**15.** Doorbraak article quoting Wim de Wit without context **- Belgium (2019)**

Belgium paper Doorbraak published an article recounting a speech Wim de Wit made at an IJzerwake event in which he claimed: “In principle, freedom of expression still applies, except when it comes to Muslims, Negroes, holibi’s [homosexual, lesbian and bisexual individuals], Transgender people, transvestites, Gypsies, feminists and certain politicians.” The quote implies that the minority groups mentioned are ‘untouchable’ when it comes to criticism, furthering the idea that these groups receive preferential treatment, painting them in negative light. The issue with this case was the clear lack of journalistic criticism of the speech; the quote was published without any context or counter arguments.

*Gender-based discrimination*

When it comes to gender, we have noted through our work that women are often more negatively affected than men. Our media monitoring work has revealed that Muslim women are more often the victims of hate speech compared to Muslim men. This is magnified when it comes to use of images, where Muslim women are often misrepresented. For example, The Independent [recently published an article](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/media-monitoring/item/620-uk-%E2%80%93-the-independent-using-inappropriate-image-misrepresenting-young-muslim-girls.html): “In Pakistan, sex workers face a cruel dilemma.” The article explored how sex workers in Pakistan are affected by COVID-19 and social distancing measures. When promoting the article on Facebook, The Independent used an image of young girls wearing head scarfs. The article at no time mentions underage girls or Islam, so the choice of image was confusing.. Cases like this show how something which may seem insignificant, like an image, can have a significant impact on discrimination against a minority group. An example like this can play into the hands of those who already hold dangerous ideas about a group of people, and only reinforces their discriminatory ways of thinking. We also regularly see cases of [wrong images being used when talking about Muslim women’s headdress](http://www.apple.com). A woman wearing a niqab is often used when talking about Muslim women; however, the hijab is a much more common and representative item of clothing worn by Muslim women. Cases like this misinform the public and can have long-term impact within society. It is clear to us that more training is needed for journalists to better understand religious details and nuance elements and to ensure that fair and ethical reporting occurs. This training should occur not only through education, but also in-house in news organisations.

*Laws and policies*

In the United Kingdom, our newspapers and magazines are governed by the self-regulatory body IPSO. When it comes to discrimination, IPSO’s Editors’ Code Clause 12 currently punishes publications that incite hatred against individuals, but not against groups. This is a significant issue which MDI has been highlighting for some time. While a free press should be allowed to criticize groups, this policy crosses a line where criticism becomes discrimination. Currently, attacks on marginalized communities are commonplace in the British press. When the public complains to IPSO, their complaints are overwhelmingly rejected on the basis that it is not against IPSO’s code to criticize groups. As a result, racism, anti-religious hatred, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia which are founded on the basis of discrimination against groups, are regularly found in the UK media. [We recently launched a campaign](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/what-we-do/complaints/item/583-ipso-letter.html) to change this clause, as we feel it has a significant impact on discrimination of minority groups in the press.

*Good Practices*

In relation to good practices in this realm, we recommend the study “[Getting the facts right: reporting ethnicity and religion](https://www.media-diversity.org/resources/study-on-media-coverage-of-ethnicity-a-religion-in-europe/)” which was conducted by Dr Verica Rupar for the Media Diversity Institute in partnership with the International Federation of Journalists and ARTICLE 19. In this study, Dr. Rupar notes how dehumanizing language in the press can result in discrimination, and how the press has an important role to play when it comes to countering stereotypes. Dr. Rupar also highlights how including voices from minority groups helps strengthen reporting on these groups and helps us avoid situations in which the press furthers discrimination. Additionally, our “[Linguistic Self-Defence Guide Against Antisemitism](https://www.getthetrollsout.org/resources/item/15-linguistic-self-defence-guide-against-antisemitism.html)” outlines the most common hidden linguistic mechanisms that you may come across in antisemitic speech, and it is a valuable resource for journalists looking to better their reporting on the Jewish community. We are currently developing a linguistic guide against Islamophobia to be published summer 2020. We also look to organisation like [TellMAMA](https://tellmamauk.org) and [Stop Funding Hate](https://stopfundinghate.info) as excellent cases of good practice in this area.