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Mediatization as an Echo-Chamber for Xenophobic Discourses in the Threat Society: The Muhammad Cartoons in Denmark and Sweden

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Introduction

This chapter reflects on the role of mainstream journalism in the proliferation of Islamophobia in late modern society, by analysing two cases where newspapers in Denmark and Sweden published cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Both are instances of mediated perceptions of Muslims, symbolized by the Prophet, as a threat to freedom of speech, but in rather different ways. However, together they illustrate discursive processes and opinion-building strategies used by right-wing populism in which journalism becomes both amplifier and echo-chamber due to media logic. The first case, where the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed a series of Muhammad cartoons in 2005, has been intensively discussed both by journalists and media researchers (e.g. Eide et al. 2008, Sundström 2009). The second case, in 2007 where the Swedish newspaper *Nerikes-Allehanda* published a cartoon portraying Muhammad as a toy dog, has also been studied by media researchers (Camauër 2011, Camauër (ed.) forthcoming). In both instances, the publication of the caricatures resulted in protests, violent demonstrations and death threats against the cartoonists and editors, but led to varying editorial conclusions.

I will focus on certain aspects of these two cases that relate to the spin of threat perceptions as driving factors behind the publishing of the cartoons. I will argue that these cases are examples of mediatized crisis spirals typical of a new phase of late-modern society, which I label the 'threat society'. The dual perspective elaborated is related to two analytical levels – macro and micro – which are necessary for an understanding of the media-related mechanisms that can partly explain these two cases, and also more recently, the Oslo and Toulouse mass murders in July 2011 and March 2012, respectively. Of course, the importance of the media is indirect in the sense that 1) the operative 'rationale' for the terrible crimes is to get the attention of

the media, as explicitly expressed in Brevik's so-called manifest, and would not have been conducted without the media, and 2) because of the nationalized framing and tendency in the media to depict some foreigners as a potential risk to the national community.

The media's role

Studies of the media have shown that they play an important role in the facilitation of xenophobic attitudes and opinion-building. In the 1970s and 1980s, several analysts concluded that news reporting on immigration and refugees was constructed from a basic distinction between 'Us' and 'Them' – where immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers were depicted as risk phenomena for the national society and population. The alleged dangers included, for example, new arrivals bringing diseases, criminal behaviour, economic burdens, foreign social and moral norms; in short, 'They' threatened 'Our' way of life and cultural identity (e.g. Hartman & Husband 1974, Hall et al. 1978, van Dijk 1993, European Dilemma 2005, Nohrstedt & Camauër 2006, KhosraviNik 2009, 2010, KhosraviNik et al. 2012; see also chapters by Wodak (Ch. 2), Kovács (Ch. 15) and Kallis (Ch. 4) in this volume). In some studies, a dual-media construction of immigrants has been identified with distant 'Others' outside national borders; for example, asylum-seekers are depicted in negative and stigmatizing terms, whereas close 'Others', already living in the country with neighbours and school personnel supporting them when applying for residence permits, are positively described as assimilated and grateful for the hospitality they have received in their new country (Brune 2004, Camauër 2011).

Mainstream media operate within national horizons or frames, what Billig has called 'banal nationalism' (1995). They are institutions in the domain of the nation state, and their audience, almost without exception, is limited by territorial borders. They address their readers, listeners or viewers as citizens with an implicit national identity.

In several ways this has consequences for the media as facilitators of right-wing populism (RWP) and extremism. The implied implicit 'We' in the media's addresses to their audience makes every problem, risk and danger a threat to 'Us'. If a pandemic breaks out or refugees are gathering at the borders, the media logic tends to describe this as something that 'We' must protect ourselves from. The inclination and incitement to focus on the problems, risks and dangers that people in other countries face, perhaps equal to our own, is far less prominent compared with this in-group perspective. These 'Others' are secondary in importance or even irrelevant for the direction of media attention. There are organizational and economic mechanisms behind this – the media live by attracting people's attention, the main success factor for commercial media (see van Dijk 1993, Triandafyllidou et al. 2009, Krzyżanowski & Wodak 2009).

For the 'hot' nationalism, for example, RWP that Billig (1995) juxtaposes with the 'banal' variant, the media provide a discursive environment that fertilizes their impact on the general public. As the main carrier of 'banal' nationalism, the media prepare and give resonance to right-wing propaganda when they point to the 'Other' as the problem. In this way, RWP propaganda simply makes explicit and echoes what the media logic

implicitly and 'banally' implies. Further, the media's 'banal' nationalism helps to cover up the RWP movement's international character, which comes out so clearly in the contributions to this volume. The narrow national frames of media logic are obstacles to journalism that could reveal the collaboration and transnational, 'foreign,' elements in the propaganda that pretend to protect and defend 'Danishness,' 'Swedishness' and 'Britishness.' The general lack of global, or at least transnational, news perspectives in the mainstream media, in this instance, helps the RWP to avoid being exposed before the general public in their 'nudity' as promoters of the national interest.

The inherent 'banal' nationalism of the media further leaves journalists off guard when they are accused, from the RWP side, of being 'politically correct' and hiding the 'truth' about all the allegedly negative consequences of immigration and 'multicultural' influences. This lack of defence against RWP propaganda seems to come from a naive and superficial understanding of its strategy and rhetorical methods that this volume hopefully will contribute to remedying (see also the chapters by Andersson (Ch. 22), Pelinka (Ch. 1), Oja & Mral (Ch. 19) and Wodak (Ch. 2) in this volume). However, the institutional roots behind this professional shortcoming are first, journalists' instinctive opposition to all kinds of censorship, and second, the accord between RWP propaganda and a media logic built on the distinction between the imagined national community and the external dangers that are threatening 'Us' (see also Wodak et al. 2009).

Here is not the place to elaborate upon the argument above in relation to the extensive globalization literature. Suffice it to note that although the theoretical speculations about the media as a globalizing agent are frequent (e.g. Volkmer 2001, Beck 2006, Reese 2007, Eide et al. 2008, Chouliaraki 2009), others are more sceptical (e.g. Riegert 1998, Biltereyest 2001, Nohrstedt & Ottosen 2001, Hafez 2007, Kunelius & Eide 2007). Empirically based research in the field remains rare, but existing studies generally confirm that media content disseminates and promotes national frames (e.g. Olausson 2005, Östman 2009).

The media's role in connection with the cartoon cases must however also be discussed with regard to the question concerning the relationship between media content and social processes, including crises and intercultural communication processes, as well as how democratic values such as freedom of speech and religion are contested from various perspectives.

The media as constitutive of the threat society

Elsewhere I have described the threat society as a stage of late modernity, drawing upon the analyses of Beck, Furedi, Bauman, Cottle and Atheide (for references see Nohrstedt 2011). A threat society is marked by the expansion of a culture of fear, and of politics focusing on the management of various threats. The role of the media is central to the theory of a threat society. Mediatization explains the special role of the media in the development of a threat society. Media logic and the staging of spectacular 'media events' contribute to a symbolic reality which functions as a habitat where threats, crises and conflicts are broadly constructed and gain ontological, epistemological and identity-political existence. In a threat society, these processes do not occur in isolation

from other institutions and actors. On the contrary, there are different threat exploiters who play a promotional role in these processes, which are largely displayed in the media. In that problems and dangers in a threat society are constructed as 'threats', they are broadly connected with 'otherism', that is, with the construction of an opposition between 'Us' and 'Them'. The discourse of threat politics constantly constructs recurrent threats, which dominate social life and produce crises and conflicts, with the common characteristic of a staged situation in which 'We' are exposed to dangers caused by 'Them'; therefore, to maintain and preserve our safe and secure life, 'We' have to protect ourselves from 'Them'. A threat society may thus run the risk of becoming a 'hate society'. Even though it does not go that far, it seems that a threat society does harbour strong endogenous tendencies towards discrimination and xenophobia, with mediatization also neglecting to construct threats as a result of the media audience's (our) actions, or lack thereof.

To sum up the macro-level argument: First, the 'banal' nationalism of the media proliferates as 'hot' nationalism, for example, RWP, due to reasons related to media logic. Second, in a late modern threat society, politics is marked by at least the three following features, which are also reinforced by the current media logic (for further details, see Nohrstedt 2011):

1. *Threats and dangers dominate in the political rhetoric.*
2. *Political changes are driven by worst-case scenarios.*
3. *Political and social identity increasingly takes on the shape of a vulnerable and exposed individual who does not dare to trust his/her fellow citizens.*

In the following I will show that this macro-level analysis is necessary for explaining – at the micro-level – why the two cartoon cases became media events in the first place.

Empirical cases: The Muhammad cartoons in Jyllands-Posten and Nerikes Allehanda

In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (JP) published 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to counteract an allegedly growing self-censorship in the country of expressions that might offend the Muslim minority, as declared by the editorial that accompanied the cartoons. To some, these cartoons were offensive, for example, the one that depicted Muhammad as a terrorist (with a burning fuse bomb in his turban). A crisis emerged in the relations between Denmark and several Muslim countries when additional Danish newspapers published the cartoons, and because of the refusal of the Danish Prime Minister to meet with the countries' diplomats. Violent demonstrations in several Muslim countries led to attempts to burn down the Danish embassy in Islamabad and to boycott Danish products.

Two years later, the Swedish provincial newspaper *Nerikes-Allehanda* also printed a cartoon of Muhammad, but this time the Prophet was depicted as a toy dog. The cartoon, drawn by Lars Vilks, had already been published in several other Swedish newspapers. When *Nerikes-Allehanda* (NA) published the cartoon, local Muslim

organizations responded by organizing demonstrations. The editor-in-chief of NA expressed great surprise when publication of the cartoon resulted in worldwide media attention, a public burning of the Swedish flag in Pakistan, and death threats against both the artist and himself. In spite of the crisis in Denmark only two years earlier, he had not expected this reaction as the cartoon had been published earlier in the Swedish media (Camauër (ed.) forthcoming).

I will not discuss the two cases in detail here as each has initiated various studies, by both academic scholars and journalists (e.g. Eide et al. 2008, Sundström 2009, ter Wal et al. 2009). My analysis will concentrate first on the declared motives for publishing the caricatures, and second on the broad shift that marked both cases. I will emphasize the threat spirals that publication of the cartoons triggered, and particularly how the ill-founded reasons for publishing the cartoons unleashed dramatic reactions worldwide. This is important since, even if only in one of the cases, the JP, the explanation could be the newspaper's recent history as a promoter of xenophobic views in, for example, editorials, which is not possible in the NA case, with its clear position against RWP propaganda.

Consequences

The dramatic consequences that followed publication of the Muhammad cartoons in Denmark and Sweden have been mentioned. There were local protests and demonstrations and violent reactions internationally in some Muslim countries, including burning of the Danish flag, a boycott of Danish products, death threats against artists and editors, demolition of Danish property and attacks on the Danish embassy in Islamabad. Even a lethal bomb blast outside the same embassy three years after publication was attributed to the JP's publication of the Muhammad cartoons. In all, more than 130 people were killed in events relating to the Danish case (Hervik et al. 2008). No known deaths were reported in the Swedish case, however a 'fatwa' (here an Islamic death sentence) was declared against the artist, as well as the NA's editor-in-chief, and two years after the Swedish publication, suspected assassins relating to this case were arrested in Ireland and the United States of America.

Motives for publishing the cartoons

The editorials that accompanied the cartoons were, in both cases, remarkably similar. Both argued that freedom of speech implies that people may be offended by others' opinions, critical and ironic art, and that there is no right to be protected from being insulted in public debates and discussions. It is 'incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech' to insist on 'special consideration of /one's own/ religious feelings' (article published in JP 30 September 2005, together with the cartoons: translated in Eide et al. 2008: 31). Furthermore, as the editor-in-chief of NA argued, there is 'a right to ridicule a religion' (editorial headline, NA 19 August 2007). In JP, the argument seeking to justify the decision to publish the cartoons was explicit in

its manifestation against the threat of increased self-censorship: ‘... we are approaching a slippery slope where no one can tell where self-censorship will end. That is why *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten* has invited members of the Danish Editorial Cartoonists Union to draw Muhammad as they see him . . .’ (JP 30 September 2005).

In NA, however, the argument was somewhat unclear, as no explicit motive for ‘publishing’ the cartoon was mentioned. Implicitly, however, one can reconstruct the argument from the attached editorial. The editorial began by stating that Vilks had drawn some caricatures that ridiculed the Prophet Muhammad, and that ‘so far three exhibitors have refused to display his pictures’. After naming the exhibitors, the editor concluded: ‘This is unacceptable self-censorship’. This sentence is followed by a principled declaration that a liberal society must manage to do two things simultaneously: 1) protect Muslims’ right to religious freedom and build mosques, and 2) ‘it is also allowed to ridicule the foremost symbols of Islam – like all other religions’ symbols’.

Further, in the NA article, the editor expressed another principle, namely that ‘The right to freedom of religion – and the right to blaspheme religions go together. They presuppose each other’. The editorial’s final sentences concluded that this was also important for Muslims, and he argued that a ‘fundamentalist Muslim’, who would like to express his beliefs through visual art, ‘could be stopped because obviously galleries can easily be convinced that the pictures are inappropriate, that they may result in rumpus. Hence the restrictions on Lars Vilks’ possibilities to express himself, may also affect the right of Muslims to express themselves’ (editorial, NA 1 September 2007).

Critique of the motives expressed for publishing the cartoons

In the JP case, Peter Hervik analysed the spin involved with the act of publishing. This act was declared by the newspaper’s editor-in-chief to be a protest and a symbolic counterstroke against an alleged trend of increasing self-censorship in Denmark. However, the factual evidence for this alleged ‘slippery slope’ was suspect, to say the least. The concrete background was the author Kåre Bluitgen’s complaints that he had had trouble finding illustrators to work on a children’s book about the Quran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, in combination with his explanation of these illustrators being afraid of Muslim reaction. This was given as the explicit reason for JP to invite cartoonists to ‘draw Muhammad as they see him’ (JP 30 September 2005, Hervik et al. 2008: 31). However, Bluitgen’s story was far from watertight, as many illustrators may have refused to work with him because of his being a well-known Islamophobic figure in Denmark, with very few outside the right wing wanting to be associated with him (Sundström 2009). Furthermore, the fact that JP managed to recruit a number of cartoonists at short notice seems to falsify the alleged common fear of Muslim reactions and self-censorship (ibid.). JP’s motives were also questionable, given their track record as a newspaper with ‘provocations and Islamophobic news items, which might explain why, initially, so few other Danish media took notice of the cartoons’ (Hervik 2008: 64).

The media hype came a month later when eleven ambassadors from Muslim countries wrote a letter to the Danish Prime Minister expressing their concerns

about Islamophobic tendencies in Denmark and the eruption of political violence following publication of the cartoons. The letter requested a meeting between the ambassadors and the Prime Minister – a meeting which he refused – explaining that it was not possible under the Constitution for the Danish Government to interfere with the freedom of the press. But that was something that the ambassadors denied they had ever asked for, and which experts who analysed the letter concluded was not implicated by the text except as a biased interpretation. Despite further attempts from the ambassadors to assure the Danish authorities that they had not asked for any legal interference but rather for consultation concerning the alarming situation, the Prime Minister continued, publically, to describe their request as a demand for government restrictions on the free media in Denmark, for example, in an interview on 7 January 2006 (Sundström 2009: 227).

Consequently, this transformed the self-censorship discourse into a discourse of freedom of speech. When the JP case escalated, it was covered extensively in both the national and international media. The reaction to the JP case in Muslim countries was triggered not only by publication of the cartoons, but also by the arrogant behaviour of the Danish Prime Minister (Hervik et al. 2008: 33). The spin on the alleged freedom of speech issue, which was probably initiated as part of a damage control strategy, now became significant to transnational Islamophobic movements and ‘highly successful’ (Hervik 2008: 65).

A more recent JP editorial, on 27 February 2010, illustrated this; the editor denounced the argument by another Danish newspaper that had made a public apology to Muslims that were offended by the cartoons and requested dialogue. The JP editor scorned this argument: ‘Dialogue is positive as a point of departure, but we see no ground for entering a dialogue about for example the reasonableness of stoning of women that have been raped, or hanging homosexuals from building cranes’. The total lack of self-criticism, as well as the refusal of any dialogue, amounted to an extreme variant of ‘otherism’.

The NA case followed a similar shift, but in contradistinction to the JP case, the provincial Swedish paper had no track record of Islamophobic reporting. When the editors of NA received the news that Vilks’ Muhammad sketches had been removed from an exhibition in a small village museum, and when Vilks himself relayed that two other exhibitors had refused to display his cartoons because of fear of Muslim protests, the NA editors decided to publish Vilks’ caricature of the Prophet Muhammad. In the attached editorial it was implied, as already mentioned, that the motive was to demonstrate the right to freedom of speech, including the right to ridicule. In a private conversation, the editor-in-chief later explained that the decision was – at least partly – based on the assumption that by publishing the caricature they would show that the fears expressed by exhibitors were exaggerated and unfounded. So by implication, the NA editors expected the act of publishing to prove that Muslims would not object or take action against institutions that reproduced the Muhammad cartoon, that is, that there was no conflict between ‘civilizations’ involved. As the cartoon had already been published by other Swedish newspapers, they did not foresee that a newspaper with a local circulation would trigger such global attention and reaction.

As in the JP case, the editors' interpretation of earlier events and Vilks' own statement, that the exhibitors did not display his drawings because of fear of harsh Muslim reaction, are questionable. As mentioned above, the NA editor described three exhibitors having refused to show Vilks drawings as acts of 'unacceptable self-censorship' (NA 19 August 2007). At a seminar several months later, the editors admitted that they did not know for sure whether all three exhibitors had actually refused to show Vilks' cartoons because of fear of Muslim reaction. As one of the exhibitors involved was the Modern Museum in Stockholm – a national scene for contemporary art – it is more than plausible that the decision was based on other motives, for example, aesthetic quality.

Similar to the JP case, and in spite of the editors' intentions, publication of the cartoon in NA grew from a demonstration of the wide scope of freedom of speech, tolerance of deviant opinions and absence of clashes between religions and cultures in Sweden into a discourse of violent conflict between a democratic and free society and threatening fundamentalist Muslims. This was mainly driven by subjective news journalism and headlines. Death threats against the cartoonists and the editors received paramount exposure in NA and other Swedish media, although by comparison, Middle Eastern media paid less attention to these reports – probably because the sources were known within the region to be of low reliability (Camauër (ed.) forthcoming, El Din forthcoming, Tahir forthcoming). In 2007, when Iranian President Ahmadinejad was asked about the case of the NA cartoon at a press conference, he said that it was typical Zionist provocation, but that the Iranian people had no reason whatsoever to feel offended or to take action. Only the first part of his response about the Zionist conspiracy was relayed by the AFP news agency and the Swedish press (Tahir forthcoming). Instead of news reports of the moderate coverage in the Middle-Eastern media, the Swedish media and NA reproduced a discourse about freedom of speech under threat, and its brave defenders, with the front page of the NA showing a photograph of the editor-in-chief in front of the main entrance to the NA office under the main headline: 'Productive dialogue at the gate of freedom of the press' (NA 1 September 2007).

All in all, the enduring impression of the Swedish press coverage, both in NA and in other Swedish media, seems to be of a growing threat against Swedish democracy and freedom of the press. The manner in which distant Muslims' reactions were depicted resonated with a narrative of 'clashing civilizations' (Huntington 1996).

The crux

What then is the crux of these two cases? I argue that it remains a mystery as to why these media events ever happened in the first place. In both cases, the declared motives for publishing are, on closer inspection, questionable from a purely factual point of view. It was not substantiated that self-censorship, due to fear of Muslim reaction, had been important when illustrators (in the JP case) and exhibitors (in the NA case) declined to produce or display the Muhammad cartoons. The editors of the two newspapers drew these conclusions, but evidently with no firm ground in the form of factual evidence. In both cases, however, mediatized threat spirals emerged. In the end, the image of a growing threat from the Muslim world against Nordic democracy and freedom was

disseminated to the general public. In the JP case, this was confirmation of its previous Islamophobic reporting; and in the NA case, ironically, it was falsification of its editors' assumption that publishing the cartoon would prove the fear of Muslim reaction to be exaggerated or even false. Considering that the NA editors assumed that they could falsify the belief in an imminent Muslim threat, the common denominator and remaining impact of the two cartoon cases equate to the proliferation of an image of an acute Muslim threat against the 'homeland', that is, a kind of 'culture of fear' (Furedi 2006).

The striking result of these two cases is that both JP and NA, in spite of the latter's intention to do the opposite, caused threat spirals, the promotion of threat-politics and the proliferation of a culture of fear, consciously (JP) or unconsciously (NA), because of the nationalistic outlook within media framing (see also Oberhuber et al. 2005). And that is almost by definition the index of a dominant cultural pattern, when discursive and ideological outcomes are led in a certain direction, irrespective of the content and/or intention of the actual publication. Without the backdrop of Islamophobic propaganda of 'European soil being invaded by Muslims with a programme for elimination of democracy and freedom of speech', *the interpretation* of rumours about illustrators and exhibitors that had refused to produce or display the Muhammad cartoons as evidence of self-censorship would never have occurred. Whether the editors acted intentionally or not is not the issue here. The fact that in both instances the statements of self-censorship were uncritically accepted constitutes evidence for the existence of 'otherism', of a kind related to a threat society, in collective perceptions in the Nordic countries and in other parts of Europe.

The 'manifest', more than 1,500 pages in length, that the Norwegian terrorist Breivik published on the internet, just before the mass murders in Oslo and on Utøya, with its Islamophobic conspiracy theory of, for example, demographic warfare against the Christian-Western civilization, including Israel, is another extreme exponent of the 'otherism' and culture of fear that is growing in the threat society. He is obviously a typical exponent of the extremism that displays 'accusation in a mirror' (Hamelink 2011: 29), that is, he argues that mass-murder, even the use of weapons of mass destruction, is necessary as a form of self-defence against Muslim 'demographic warfare' (Breivik 2011: 824).

Finally, the lack of global journalism is a complementary factor that explains why, in these cases, the media initiated the threat spirals. Initially, narrow national horizons were important for the decision to publish, both at JP and NA. Both newspapers were occupied by the alleged intercultural problems in their respective countries. Because of their narrow perspectives they could not foresee what transnational implications their decisions would have – they were only considering the local/national situation. This is especially remarkable in the NA case, as they should have drawn on the experience of the JP case two years earlier. The only lesson they did seem to learn was not to display the cartoon in the online version of the newspaper.

The implications for intercultural communication of these threat spirals differ between the Danish and Swedish cases. In retrospect, NA's editor-in-chief expressed a lesson learnt from the cartoon incident – that even a provincial newspaper can have global reach – and declared his wish for improved dialogue with moderate and 'close

Muslims'. In the JP case, the lesson seems to be even more hard-necked resistance to dialogue in any practical sense (see JP editorial 27 February 2010).

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