

Christian and Muslim schoolchildren learned about the media, examining its portrayal of faith, during an interactive conference held at the BBC's [Mailbox](#) on 14 March 2007. Year Six (aged 10-11) pupils from St Mary's and Birchfield Schools in Handsworth, Highfields School in Saltley and St Mary's School in Selly Oak, along with media professionals, explored the relationship between what they see, hear and read in the media and their own every day experiences. This unique conference, organised by the Christian Muslim Forum, analysed how stories such as the wearing of the veil and how terrorism and Muslims have been reported on TV, radio, websites and in the newspapers. Pupils learned about how the media works, created their own reports, quizzed journalists and examined the effect the media has on young people.

Three members of the Christian Muslim Forum who led the day were Maurice Irfan Coles of the School Development Support Agency, Julia Ipgrave from Oxford Brookes University and freelance broadcaster Sandra Herbert. They were supported by a group of sixth form students from Leicester's Regent College and three trainee teachers. The forty children (mainly Christians and Muslim, but also including some Sikhs) worked with A level Media Studies students (Christians, Muslims and Hindus) who provided facilitation with media skills discussions at the conference. The children's teachers also attended, having guided their pupils in a number of media-based preliminary activities linking with the PSHE and Citizenship curricula. The children split into different groups each one supported by sixth form media students and trainee teachers which were led by Sandra, a local newspaper reporter, BBC website editor and video producers.

Everyone was welcomed to the event by Anita Bhalla (Head of BBC WM's Political and Community Unit). Anita said that she was really pleased to have the pupils at [The Mailbox](#) and that it was exciting for the BBC to have so many children who were interested in the media. She described the different types of media work taking place in Birmingham, including drama, most of Radio Two's output and the Asian Network (digital broadcasting). The event was introduced by Sandra who told the children about her involvement in the Christian Muslim Forum. She described the Forum's work of building friendships between Christians and Muslims. She, Julia and Maurice had asked themselves what they could do to build friendships and link with schools and had the idea of exploring schoolchildren's experience of the media. She expressed our gratitude to the BBC for use of the Mailbox and giving us access to their facilities.

As an ice-breaking exercise the children shared stories about themselves. They also shared what it meant for them to be Christians and Muslims. In one group the children compared the central figures of Muhammad and Jesus and the similar places of the Bible and the Qur'an in their faiths, thinking about the story of Noah which appears in both scriptures. As the event was taking place during Lent they compared Lent and Ramadan. In groups with the journalists the children were then introduced to boom microphones, video cameras, mini-disk recorders and cables. The video group supported by [Mouth that Roars](#) (our video partners), created a four person film crew so that they could familiarise themselves with the equipment. They practised filming, interviewing each other and viewing the results.

The radio group were interested in a range of issues such as global warming, face transplantation, money and debt, the veil and other religious symbols. Eventually deciding to concentrate on the wearing of religious symbols. They then took part in a recorded vox pop on religious symbols, generating an interesting exchange of views on the importance of seeing people's faces, using the veil as a means of avoiding passport security and overt religious symbols leading to boasting about the superiority of one's religion.

The children also experienced a mock press conference based on a fictitious crime in the city, putting themselves into the role of newspaper journalists. This built on what they had learnt earlier about the shape and style of a newspaper story and led into the children writing an article based on questions and answers from the press conference. Some of these articles were worthy of the Birmingham Mail with some of the children appearing to be journalism naturals.

These exercises were followed by a panel where the children were posed their own questions to the journalists – a radio station editor, a newspaper journalist and a web/radio journalist. The first question was, not surprisingly, 'would you allow someone wearing a religious symbol to read the

news?' The personal view expressed by one of the panel members was that people should be free to wear what they want, questioning whether a crucifix would offend any one (referring to some media coverage about Fiona Bruce wearing a crucifix while reading the BBC News). There were also questions about giving small stories a large media presence and focusing less on the big stories (e.g. coverage of celebrities) and whether stories were hyped up, the response was that stories were tailored to audiences and that the media naturally wants to make the most of a story likely to be of interest. There were more questions about covering, one about children and teachers wearing the veil in schools and the other about journalists going undercover. In response, the panel talked about veiling not being an issue if it did not hinder communication and also of the need for visiting journalist to show respect to religions and places of worship, and, yes, sometimes it was necessary to go undercover to get a story that was in the public interest. Finally, there were questions about other people 'stealing' pieces on the BBC's website and about making links between schools and the BBC, particularly for actual experience of media work. The panel said that if copyrighted website material was used without permission or attribution they would ask for it to be removed but were usually happy for attributed material to be used if permission was sought. On the other question, opportunities could be made for schoolchildren to visit local stations once a connection had been made, there are also occasions when journalists visit schools.

After the panel session we had presentations from the different groups. The children in the video group had produced some material which they had begun to edit. Watch this space to see what they produced. Their video interviews covered: what is your religion? what is the most important thing in your life? what will you do in the future? They told us that they had learnt a lot about different people and cultures and were interested in putting their video on television (or YouTube)!

The press group learnt how to write an effective news report, and then followed this up with a case study and a press conference. They had also picked up that the most effective story is one that affects the reader, and that they needed to write the most important part first (the inverted pyramid). Our press journalist who led the session said that everyone had a lot of fun.

The website group learnt about good and bad headlines, focusing on religion in the media – e.g. the Muslim teaching assistant who wore the veil at school and the Christian woman who faced difficulties when wearing a cross while working for British Airways. They identified a story that they would like to publish on the website about the Perry Barr football team where children of different religions and cultures meet to play football. Their headline was 'Neighbourhood Footie Smash' and the content ideas were: interviews, video diaries, explaining why it was a good thing for the community, plus downloadable posters and details of the tournament and trophy.

The radio group had been asking each other questions about religion, then had done a vox pop on the veil. After their own experience of interviewing each other on microphone they had gone to a radio studio and where the presenter had interviewed them live and although he had asked some difficult questions they had greatly enjoyed the experience.

Maurice Coles wrapped up the conference, with everyone deciding that our experiences had made a good story and that we had enjoyed it. He said that bringing Christians and Muslims together was exactly what the Christian Muslim Forum was about. Everyone clearly enjoyed working together, he closed by thanking the children for taking part, saying that they were a credit to their city, their schools and their faiths. There were many thanks at the end and we would like to express our great appreciation for the hospitality, support and involvement of the BBC at [The Mailbox](#). The next stages that we will be working on are (God willing):

- children's presentations using a variety of media to be shared in schools
- guidance for teachers on handling issues related to media and identity in class
- a model of Christian and Muslim, media and school collaboration that can be used in other regions
- a report on the processes and outcomes of the conference
- a journal article on children's religious identity and the media using data from the conference and the preliminary class work

Photographs of the event can be seen in our [Gallery](#).