FIRST SESSION
« Which communication for which civilisation(s)?"

Introduction:
The objective of the first session of debate was to focus the reflection – involving representatives of different spheres of activity, following a "systemic" approach to the topic – on the relation existing (or to be settled) between the social and cultural dynamics characterizing the contemporary Euro-Mediterranean landscape, and crucial communication-related processes such as the *representation* and the *perspective building.*

In a region marked by a difficult search for a common identity and by a general lack of knowledge (or a superficial and misleading knowledge) of the Other, the communication (and the audiovisual media, in particular) is asked to deliver a responsible and correct representation of the reality, to provide instruments of comprehension, to point out convergences and connections issues instead of exacerbating differences and crashes (without hiding the problems), to promote "nearness" instead of "distance" ; in other words, to give a "long shot" perspective able to develop the idea of culture (and of civilization) as a whole, by means of a "different communication" that goes beyond the standardisation, on one side, and beyond the logic of conflict, on the other.

Moderator:
Monica **MAGGIONI**, Rai Correspondent from the Middle Eastern countries (Italy)

Speakers:
Mohamed **ABASSA**, Director of the Abassa Institute (Algeria)
Rowaida **AL-MAAYTAH**, President of the Executive Council of the Arab Women Organisation of the Arab League (Jordan)
Amin **BASSIOUNI**, President of Nile Sat (Egypt)
Gema **MARTÍN-MUÑOZ**, Director of the Casa Arabe (Spain)
Ralf **SCHMERBERG**, Executive Director of Dropping Knowledge (Germany)

The session has been opened by the speech of Mrs. Rowaida **Maaytah**. Starting from the assumption that "the distance of Unknown is longer and bigger than that of Known", and that isolation, struggles and clashes of civilisations are dangerous contemporary trends, it is necessary that media professionals face their own responsibility and discuss about how to provide better performances in order to deliver their messages and to "answer to the humanitarian call". She has stressed the importance of improving the cultural dialogue by investing on the inter-action and the synergies between different domains such us science, politics and media, by "bringing together all the segments" that "should come together, in order to work for fruitful outputs and best practices" and to develop "interactive communication through alliances".

In the field of women issues promotion, Mrs. Al-Maaytah introduced a panorama of different actions - many of which targeted under the aegis of the H.M. the Queen - carried out through different communication tools such as international conferences, media campaigns and multi-media projects (like a web-site focused on and addressed to women).

Mr. **Abassa** has shared with the audience the results of a research entitled "Is a Euro-Mediterranean TV possible?" carried out, from 1998 to 2006, by testing thousands of people in 12 Mediterranean Northern and Southern countries. The historical, political, social framework where the North/South exchanges and relations have developed is important to understand the recent and present communication phenomena: the past of colonisation in the region has deeply affected the communication relations and outputs, making them unidirectional and functional to political purposes. Despite the independence process and the technological development, the most part of the Southern Mediterranean TVs - denounced Mr. Abassa - has not reached a real autonomy continuing to "merge and confound the public TV mission and the State and/or governmental one". The result of this is the "mass desertion, by the Arab Southern Mediterranean TV users, of the national programmes in favour of European trans-national programmes and from other Arab nations".

Three interesting phenomena have been pointed out by Mr. Abassa: all the programmes broadcast by the North and precisely conceived for the Southern audiences realise a quite modest global audience share: less than the 3% compared with a penetration esteem of more than 80% ; all the TV programmes especially broadcast from the South to the Northern Mediterranean countries are watched by less than the 0.01% of the citizens of these countries ; finally, there are TV programmes coming from public and private TVs of the North Mediterranean shore that have massively conquered the audiences of the South Mediterranean, despite that not being a choice or a targeted objective. Paradoxically, the thematic and generalist programmes conceived exclusively for the European national audiences and not for the Arab ones represent the best audience share performances, both in terms of number of contacts and of duration of connection. As a consequence, since they are absolutely not targeted on Arab audiences, they show - in terms of contents and language used - what Mr. Abassa has called the "banalisation of the Other" (e.g. the use of the word "*banlieue*" with a semplicistic or even explicit negative connotation): in other words, a superficial and sometimes racist representation of the Arab world.

Al Jazeera is another interesting case: born in 1996, it currently realises - despite its controversial identity - audience performances, both in the Arab world and in the rest of the world, that no other trans-national Arab TVs have never done.

He has admitted, in conclusion, that the North/South or South/North communications via TV show quantity and quality weaknesses and lacks. In this context, a Euro-Mediterranean TV could represent an important tool addressed to the development of "a pedagogy of belonging to the same region, of the spreading out of positive ideas and values": this TV could be the "first stone to build the real dialogue between the North and the South".

Along this line of critical analysis of the European television language was placed the speech of the researcher Mrs. **Martin-Muñoz**. She has stressed three focal axes which media have to work on: first of all, the *binary division* between "we" and "they". For example, the frequent use of concepts like "dialogue between cultures" or "dialogue between civilisations" (implying the plural) works in the same reference framework of the concept of "chock of civilisations" ; in other words, it implies the idea that we belong to isolated civilisation and cultural sets. Mrs. Martín Muñoz suggests to abandon this dangerous "communitarist" approach - by means of which everything is reduced to mass concepts or categories, like "the Arab" and "the Western" - and to move the focus on the individuals and on their freedom of choice: it is not the cultures and the civilisations that communicate one to the other, but the individuals do it.

Another problematic phenomenon is the *conflict of words*, the *conflict of languages*: the western language talks about the Arab and Muslim worlds in terms of culture and religion, and the most part of the public opinion thinks that every fact can be interpreted with the "key" of culture and religion, without considering other fundamental categories of comprehension and knowledge of the Other: the political, economical and social ones. Vice-versa, many of the anti-west opinions are based on political issues, and derive from economic and political questions. So, the languages applied deal with different spheres. How to set up a dialogue if we continue speaking different languages? We have to overcome this impasse.

Third point, the *culture of distance,* that we can perceive in the way the European and the Western Media talk about what happens in the Arab world. This is represented by the Media as a monolithic community often characterized by a high level of violence and irrationality, so engendering in the audience doubts concerning the level of its civilisation. Another trend is that of selecting the interlocutor considered as valid for us: usually, what it is considered valid is what is more similar to us, even from aesthetic and language points of view. This way, visibility is given only to those interlocutors that represent the idea of modernity that Media want to show, so excluding what is different, that is, a huge part of this society. The Arab world knows the Western world much better than we know the Arab world. So - Mrs. Muñoz has concluded - "we have a problem about imaginary rather than about reality. We keep on looking for the East that the West imagines, and never the East that really exists".

In this framework, the success that Al Jazeera faces among the Arab audiences can be explained through the fact that in this channel "the Arab people recognize their image, identify themselves in an image free from the stereotypes and the *cliché* of representation that we are used to see in the Western media". Al Jazeera is able to match an independent and international information language (as in the Eastern media) with a "not orientalist and stereotyped image of the Arab world".

Mr. **Bassiouni** has opened his speech by stating that "the civilisation is a torch that people carry from hand to hand; no one can claim to possess the civilisation", and that "*civilisation is a process*". Starting from this assumption, under the aegis of civilisation and culture "we are all moving along the same way, we all belong to one community, we need cooperation", especially in this key-region, "where there are the signs and temples of each religion". In order to continue feeding this "process", nowadays "we have new horizons that enable us to achieve what we want" : now we are living in a satellite world and through satellite TV channels it is possible to explore the other worlds, to try to build one Culture. In other words, the media are asked to "reveal the reality, to disseminate and spread dialogue and peace, to activate tolerance issues". In order to improve this idea of "one humanitarian family" through the media, it could be useful to promote one common legislation for all the satellite channels.

Finally, an innovative experience of use of multi-media as means of exchanging and disseminating culture and knowledge worldwide has been introduced: Mr. **Schmerberg** has presented to the audience the "*Dropping Knowledge*" project. Dropping Knowledge's mission is to provide a globally accessible educational source and online network of knowledge, opinions and ideas, in order to enable people to reflect on multiple viewpoints on important global values and issues of our time. The aim is to transfer the knowledge into society, to stimulate critical thought, to generate wisdom and simultaneously create a dialogue between people and their communities. On the 6th September 2006, at the Babelsplatz, in Berlin, 100 questions donated by people all around the world through Dropping Knowledge website have been answered - simultaneously and live on the website - by a "Table of voices" composed by 112 experts coming from all around the world (56 countries). The idea – explained Mr. Schmerberg – is to provide "fresh knowledge" by means of modern technologies and media, that are able to give us new communication opportunities.
Starting from the assumption that images spread out by the media deeply affect our opinions and feelings, it is important to find alternative ways of disseminating knowledge, because traditional mainstream media are, in many areas of the world, "manipulative and ideological". "In the today global society there is no truth. Everyone - religion, politics and business - pretends to tell you what the Truth is": it is necessary to "re-balance and produce material able to represent much more than one side", "to feed any discussions with different positions and points of view", "to make people make their own choice" .
The internet medium particularly fits with these aims because it is able "to cross borders very fast and easily" and to play as a platform of free exchange of material, videos, information, etc.

Following the first session of debate, the meeting has been honoured by the presence of the **Prime Minister**, Dr. **Marouf Bakhit**, who, after conveying the salutes of H.M. the King Abdullah II to the organisers and the participants of the Conference, has focused his message on the responsibility of the Media, on the risk of an overdone competition and on the increasing violence of images.
Starting from the idea that "the television is a visitor that enters people's houses without even asking permission and also affects their behaviour and attitudes" and that "our children spend more time in front of the TV than studying", he underlines that "this should […] encourage to create programmes that address humanitarian messages characterised by balance and modernity. […] We all reject all kind of discrimination and hatred, and we should exclude any violent theme that might affect the minds of children and youth". He has continued by highlighting the risk, in terms of education, deriving from the existing race between TV channels to show picture of actual violence, generating a sort of "violence entertainment". It is necessary to introduce and produce educational TV programmes and encourage an "entertainment education". "The challenges faced by the audiovisual industry are much more after the media became a dangerous weapons in the hands of terrorism that became able to deliver negative messages and of negative impacts": he has denounced the exploitation of the race between satellite channels made by terrorism in order to disseminate and spread out violence. Rejecting items of violence, promoting the peaceful coexistence and the exchange of ideas: these are the values to be spread out through these crucial means.