

## **Discussion on the Danish cartoons controversy 7-19 February 2006**

European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)  
Media Anthropology Network  
Mailing List [medianthro@abyznet.net](mailto:medianthro@abyznet.net)  
<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/maillinglist.htm>

### **Abstract**

This discussion, started by Erkan Saka (Rice University), on 7 February 2006, arose from the intense media coverage of protests by Muslims around the world following the publication of a number of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten and print media across Continental Europe and beyond. The discussion followed two main threads. By far the longer of these threads was devoted to contextualising the cartoon issue with reference to participants' own backgrounds and/or current residence in Denmark, Jordan, Iran, Japan, Spain, and other countries. These efforts at contextualisation were questioned by the semiotician Guido Ipsen, for whom there is a great deal at stake in this conflict; not least the threat posed to Western liberal democracies both by religious fundamentalists and by cultural relativists. A second, shorter thread dealt with the question of how anthropologists may intervene publicly in this issue and similar media events, e.g. by using the Web and other new media/ICTs.

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**Erkan Saka** [erkan@rice.edu](mailto:erkan@rice.edu)

Kambiz Kamrani posted an interesting entry entitled as "Cultural relativism meets freedom of speech with the Danish cartoons and Muslim protests" in Anthropology.Net

here is the link:

[http://anthropology.net/user/kambiz\\_kamrani/blog/2006/02/05/cultural\\_relavism\\_meets\\_freedom\\_of\\_speech\\_with\\_the\\_danish\\_cartoons\\_and\\_muslim\\_protests](http://anthropology.net/user/kambiz_kamrani/blog/2006/02/05/cultural_relavism_meets_freedom_of_speech_with_the_danish_cartoons_and_muslim_protests)

There is a burst of news articles and blog entries in the net, but this might be a good starting point and more relevant for an anthropological perspective.

I felt an affinity with his subject-position, too: "I wanted to preface my argument by saying as an Iranian-American with a cultural background founding in Muslim beliefs but an academic upbringing involving anthropology -- I find myself in a catch 22 position, i.e. while I am adamant about respecting cultural relative beliefs such as iconography, I too am equally adamant about preserving a sembalance of free speech..."

All right, this is how I can begin. I am gathering and organizing my thoughts and I will write more if this sparks any interest!

Cordially,  
Erkan

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Members of the list may be interested in the work of Danish anthropologist Peter Hervik, whose study of the Danish media's representations of Islam is available online:

[www.evensfoundation.be/PDF%20documents/Intcul\\_Conf\\_Hervik.pdf](http://www.evensfoundation.be/PDF%20documents/Intcul_Conf_Hervik.pdf)

Simone

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**John Postill** [jpostill@usa.net](mailto:jpostill@usa.net)

To follow up on the Danish cartoons issue raised by Erkan, this whole affair reminds me of a paper that Mark Hobart gave to the Anthropology Dept at SOAS, University of London, in the mid-90s. He characterised anthropology as a slow-moving discipline that can't cope with the instantaneity of the glance, of images, etc. I was wondering how well equipped we are, as a fieldwork-based discipline, to study fast-moving events such as those surrounding the cartoons around the world. How are we to intervene in the media debates, acquire a public presence (see Eriksen 2006)?

I was also reminded of the exhibition Iconoclasm that took place at ZKM in Karlsruhe in 2002. In his introduction to the book of the same name, Bruno Latour distinguishes six types of iconoclast. The 'E' type of iconoclasts 'claim an absolute right to blasphemy'. They exercise irony 'against all mediators; not that they want to get rid of them, but because they are so conscious of their fragility'. In contrast, the 'A' type are against all images, whilst the 'C' type are only against images of their opponents:

'The search for the suitable object to attract destruction and hatred is reciprocal' 'Flag-burning, painting-slashing, hostage-taking are typical examples. Tell me what you hold to be most dear, and I will wreck it so as to kill you faster'.

I'm not sure that this typology fits in with this particular dispute (or family of disputes), but at least it's a start. Any thoughts on this?

Reference

ERIKSEN, THOMAS HYLLAND. 2006. Engaging anthropology: The case for a public presence. Oxford: Berg.  
[http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/Engaging\\_Anthropology.html](http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/Engaging_Anthropology.html)

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**Brian Street** [brian.street@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:brian.street@kcl.ac.uk)

The decision by an Iranian newspaper to call for cartoons of the Holocaust seems to move them from Latour's category A to 'C'? From the perspective of Anthropology in Education (cf the work of the RAI Education Committee including developing materials on 'Citizenship' from an anthropological perspective) we might indeed need to intervene and claim a public presence in the cartoon debate. My sense is that an anthropological perspective would unpack 'offense' and differentiate the kinds of concern individuals might feel at different representations, both their content and their form - those that are used as examples in the media at present seem to focus on personal feelings, upsets etc and to focus on content at the expense of form; we might need to differentiate these from institutionally and ontologically more grounded conceptions of being which the cartoons of Mohammed evoke and which are of a different order. We might then get accused of relativism but can bring the counter charge of ethnocentrism to those who liken the latter to the former. And in terms of the media seminar, we might, as John does below, draw attention to specific features of modality and representation as key dimensions of the issue.

Brian

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**Yazan Doughan** [yazan@soas.ac.uk](mailto:yazan@soas.ac.uk)

By way of quick comment on Brian's remark about the Iranian newspaper's call for counter-cartoons, I think there is a risk of misinterpretation here. I find Baudrillard's notion of seduction much more relevant in this context. Reading the various statements made by President Ahmadinejad about the Holocaust, it seems to me his intention was not to deny that it has happened, but rather to point out what has been denied or disarticulated in the European discourse on the Holocaust. What is interesting is that Ahmadinejad called for a reconsideration of the history of the Holocaust in the name of science. The point he was making is that the West is hindering objective scientific research by not considering the possibility of the Holocaust not taking place.

Similarly, the Iranian newspaper is calling for the Holocaust cartoons in the name of freedom of expression, the principle so dear to the Europeans. The purpose of these cartoons, I think, is not to avenge the Danish representation of Muhammad, but rather to expose the mythical nature of the term 'freedom of expression'. In other words, what the Iranian newspaper is trying to say is 1. We have freedom of expression (too) and 2. The European claims of superiority in that respect are false because they would not allow the publishing of cartoons mocking the Holocaust. I am currently in Jordan and similar comments are being made about

demonstrations and the burning of European flags. "If Europeans truly believe in freedom of expression, then why do they get upset when we express ourselves?.." "Aren't mass demonstrations a form of expression?"

Yazan

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**Guido Ipsen** [guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de](mailto:guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)

There is a deep and fundamental misconception in Ahmadinejad's speech. There is no way of comparing a religious, pre-enlightenment religious taboo to restrictions concerning "caricatures" about the Shoa.

1) Ahmadinejad and several Muslim intellectuals claim that the western emphasis on freedom of speech as a result of the enlightened, modern society is absurd: Islam, in their interpretation, may not have undergone enlightenment, but they also lack a history that includes the industrially organised murder of millions.

2) Ahmadinejad thinks that caricatures about the Shoa were in acceptable "as such".

As to 1: Nazi-Germany and the Holocaust are phenomena not of the enlightened Western culture, but they developed DESPITE the ideals of freedom and democracy. Other tendencies of the sort existed, and it is the constant struggle against such regimes or doctrines which characterizes an enlightened culture that claims that quality for itself. Yet, the persistent existence of these totalitarian ideologies also characterizes the problems of a liberal society: a fact that calls for our constant vigilance.

Unless Ahmadinejad characterizes murderers who chop off innocent people's heads, who incite hatred on a religious basis, who bring death and pain to hundreds and thousands of people per year, as what they are, namely criminals, I do not see the point where Islam should have any advantage over Western society and culture.

As to 2: If Ahmadinejad were as read as he should be in the history and legal system of his chosen personal enemies, he knew that a caricature, information, or sketch of idea which assumes that the Holocaust did not happen is a criminal offence in Germany, and will also not be taken easily in other European countries. This is not for reasons of a taboo, but because denying the Holocaust is one of the lies perpetrated by contemporary Nazis. This is therefore a legal issue.

Freedom of expression is NOT a myth, but a prerequisite for democracy.

It is exactly due to the nature of our pluralist society that we will constantly have to maintain this freedom, as I mentioned before. I wonder if Ahmadinejad would assess pluralism as a fundament of Iranian society? Rather not.

Besides, demonstrations are indeed a form of expression. Burning flags is a form of aggression. This subtle difference is important to be noticed.

Guido

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**Yazan Doughan** [yazan@soas.ac.uk](mailto:yazan@soas.ac.uk)

I am not sure if Guido was responding to my comment or Ahmadinejad's speech. At any rate, my comment was purely academic, not political. Therefore, I will keep this brief to avoid slipping into a political polemic. I use the term 'myth' in the Barthesian sense (1972) which is characterised by a distance separating the literal and connotative contents of a sign. As Laclau (1990a) points out, myth is constitutive of any society. Elsewhere he explains that a literal society that is identical with itself is a pure impossibility (1990b). If 'freedom of expression' is not a myth, I am not sure what it is, for it is easy to demonstrate the radical undecideability inherent in the term by asking a group of people to clearly define what they mean by it and counting the various ways in which they try to explain it.

Danish anthropologist Peter Hervik's paper which Dr. Abram introduced to the list comes close to making a similar argument about the notion of 'cultural tolerance' in Denmark which is commonly agreed to be a feature of Danish society, but no one quite knows what it means. The distance between what the term connotes and what it denotes allows for multiple forms of identification by the various subjects thus creating a mythical space that assumes the appearance of fullness, or a utopia, to offset – or in Derrida's terms to defer – all the dislocations which the society suffers from. Thus tolerance and racism can coexist without seeming to be contradictory. As for the comment about burning flags, I do not see how the cartoons mocking Mohammad and the burning of Danish flags can be categorically different. Whether they are both 'forms of expression' or 'acts of aggression' is irrelevant. At any rate, I was trying to offer a culturally sensitive reading of the media to avoid being trapped in a one dimensional monologue.

BARTHES, R. (1972) 'Myth Today'. In: Lavers, A. trans., 1993. *Mythologies*. London: Vintage, 109-159.

LACLAU, E. (1990a) 'New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time' IN LACLAU, E.(Ed.)*New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London; New York, Verso

LACLAU, E. (1990b) 'The Impossibility of Society' IN LACLAU, E. (Ed.) *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London; New York, Verso.

**Jens Kjaerulff** [etnojens@abyznet.net](mailto:etnojens@abyznet.net)

I am happy to see this timely suggestion of discussing the 'current affair' of the Mohammed cartoon incident(s) among colleagues on the Media anthropology Network. I would like to add a perspective different to the ones already suggested on the list - one that situates the cartoons more in terms of the actual contexts and event(s) that brought them about in the first place, as well as in terms of the subsequent events that, as it turned out, yielded them wider attention. In this regard I believe I have a privileged position, because I read Danish and have been able to follow the debate as it unfolded in Denmark before the cartoons got international attention.

A necessarily crude, but still useful overview (in English) of the events that produced the cartoons may be found at Wiki - see especially the 'events' section some way down on the page at the following link:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten\\_Muhammad\\_cartoons\\_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy)

The Cartoons themselves are not linked there as far as I can tell. However, I think it is in place to review what actually comprises the center of attention in this incident - I happened to find the infamous cartoons (scroll a little ways down) on the following page:

<http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/698>

The original publication of the cartoons (in the Danish Newspaper Jyllands-Posten on September 30, 2005) is also available online, though at a cost, at:

[http://epaper.jp.dk/30-09-2005/demo/JP\\_04-03.html](http://epaper.jp.dk/30-09-2005/demo/JP_04-03.html)

In brief, I suggest - and I write as an anthropologist here rather than as 'a Dane' - that to appreciate the publishing (and reception) of the cartoons and also their present significances, one should realize that they were not published in the name of 'freedom of expression' in any general sense, or as a matter of (ontological?) principle of 'Western democracy', or anything like that. Rather, the Cartoons were brought about in the wake of hardships endured by an author of a children's book, which in turn highlighted experiences by authors and artists making a living in Denmark, that they were subtly being intimidated by fundamentalists/populist residents in Denmark invoking Islam, so that in effect they were exercising 'self-censorship' in their work. It was in reaction to this scenario, also touched on in other Danish papers at the time (see the Wiki site), that the cartoons were published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on September 30 2005. ( I should add – but here I speak as a 'native' rather than 'just' an anthropologist, if the latter is to be found anywhere in pure form - that I find these cartoons remarkably innocent; I am slightly baffled that 12 drawings of such inconspicuous character can attract such attention, and I wonder how many people - of muslim denomination or otherwise - have in fact SEEN the actual cartoons which occasions so much hype, rather than merely heard about them. But have a look for yourself, cf above link ) After the cartoons were published in Denmark in September last year, some Muslim activists resident in Denmark reacted, in part by mobilizing networks in the Middle East, in pursuit of 'setting the record straight' at the stage back in Denmark. Among their initiatives in this regard, they ostensibly added some images to the original cartoons of considerably more offensive potential than the original cartoons:- one depicting Mohammed as a pig (an unclean animal to be avoided following Muslim lore in my understanding).

I have managed to find a copy of the original picture here:

<http://politiken.dk/visArtikel.i.asp?PageID=437199>

- and one depicting some sexual explicit scene involving a dog and mohammed (a dog likewise a less flattering species in muslim lore in my understanding). Since then, things have unfolded much further and become yet more complicated. The point I wish to suggest is this: A debate of the cartoon incident (which clearly comprises many incidents) cast in terms of 'purely theoretical' terms, structural/general principles, e.g. 'freedom of expression' versus 'cultural relativism', or whatever, simply misses out on what was, and is going on in the wake of the publication(s) of the cartoons.

Of course the issue of, say, cultural relativism, is brought out, in that (e.g.) 'religion' is being reified in populist political rethoric, to the effect that 'it' has been grossly offended. (Paradoxically, the reason the Prophet must not be depicted is effectively precisely to avoid 'false objects of worship', or, effectively, reification of his teachings, as I understand it...although here we are of course on theological/logical grounds, removed from social practice - nonetheless, one may wonder how this taboo came about to begin with, evidently reification of islam abounds in many other shapes and sizes...) Such instances of reification

should in turn alert an anthropologist to the circumstances of reification - i.e. local social contexts and actors. The recent strong reactions to the cartoons seems in my view to have everything to do with local politics and social circumstances in the Middle East, rather than the cartoons in their own right, or general principles per se. I understand that new riots against the cartoons are expected in the wake of an upcoming Shiah religious event. I suggest that such expectations further underscore this point. In trying to balance an analytical anthropologist gaze, with an informed (contextualized) native one, it strikes me (at least as I presently think about it) that the further these 'cartoon incidents' unfold, the more relevant in fact becomes the rationale that originally brought the cartoons about as an act of defiance in the face of experiences of intimidation in context of populist/fundamentalist politics. In such contexts, both in Denmark and indeed in the Middle East, I believe these cartoons have in fact been quite welcome. I see Danish politicians across the political spectrum stand united in this case as rarely before, and I speculate that similar dynamics keep the issue alive in the Middle East, not to speak of the way these inconspicuous cartoons continue to make headlines in the Media, which are having a bonanza while this story is still going strong. While many Danish Businesses have been severely punished in the wake of this, the media, not least Jyllandposten who originally published the cartoons, have never had as many hits on their internet site before. More than anything perhaps, this is (yet a) story about 'the media' turned in on themselves, and I suggest that as anthropologists we need to go beyond that to understand why people continue to love or hate 12 cartoons so much. Looking forward to more input in this string!

Cheers // Jens

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**Eric Rothenbuhler** [rothenbuhler@tamu.edu](mailto:rothenbuhler@tamu.edu)

Yazan's clarification is very helpful and very interesting. I do not yet know what to think or say about the whole controversy. But on the one little point about comparing cartoons and protests, for most purposes I would want to draw a line between burning flags and burning embassies, rather than between publishing cartoons and burning flags.

Eric

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**Elisenda Ardevol Piera** [eardevol@uoc.edu](mailto:eardevol@uoc.edu)

Dear List,

I have not been following this cartoon controversy and, as Eric, I do not have a contrasted opinion yet, but I agree with John's argument about the difficulty of a complex anthropological analysis to be drawn and heard in between this kind of "symbolic war", and indeed, the urgency of that kind of work to be done. The idea of trying to do some comparative analysis through counterexamples might work. - I remember the opposite interpretations of 11M facts in Madrid. For the main North American press, the massive reaction in Spain against the then current government was interpreted as people fears and a kind of surrounding to Muslim terrorism, nothing more distant to the feelings of the people that went out to the streets.

I asked Susan DiGiacomo, that presented a paper in our Media Anthropology symposium in Sevilla about that facts entitled “News and culture: an approach to ethnographic analysis of apparently transitory facts”, if she can give me an English version to post here in our list -still waiting.

A trivial anecdote: I was with my father at the hospital taking care of my mother -this is my business those days- when he shows me the newspaper first page with a photograph of a demonstration somewhere in the Arabic world against this cartoon, I think. My father reaction was “look, they are all crazy!” My first reaction was to ask him: “so, do you think that this entire mass of people is crazy?” “No, of course not“, he said. So -I began-, we have to try to explain it through a deeper understanding of their point of view and why and how they have been mobilized to that extrem... then we both continue to talk about how easily people burns out instead to dialogue, how easily angry feelings are used to reaffirm own values despite other considerations, why this -for us- apparently “innocent” cartoon have been used to express greater dissatisfactions... how this is politically used, how we quickly make a value judgement without knowing other’s reasons, situations, etc, etc. May be it will seem very naïve, but this is what we did. Only words can save us from punches.

For me, this thread is very instructive. John and Brian gave us theoretical insights and useful tools. Yazan gives us a few perspectives and arguments of some people in Jordan that help us to understand what people think there. Arguments that express resentment and make an allusion to European values and pretended superiority... it interested me because he is offering us a glance of how people are interpreting these facts there. Gido gives us counter-arguments, which are also welcome, because they are showing us “the other side” of the same coin: ¿who is “superior” to whom? Ahhh! This must not to be the question, I think, but it reveals the problem. The political polemic that we try to avoid is in the core of the acts we try to examine. We cannot understand what is happening only from a pure “theoretical” point of view, we need also, first hand interpretations, context, an ethnographic perspective. We cannot escape from policy, but our myth is that academic arguments must help us to lead us to more responsible political actions. Let’s try it!

Elisenda

**Guido Ipsen** [guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de](mailto:guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)

I do not agree with Yazan's explorations of myth. The Barthean conception of myth is a structuralist conception of dividing meaning into denotative and connotative contents. In his theory, Barthes well develops how messages, especially of pictorial coding, go beyond the "literal" meaning of the images conveyed in the communicative act. However, I should criticise the application of this theory for several reasons.

a) The so-called denotative meaning of a sign is in itself a construct deriving from a host of semiotic events, which Barthes ignores. In the case of "freedom of speech", as a sign, it is ridiculous to try and define the "literal" meaning. In the current discourse, as is obvious, each of the opponents already claim for themselves how to define that "literal" meaning of the term. Therefore, we should abandon Barthes' theory altogether. It assumes that there is a meaning core to a sign, which there is not in the first place. Any hint to Derrida will only confuse the matter more, this theorising equals a cul-de-sac.

b) "Freedom of speech" still has if not a literal, so at least a context-specific meaning, which is the legal institutionalization of the term in the constitutions of countries in which the term applies. A violation of that principle is then a legal offense, and is no longer subject to open discourse, but to legal procedures. Again, this should help to recognise that the term is not a myth. It is a consensus-driven institutionalised right in the very Deweyan sense. Hence, a violation of existing laws - which again are based on free consensus - may infringe the justification of freedom of speech. The fact that certain discourse is therefore banned does not make Freedom of Speech a myth, but shows that regulation of principles is at work.

c) The entire discussion goes astray, as the protagonists lack a common ground. If you apply a theory like Barthes' mythology to Western discourse on Freedom of Speech, you must as well implement it on the Muslim discourse, which Yazan does not. However, I suggest that the superimposition of meanings onto signs is exactly at the core of any religious discourse. I also find that proof of my statements has been sent to us from within this very network, as I may quote Jackie:

- > I am based in Tehran and cannot comment in depth because of monitoring
- > of emails and super sensitivities (I'm not being paranoid, it's just a
- > fact of life that you get used to here).

Another proof for this no-common-ground- assumption is the existence of caricatures, e.g., about the crucifixion of Jesus, as by the French cartoonist Franquin (in: "Idées Noires"). We cannot possibly communicate the complex web of meanings which such cartoons entail to the Muslim community, where a cartoonist daring a similar thing will endure I don't know which punishment.

d) All in all, a society that does not recognise the necessity of the laical state, and which furthermore perceives its very basis as perfused by or even grounded on religious beliefs, does not share a common ground with those who differ in these aspects. This fundamental communicational mismatch has not been addressed. Application of semiological or any other theory from the "Western" point of view can only try and disclose this mismatch. It cannot, however, solve that problem.

Furthermore it is my personal belief that political leaders of a society where free participation in public discourse is not possible for all citizens have no right whatsoever to criticise the principle of freedom of speech. Furthermore, as has been shown in other of public portrayal of celebrities etc., the Muslim community could have made use of the Danish or European legal system and its control functions. They chose to not go by this way but to agitate, and to use brutal force. I therefore do not think that we should commit ourselves to any intellectual theorising as to how we may "accept" or "understand" such behaviour. Personally, I detest it. Academically, I deny that it should be "explained". It may, however, be investigated.

Guido

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**Simone Abram** [s.abram@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:s.abram@sheffield.ac.uk)

This discussion is interesting, and slightly surprising for two reasons. I'm not commenting on the content of the argument, but its form and metacommentaries. Firstly, I am personally quite surprised at the lack of connection with the recent French riots. The latest edition of Anthropology Today has an interesting article by Didier Fassin, accusing French

anthropologists (and others, by implication) of ignoring the issue of ethnic/racial tension in France. He doesn't say that the form of riots in the suburbs follows in the French radical tradition (e.g. in burning barricades specifically), but indicates the increasing segregation and intense low-level harassment of young suburbans by police. Although the article criticises the more conservative institutions of French anthropology, there is an implication that anthropologists have not been present enough in media debates, which resembles the criticism that emerged earlier in this discussion.

In this regard, (which is my second point), it might be useful to look back to the Copenhagen EASA conference workshop on anthropology and the media. As I remember it (ie not necessarily reliably), much discussion was given over to the timescales of media work versus academic work, a problem highlighted by Thomas Hylland Erikson in the discussion of his and Marianne Gullestad's spat with a comedian/columnist in the Norwegian tabloids. While the academic consults evidence and considers responses, journalists may already have moved the debate onto new ground. Erikson argues that the duty of the academic is to relate debates to research, not just to be professionally opinionated, and therefore if you jump straight into a frenzied debate, you are likely to lose the value of being an academic.

After another very acrimonious and rather self-righteous debate in the Norwegian press about 'forced female circumcision', Aud Talle chose to write a book for general readership in response, not least because to enter into the debate when it is 'hot' is to join an agenda often already set in a most unhelpful fashion. (Indeed, the feeling of obligation to contribute is likely to be greatest when the debate is going in a disturbing direction.) In order to offer any in-depth understanding of such complex issues, the ground needs to be prepared in an appropriate way, and that is unlikely to be in the context of media escalation. (When is an audience likely to be receptive to a considered academic response to a crisis?) This latter point is in relation to the realpolitik of press structures and practices.

It took this discussion some time before we heard a more nuanced, perhaps more ethnographic, account of the Danish context. It took a little longer to hear a voice from Teheran. It's interesting to think about escalation and heightened timescales in the context of media-crisis (manufactured or otherwise), but there does seem to be a tension here between participant observation and participation per se. I don't want to succumb to excessive navel-gazing, but it might be useful to consider why the call for anthropologists to make press comments crops up repeatedly in relation to moments of crisis...

Simone

#### **Refs:**

Fassin, D (2006) Riots in France and silent anthropologists. *Anthropology Today* 22(1).

Talle A. (2003) *Om kvinneleg omskjering : debatt og erfaring (On Female Circumcision: debate and experience)* Oslo : Samlaget.

**Daniel Taghioff** [danieltaghioff@yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)

What interesting times we live in. I was listening to 'the message' yesterday, a classic rap track by grandmaster flash. The main lyric is 'don't push me cos I'm close to the edge,' It does seem

to me that there was a huge potential for this kind of reaction before the cartoons came out. But are the cartoons really the trigger; as Jens points out they are fairly innocuous? There was a very good comment on this list that these kinds of demonstrations become easier to organise with new media, mobile phones particularly.

I am not much of a technological determinist, but it seems here that the media is the story, and that new media is also strongly constitutive of the rapid and strong response to it. Yazan might be right, we may well be facing the irony of our own position as 'democrats'. This may be part of the emergence of global public debates. That we in the secular west are uncomfortable with the religious character of this, could be seen as undemocratic: I am not sure that secularism is the majority position globally.

So *\*if\** we are looking at the emergence of some sort of globalisation of public opinion formation (more via networks than mass media it seems in this case - is this the way it seems from within the middle east?), and perhaps some sort of rudiments of the possibility for global democratic processes (protest, to my mind, being the mother of democracy), where do 'we' (as mostly secular democrats I assume) place ourselves, in an overwhelmingly religious world? As a counterpoint, I wonder what debates in multi-ethnic democracies with large muslim populations, such as Indonesia, or India look like: Is our sense of a 'global event' here mythical in the face of diverse commentaries? And as anthropologists, with 'local' concerns, how do we cope with such rapid and broad responses: Aren't new media making our job harder for us? How do we avoid reifying, but cope with such wide ranging co-ordination?

Daniel

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**Kira Kosnick** [k\\_kosnick@yahoo.de](mailto:k_kosnick@yahoo.de)

Dear all, without wanting to intervene in the 'freedom of expression' debate, it seems to me that Barthes' notion of myth should not be dismissed so easily – in fact, if applied to Guido's comments regarding "the Muslim community", this notion might very well show some analytical value. It seems to me extremely dangerous to postulate the existence of such a "Muslim community", a community which in Guido's rendition appears as a corporate actor, simultaneously diasporic and globalized. ("...the Muslim community could have made use of the Danish or European legal system and its control functions. They chose to not go by this way but to agitate, and to use brutal force.")

To stipulate the existence of such a 'community' is to ignore the heterogeneity of beliefs under the roof of Islam, and the heterogeneity of non-violent Muslim responses that have arguably had less media exposure over the past week. Barthes' point about myth was not to establish the difference between denotative/'literal' and connotative meanings, it was to show the operation of myth as "depoliticized speech," at what some analysts have called a third level of signification. Both elements seem relevant in this context here.

In the third, ideological order of signification, the sign reflects major concepts that underpin a particular and always interested worldview. To speak of the Muslim World or the Muslim Community as a corporate actor empties the sign Muslim of its complex potential to signify,

and comes dangerously close to situating it within a 'clash of civilizations' perspective. Barthes said that "myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification," referring to its ideological dimension. I think we would do well not to dismiss this rather valuable aspect of his analysis, also when it comes to our own use of language.

Best, Kira

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**Guido Ipsen** [guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de](mailto:guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)

I was referring to the Danish Muslim community and their leaders who apparently traveled abroad widely in order to raise protest. I recognise the diversity of the Muslim religion; nonetheless they are, if to be precise, a community willy-nilly. Every religious group is.

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**Mark Peterson** [petersm2@muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

I want to agree with Daniel and Jens, and suggest that sometimes trying to analyze a mediated cluster of events in mythic, symbolic or ideological terms (which is how I read Guido's post) is not very productive and fails to build on anthropology's strengths. Each of the events--the Danish controversy between the imams and some members of the Danish press, the publishing of the cartoons, the delegations by the Imams to Egypt and Lebanon, the reproduction of the cartoons, the various responses from boycotts to riots--are separate events.

They are linked by the cartoons, and in many cases probably merely by oral reports of the cartoons. The links--actual flows of people and signs from context to context--are important, and need to be described, but so do the local contexts. What the media does is reify all these events into a single event, which can then be labeled (as free speech vs. respect for religious beliefs, or whatever). These labels provide convenient means of keeping the news holes filled.

I was a Washington DC journalist for six years and I know how the system works. Analyzing media accounts is also interesting, but it is an analysis of a different type. I am reminded of Talal Asad's article on the Salman Rushdie affair in *Cultural Anthropology* back in the 1980s. He does an excellent job of showing how the demonization of Satanic Verses was differently demonized by different social actors in different contexts, and how all these different issues were reified by Western media accounts as a single "affair." This "affair" as mediated pitted the core liberal myth that books are sacred (freedom of expression) against the core Muslim myth that *a* book is sacred. One of the dangers of speaking to the media as an "expert" is than

one answers *their* questions, from within their frames, rather than the kinds of questions one would ask as an anthropologist.

Mark

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**Anna Horolets** [labusia\\_xl@wp.pl](mailto:labusia_xl@wp.pl)

I think Jens touched upon a very important dimension of the incident - the time. This strand of discussion re-appears in the incident with Japanese history books. The content of the debate changes quite a lot with time but the public and journalists are blessedly forgetful of "how it all has started". While the time goes by, the press (and other media) representations of an event change quite a lot, the event is transformed several times and assumes quite different characters; in fact the event starts living in its own time - as long as it triggers response and is capable of producing other - media and non-media (but of rather of high news value) - events.

In this case it is probably not surprising that the caricature affair was "noticed" now when the media can feed themselves on some spectacular (i.e. of good news value) events. However, this seems to be somehow connected to the issue of global public opinion that someone raised. It seems that the very 'news-value' is dependent on a set of hierarchy of values/symbols shared by some community. There seems to be no global community. That is not to say there are no communities that transcend national borders, but they are multiple. It would be interesting to find out in which "communities" (or simply where) the attention is not paid to this affair or different parts of it are accentuated. It reveals local sensitivities. In Polish media, for instance, there is no notice of the Holocaust Cartoon Competition (as far as I know). Instead there is a lot of talk around the Polish newspaper that re-produced the cartoon. There were apologies from the Prime Minister and the editor-in-chief of the newspapers plus some traces of the freedom of press debate. As far as the position of anthropologists in such debates is concerned, it seems to be quite an ambiguous one.

On the one hand, anthropologist is expected to take press discourse seriously, or alternatively take a stand on the public issue. (Taking it seriously could be difficult if one reconstructs the emergence of the texts and all the sequences). On the other hand, with a lot of sensitivities to the constructed nature of the events and a tendency to give complex rather than straightforward answers, most anthropologists are doomed to be unheard in the public debate. Most answers that are heard are political (or political science).

Perhaps, it's a hasty generalisation though.

Best,

Anna Horolets

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**John Postill** [jpostill@usa.net](mailto:jpostill@usa.net)

One key theme in our discussion seems to be the contrasting temporalities of academia and 'the media'. But I'm wondering whether we're forgetting that the web operates at many different speeds. Wouldn't it be perfectly feasible to publish online anthropologically informed pieces on (re)current affairs at our own pace? Journalists would then come to our archives as well as referring readers/viewers to our website.

By the way, there's an e-publishing seminar convened by Adam Kuper coming up in April that may be of interest in this regard (there's also an informal EASA group coordinated by Jens Kjaerulff on how to revamp our communications): British Academy Specialist Seminar E-Publishing in the Humanities and Social Sciences Convenor: Adam Kuper, FBA, Brunel University Friday, 7 April 2006 £20 Seminar Fee (£10 concessions)

John

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**Guido Ipsen** [guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de](mailto:guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)

Anna has tackled a very important issue:

- > As far as the position of anthropologists in such debates is
- > concerned, it seems to be quite an ambiguous one. On the one hand,
- > anthropologist is expected to take press discourse seriously, or
- > alternatively take a stand on the public issue.

In this regard, I think that there are indeed two discussions going on which we might wish to separate:

- a) The discussion about the discourse \*making use of\* and \*appearing in\* the media, and hence being subject to media (anthropological) analysis, and
- b) a politically inspired discussion about the justification of said discourse.

Unfortunately, discussants reacting to statements that contribute to b) remain in a field substantially arguing along the lines of a). Meanwhile, out there people are dying due to a conflict that could as well be fought in discourse only. Only it is not a media conflict. I repeat my point of view, it is not a conflict of discourses competing in the media because in essence there is no common ground to be shared.

This goes deep, as this section from the Times online, 6-2-2006, shows:

- > Farid Mortazavi, graphics editor for Tehran's /Hamshahri/ newspaper,
- > said that the deliberately inflammatory contest would test out how
- > committed Europeans were to the concept freedom of expression.
- >> "The Western papers printed these sacrilegious cartoons on the pretext
- > of freedom of expression, so let's see if they mean what they say and
- > also print these Holocaust cartoons," he said.
- >> [...]>> Iran's regime is supportive of Holocaust revisionist historians, who
- > maintain that the slaughter of Europe's Jews during the Second World
- > War was invented or exaggerated to justify the creation of Israel on
- > Palestinian territory.>

I suggest that we be very careful in assessing the quality of the Iranian contribution to this discourse. Embracing the Iranian standpoint is not only outrageous from a common sense point of view (which, from a scholarly position might be labelled culturally coded and therefore subjective, just as the Muslim rage concerning the caricatures). It is also historically, empirically, matter-of-factly wrong. Period. We do not ignore Holocaust revisionist historians and exclude them from discourse because we are personally annoyed, but because they perpetrate lies. Lies against historical, cultural, social facts. I hope that in assessing the situation according to discussion line a), everybody please keeps in mind whose opinions you are embracing, "trying to understand", placing into context etc. Arguing with Ahmanidejad, attributing the label "myth" (Barthean or not) to western free discourse is at best naive.

I expect us to be able to make a difference between a politician's fair assessment and cheap propaganda. Also, in assessing the communicative ways of a culture, we must be careful. The huge cumulative demonstrations we are presented with appear as a threat to the average European because ours is not a street culture. However, the public event has turned bloody. I am not ready to include killing into my media specific theoremes.

Again, I hope that the evaluation of said demonstrations keeps in mind these important issues in our discussion. regards,

Guido

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**Yazan Doughan** [yazan@soas.ac.uk](mailto:yazan@soas.ac.uk)

I am happy to see that the debate is gaining more momentum by the minute. It is also interesting to hear bits of commentary on the events from across the world. To begin with, I would like to elaborate on the point I wanted to make in my first email. I was trying to drive the discussion away from notions of the 'clash of civilizations' (or the 'iconoclash of civilizations') and the debates crowding the web over claims of cultural superiority from the different parties involved.

I suggested that Baudrillard's notion of seduction can be quite helpful in understanding what is happening. For Baurillard, seduction is a never ending game of reciprocal exchange in which the line that separates the victor and the defeated is very blurry. The seducer and the seduced exchange positions so rapidly that it is not obvious who is the subject and who is the object in this game of appearances. To repeat, it is a playfully fatal game of 'appearances'. Although I am no expert on Iran, I seriously doubt that Iranians have any illusions about the state of civil liberty in their country. I also doubt that their president does, for that matter. The reason why this becomes relevant to a discussion list on media anthropology is that the whole game is not about reality, but rather a game of simulations, a 'simulacra', to use another Baudrillard term. Iran's call for France to address its racial problems following the urban riots there should also be understood in that context, as should Gadhafi's yearly calls for the US to respect human rights following the publishing of Human Rights Watch reports. Equally, the burning of the embassies in Damascus and Beirut, I think, was pre orchestrated by the Syrian government to simulate anti-Western sentiment in the region and dis-simulate the internal and external pressures it is facing.

Talking about media reports as if they were a mere reflection of events is just absurd realism that perpetuates ignorance. To add a bit of facts for the theory-averse, I shall give some brief

account on media reports on the whole affair from my perspective as an Arabic speaking scholar currently living in Jordan. This would link nicely with Anna's point about time. I have first learnt about the cartoons through an email from an Artist friend (Arab Muslim) who described them as something that "got a sad reaction from the fanatics". A few weeks later, Jordanian newspapers started publishing international press agency reports about a boycott of Danish products in major stores in the Gulf in response to the cartoons. At the time, the media here was preoccupied with the Hamas landslide victory in the Palestinian elections. The Western reaction to the results of the elections was seen as hypocritical (simultaneously calling for and blocking democracy in the Middle East). Slowly, official statements in Denmark and Saudi Arabia about the cartoons started to be reported. Later, columnists picked up on the whole thing and started commenting on it focusing mainly on Denmark's defiance which they described as "arrogant and condescending". Civil society organisations then started calling for mass demonstrations in protest against what they saw as a Danish insult to the Prophet and Islam. It was only when two Jordanian tabloids published the controversial cartoons that the Jordanian government made an official response taking the editors of the two newspapers to court for charges of publishing religiously offensive material. The King also started making public statements saying that freedom of expression does not justify hurting the feelings of others. The highlight of today's newspapers was a Guardian report that the Jyllands-Posten had previously refused to publish cartoons mocking Jesus. There was also news that a lawsuits which Muslim organisations have filed in Denmark against the newspaper were rejected in spite of a Danish law that prohibits the publishing of such materials. The focus of opinion columns, however, seems to be shifting towards calls for dialogue between East and West.

I think that the work of a media anthropologist is far more sophisticated than that of the political pundits. Following Bakhtin, the media are not about messages that need to be decoded, but rather compose of utterances that address someone and anticipate a response. To analyse the media is to ask questions about the addresser, the addressed and the anticipated response. Following Collingwood, who argues that every statement (utterance) presupposes another, it is also about interrogating utterances to dig-out what they presuppose. All this is complicated because each utterance speaks about the already spoken about and bears the trace of other utterances. As Bakhtin puts it, "No living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other alien words about the same object, the same theme, and it is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate." (Discourse in the Novel p.276, cited in Morson and Emerson 1990, p.137). Consider, for example, the Guardian report I have mentioned above; it would be absurd to assume that it had the same addressees and anticipated the same response as that of the same report published in a Jordanian newspaper, verbatim.

MORSON, G. S. & EMERSON, C. (1990) Mikhail Bakhtin: creation of a prosaics, Stanford, Calif., Stanford Univ. Press.

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**Deborah Woodell** [woodell@rowan.edu](mailto:woodell@rowan.edu)

Simone commented:

<I don't want to succumb to excessive navel-gazing, but it might be useful to consider why the call for anthropologists to make press comments crops up repeatedly in relation to moments of crisis...>

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Well, speaking from the media camp -- and I'm not particularly proud of this fact -- there is a dearth of deep understanding in much of the media when it comes to anthropological issues. I'm afraid many of us have a congenital case of short-attention span in what we cover, or, to use that old analogy, our expertise is a mile wide, but only an inch deep. So, when something like this arises, we dip our toes into the water and then call on the lifeguards (the anthropologists, the experts in all fields, in fact) to throw us a life preserver. And then we move on to the next story.

After 9/11 and the emergence of the Taliban as the key force in Afghanistan, a colleague at my newspaper asked me if I had ever heard of them. Having seen what happened to the Buddhist statues, I said, yes. But I happened to be a rarity in that case.

BTW, I am new to this list and am enjoying the discussion very much. I'm looking forward to continued enlightenment.

Deb

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**Jens Kjaerulff** [etnojens@abyznet.net](mailto:etnojens@abyznet.net)

I'm enjoying your input very much too Deborah, keep it coming! // Jens

**Daniel Taghioff** [danieltaghioff@yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)

Firstly, I agree with Jens, it is really useful to get accounts of how things work from Journalists. Keep those comments coming, please! It helps in cutting through us reifying the media as analysts, when you get to discuss the diverse experiences of those engaged in doing the reifying that the media tends to involve.

To clarify how I see this, (based on what others have said here also) I think 'we' partly tend to reify the media, because 'the media' tends to reify: 'The media' seems like part of an effort to render an ordered account of the world. So particular accounts of media practice can show how this reification happens: in practice, which I think links the local with wider contexts: These wider 'contexts' are actively produced in particular practices of representation. Which goes to the issue of common ground: Guido seems to be pressing on the point that there is no apriori meaning to a sign or symbol: They are interpreted by people, in context, in particular moments. However there is not a complete lack of context to this current situation: In a way, context is being constituted as we speak. Common ground is not a good metaphor, since there are many diverse relationships involved, so to use this metaphor fully would involve a many-worlds theory! BUT, just because there are no philosophical apriori's to interpretation, does not mean that we are not seeing the active constitution of contexts for interpretation: To pick up on an earlier comment, the active constitution and struggle over frames and hierarchies.

This is not happening on some flat plane, it is diverse. But we are not operating in a vacuum either: The free space of a-priori non-relation is like all theories of vacuum: It is an abstract principle: In practice there is always particular content, however diverse, accidental and rudimentary. What we are seeing now, I feel, is an increase in 'common ground' in many ways: Even a conflict presupposes something to fight over, however much that thing is 'hyper-real' or driven by representation circling around on itself and losing reference to externals, like the cartoons this supposedly started with.

Oh and by the way, I think Barthes uses myth precisely to talk about how something with its own history is appropriated into a powerful discourse, and thus is transformed into a reified element in that discourse. I think his example, in *Mythologies*, of the African Soldier in front of the French flag is quite similar to the way the cartoons have been picked up and transformed. But it is the practices, and agents in practice, that do this picking up and reifying that should be of interest to Media Anthropologists, in my opinion (and also to rephrase what some others have said, my bit of mythologising for the day.)

Daniel

**Peter Hervik** [Peter.hervik@imer.mah.se](mailto:Peter.hervik@imer.mah.se)

Dear List,

I am a Danish anthropologist (PhD 1992) that has worked in Mexico and on the mass media in Denmark. I did fieldwork among Yucatec Mayan speakers looking at— among other things - the articulation between self-identification and external categorization. This interest also led me to a study of the Maya in the National Geographic Magazine and from there to media anthropology. I then used insight and experience gained from my work in Mexico in two anthropological research projects on the Danish media's coverage of ethnic issues. An important aspect of this work has been to interview readers and journalists not only about ethnic minorities in the country, but also about how they perceive people in non-Western countries. I am currently employed at Malmö University in Peace and Conflict Studies and Political Anthropology. Among the courses I teach are "War and the Media," "Enemy Images", and "The Experience of Violent Conflict." More generally I am also working on neo-nationalism, neo-racism, ethnicity, populism, political communication, team research, and the relationship between media coverage and popular consciousness.

In my latest major research project I looked at how the Danish media covered religion starting May 15, 2001. Just two days into the project a huge story broke out about a few young Danish Muslims with Pakistani background had "infiltrated" Danish political parties. The project led to the book long report "The Muslims of the Media. Anthropological Investigation of the Media's Coverage of religions in Denmark." Unfortunately for this network it is in Danish but below I give you a link a 5 page summary. This publication contains a separate chapter on Jyllands Posten's coverage of Islam in the summer of 2001. Also, my previous book "Den generende forskellighed" (The Annoying Difference) contains a chapter on yet another anti-Muslim story that ran for three weeks in Jyllands Posten in the late 1990s.

Ironically, my work "Muslims of the Media" has been blacklisted (in nationalistic parlance this qualifies as "censorship") by most of the Danish news media. My research revealed that the news media had played a not very flattering role in ousting the young Danish-Pakistani

politicians from national politics using accusations that they were fundamentalists, supporting the Taliban, supporting the regime of late Ayatollah Khomeini (who of course is Shia and the Danish Muslims with Pakistani background were Sunni) and the death penalty. These false allegations originated in pseudo-scientific/journalistic research carried out by so-called hate mongers of nationalist persuasion (who at the same time claim they are socialists). Denmark's Radio took over some of this "research" including its hostile sources. Some of you probably have experienced similar responses to your news media research. A cursory look reveals that about 9 out of 10 studies critical of the news media in Denmark are not covered by the media itself, which again is supported through personal communication with other researchers of the news media.

I have been extremely happy to read about the comparative events suggested by many of you. This is very useful for my thinking, although in some cases the cases differ substantially and do not fall into the same category of events. Also interesting is the theoretical takes offered from different angles such as Barthes, Laclau, and Bakhtin to mention some. They are not all equally appropriate it seems to me, but simply trying to use these ideas is a good constructive exercise and helpful for further clarification.

Kambiz Kamrani writes that he finds himself in a catch 22 situation: "Adamant about respecting cultural relative beliefs such as iconography, I too am equally adamant about preserving a semblance of free speech." I think you are building a straw man or at least a false catch 22. The "freespeech" focus comes originally from government spin-doctors and the discourse of justification launched by the leadership of Jyllands Posten to save face, which again set the agenda for much of the popular consciousness. Consequently and not very surprisingly many Danes subscribe to the free speech aspect, which helps them to place the blame outside Denmark's borders. Fortunately, some prominent scholars and politicians have not fallen for the argument and like - Condoleezza Rice – stated with unusual clarity that you can't use freedom of speech to legitimize such disrespectful, offending acts.

What most of you probably do not know is that Jyllands Posten has a decade long track record of bringing journalistic articles, pictures, editorials and comments with anti-Islamic content. Politics in Denmark is saturated with populism. Thus, if you ask for nuances in the debate, you are immediately accused of political correctness or being a so-called "halal hippie." This type of rhetorical attack was launched by the Premier Minister as a "culturewar" (much like what you have seen in American politics from where the inspiration originated) and reinforced the asymmetrical relationship between native Danes and the country's Muslim population. (Approximately 200.000 Muslims live in Denmark of which maybe 25-30.000 are "truly" Muslim believers).

Jyllands Posten's editorials in 2001 are filled with offensive, confrontational language when dealing with Islam, such as comparing young Muslims in Denmark with the Taliban fighters (there were seven such editorial in the span of three months). Words like despicable, unenlightened, obscure, not trustworthy, middle age, and abominable were repeated again and again in articles and editorials. In addition, the political commentator of the newspaper situated the story of the young Muslims within Huntington's framework conceptualizing the events in Denmark as a clash between unbridgeable cultures. It should also be noted that several journalists working for Jyllands Posten opposed confrontational offensive editorials and the flirtation with ultra-right views of Islam as well adoption of American narratives about culture clashes.

More specifically – in the archives of the newspaper - Kurt Westergård who drew the “ticking bomb” cartoon has been employed by Jyllands Posten for a number of years and indeed on previous occasions drawn offensive cartoons. One drawing from August of 2005 depicts a Muslim with a ticking bomb in his turban.

I should also add that Jyllands Posten did its own “commemoration” of 9/11 in 2005. The front page had a large headline: “Islam is the most violent[religion].” The story was based on one source, a PhD. student in parents, who had analyzed historical texts, compared them and concluded that today also, Islam is more violent than other religions.

It must be added that Jyllands Posten is no exception in the Danish press, when it comes to bringing anti-Muslim representations during the last decade. In fact, there is a general anti-Islamic sentiment in the majority of the Danish news media and in the Danish population (see the report on Denmark from the EUMC, see below).

I can't go into much detail here although this constitutes the “anthropological thick contextualization” but one needs to look at the historical emergence of neo-nationalism and neo-racism in Denmark since the early 90s. Instead I refer you to a book chapter in a forthcoming book in English listed below. I was running two research projects (1996-1999 and 2001-2003) precisely during two crucial historical moments in the Danish history of media coverage of Islam. First, the spring months of 1997 when the tabloid paper, Ekstra Bladet teamed up with the newly formed Danish People's Party in the same neo-racism grounded campaign launched to gain readers and voters. Secondly, in the summer of 2001 the story on the young Muslims made anti-Islamic sentiments peak – once again. By 2001 more than 80% (!) of the Danish voters saw the relationship between native Danes and non-western immigrants (Muslims in particular) as unbridgeable. My Swedish colleagues predict that this figure would probably come out around 50% in Sweden. Muslims are the “unruly guests” who refuse to downplay their annoying differences, thus they upset the native guests and causing all kinds of problems. For the long-time effect of this media coverage on popular consciousness see my article in Ethnos 2004. Details below.

You don't have to be a Muslim in Denmark to realize and experience discrimination and racist statements against Muslims. Allow me to quote the beginning of the forthcoming article:

“In November 2001 Denmark went through an election campaign for Folketinget (the Danish Parliament) and local government. The key theme of the campaign leading up to the election on 20 November was immigrants and refugees. Here are some quotes and paraphrasing of opinions presented to the press during the months prior to the election:

‘Muslims are just waiting for the right moment to kill us.’ Mogens Camre, MP, Fremskridspartiet (The Progress Party)

‘Certain people pose a security risk solely because of their religion, which means that they have to be placed in internment camps.’ Inge Dahl Sørensen, MP, Venstre (Denmark's Liberal Party)

‘If you try to legislate your way out of these problems [Muslim organizations], it is a historical rule that rats always find new holes, if you cover up the old ones.’ Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, MP, Socialdemokratiet (The Social Democrats)

‘We need to prevent immigrants and their descendants from finding their spouses in Turkey, Pakistan and Somalia.’ Birthe Rønn Hornbech, MP, Venstre

‘After nine years with Nyrup [the former Prime Minister] refugee and immigrant problems are bigger than ever. More than every second immigrant is without work. The number of people under the family reunification law is increasing and increasing. Danish values have come under pressure from fundamentalist groups... Second-generation immigrants are responsible for adisproportionate share of crime and violence in Danish society.’ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Venstre”

Many more such statements could be added. At the EUMC website you can see the national reports research on racism. Most of them talk about strong polarized even vulgarized “us” “them” relations that as we all know is the basis needed for nationalism and racism to flourish and become strong and have consequences.

So, there is a general very Islam critical – even enemy image of Islam – in Denmark. The Muhammad cartoons must be seen as embedded in this development and a sort of extreme expression of this. Free speech is indeed used to legitimize an intended provocation.

It has been argued that people around the world protesting have misunderstood what was the intended purpose of publishing the cartoons including testing the “self-censorship” as Jens described. But they have not misunderstood the hostile sentiment salient in Danish society. Most Danes miss this point it seems, including Jens. And Jens, does it then matter much that “they” haven’t seen the drawings? Does it matter that people have not understood what went on in the production side of the drawings including the alleged intentions to test “self-censorship”? Here, I refer to an important principle in the original British cultural studies approach. Whether are presentation is distorting “reality” is perhaps not so important to study or to become the object of moral outrage and indignation, but rather that the drawings themselves are reality and have an effect regardless of the distortions or wrongly understood intentions.

Besides, let us also not be too ethnocentric here. For many of us(anthropologists) have been documented how the West have (mis)represented the rest of the whole in all kinds of ways. (See for instance Collins and Lutz study of the National Geographic Magazine).

By the way I am happy that Jens uses quotes around “self-censorship.” Although not discussed the question seems to be how and to what extent is not wanting to draw Muhammad self-censorship? I think this kind of choice of terminology only appears within a strong nationalists discourse.

Another comment directly to Jens (whom I should say, I don’t know apart from the network). Jens wrote “I find these cartoons remarkably innocent. ”First of all you must include the pragmatic dimension to your reflection and not reduce your reading to the semantics. What was the purpose of this communication? How is it seen from the receiving side? Second, your own “heroic” perception (sorry Jens) is irrelevant. How can you find the cartoons innocent when they offend so many people and lead to such global and violent consequences? Is this perhaps another expression of “Danish humor or irony” as some have argued including the Danish Premier Minister in his search for effective spin? The “ticking bomb” it was claimed expresses irony. “That is part of being Danish.” But how can it express irony when Muslims in fact are seen asa “ticking bomb?” Even in the same newspaper. One should also remember that Jyllands Posten is the most widely read newspaper in Denmark and the most powerful. I

have so many other comments, questions and issues that I want and need to have discussed, but let me stop. I would appreciate all comments.

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I am thrilled to see yet an attempt on the list at contextualizing the Mohammed cartoons. As Peter Hervik among many things addresses my last input in some detail, I feel compelled to reply to some of it in turn. Regretably I don't have resources to write at a length or in detail comparable to what Peter has provided.

First I want to say that my last go on this thread was at heart a plea for social contextualization of the cartoons, which I found missing both in the discussion on the list, and in what is available in other discussions on the incidents to which I have access. Those who have been tuned in to this list for some time will know that 'contextualization of media' is a preoccupation that I have more generally, and (crudely) usually I can't get enough of it. In this regard, my intervention about the cartoons is old hat.

Next, for the record, I also want to contextualize my commentary slightly further in terms of my personal background, in extension from Peter's mail. I completed my Ph.D. (centered on Internet usage and change) in anthropology with the Danish Research School of

Anthropology and Ethnography last Fall, and have lived in Denmark for a number of years (I was born and raised there), although these days I reside in Canada for family reasons. In this way I am quite familiar with the general populist/anti-immigration scene in Denmark that Peter describes from personal experience, which, in a word, sickens me when I don't anthropologize/exoticize it. Indeed, my wife (and so our children) are 'visible minorities of Asian descent', and so we (they) have had a share of first hand experiences with that side of Denmark while living there. I point this out, as Peter's mail could be read to imply that I in some way endorse the populist/ xenophobic sentiments and rethoric that abound in Denmark (intentionally or not - if I get you wrong here I apologize Peter). let me be quite clear, that is not at all my agenda.

Turned around, I think it undermines sustained critique of those sad circumstances in Denmark, if one is taken to task for endorsing them, just because one doesn't embrace conservative cultural-relativist('Halal-Hippie', cf Peter) critiques of them whole-heartedly either. I think it would be ridiculous to claim that Danish Nationalist Populisms the only form of populism involved in the cartoon incidents (a reason I speak of them in the plural), and in my view populism is a fair target for criticism no matter what particular expression it takes (- which, in the passing, is a reason Jyllandsposten's ostensible intent with the cartoons may be seen, and indeed is seen, as having some merit, although I hasten to add that I think it would be misguided to see this as 'the main' or only axis of discussion. It is certainly not the main point I want to pursue here).

This being a general orientation of mine, let me comment more pointily to Peter, who in a passage I find captures what I here want to comment on, wrote:

- > Jens wrote \_\_\_ I find these cartoons remarkably innocent. \_\_\_
- > First of all you must include the pragmatic dimension
- > to your reflection and not reduce your reading to the
- > semantics. What was the purpose of this communication?
- > How is it seen from the receiving side? Second, your own
- > \_\_\_heroic\_\_\_ perception (sorry Jens) is irrelevant. How
- > can you find the cartoons innocent when they offend so
- > many people and lead to such global and
- > violent consequences?

I think generalizing notions such as "THE receiving side" in this quote, and more widely in your intervention Peter (e.g. with reference to Lutzand Collins), are characteristic of many social science approaches to media, and they are as problematic as they are simplistic. THIS was at the heart of my last mail. In this regard, I in fact think that my own 'gut feeling' as a 'participant-observer media consumer' (the fact that I as a consumer find the cartoons quite innocent) is not entirely without merit, although clearly my reading is only one among many possible - and none of which can be reduced to 'pure semantics' (clearly there is no such thing in social practice, a point which the structural approaches that I wrote my last mail 'against' miss out on).

The point I sought to make extending from this, was that there is more to the seemingly 'global' upheaval unfolding in the media, than simply Danish arrogance and an undifferentiated crowd of muslims being 'offended'. I can think of media's thirst for picturesque sensations(all the 'less offended' who stay home don't sell tickets); and I can think if a variety of other local populist agendas and stages than the Danish one(s), where the cartoons take on 'pragmatic dimensions' as you put it, that are quite different from the one I assume you are referring to (i.e. Jyllandsposten's, and even within Jyllandsposten one could

perhaps question whether there is just one single pragmatic agenda). So, without in any way taking a defensive stance on behalf of Danish populists and xenophobists, I think we need to be careful not to unintendedly rehearse the kind of 'Halal-Hippie' arguments that populists thrive on attacking, by denying that the present cartoon hype is also occasioned (among other things) by various islamist populist agendas and the many local experiences of hardship they presumably cater to.

At least I find it hard to make anthropological sense of people burning embassies and flags in the Middle East and in South East Asia exclusively in terms of the cartoons or Danish populist sentiments. I think 'Danes' need to be a little more modest, despite the present worldwide attention that gives Denmark and Jyllandposten all the credit! Although I am content to turn the present 'global', (at least in terms of media) attention to local use against nationalist and xenophobic populism in Denmark, and for that matter against Jyllandposten. And as anthropologists I think we should be more ambitious when approaching media, and not so readily adopt the kind of gross generalization that is characteristic of so many other approaches to media (let alone the media themselves).

As I see it, the distinguishing strength of field work based anthropology is the potential for truly contextualizing media engagements as they unfold in social practice, among concrete people, who in the sum of things have many other things on their agendas than cartoons and Danish insults (Thank goodness!), which in turn inform their 'consumption' of them. As Peter, I feel I have far from exhausted what I would like to say on this one here, but (I assume like most of us) I need to be pragmatic with commitments apart from my email so I will end here. Thanks for the attention, and I am happy to have made your acquaintance Peter!

Best regards, Jens

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**Deborah Woodell** [woodell@rowan.edu](mailto:woodell@rowan.edu)

As a media person, I wonder, What do folks here think about the controversy surrounding the subsequent publication of the cartoons, with respect to the telling of the news? In addition to my adjunct post, I work at the Philadelphia Daily News, and our sister publication/main competition published one of the offending cartoons with the caveat that one cannot report the news sufficiently without showing the cartoon(s). The publication sparked protests in front of the building, during which someone noted that newspapers seem capable of reporting on child pornography without having to resort to visuals. At what point do you think newspapers switch from merely telling the news to drawing attention to themselves?

Deb

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**Brian Moeran** [bdm.ikl@cbs.dk](mailto:bdm.ikl@cbs.dk)

I have been following the discussion with some interest, following my return to Denmark last week after a year in Japan, and would like to thank all those concerned for contributions that have been extremely interesting and thought provoking. I am particularly grateful to Jens and Peter, both Danes, for making points that I had been fumbling with in my own mind without being able to express them so clearly or eloquently.

The idea of "freedom of speech" propounded by the mass media should, I think, always be treated with a certain skepticism, given that those media are funded by advertisers and that they still present "news" that is planted by government and business organizations (witness the lead-up to the Iraq War and the reporting of 9/11, plus company PR that passes as "financial news"). However, as a non-Dane living in Copenhagen and not fully conversant with the nuances of the Danish language, I do feel it is very important to recognize Peter's point that "freedom of speech" is not just a red herring in this particular media debate; it is a red herring in the operation of Danish society as a whole. As I have discovered to my own disadvantage in the past, any written word of criticism of Danish society on the part of *any* foreigner (of whatever colour or creed) is met with a torrent of abuse and demands that one return to whence one came.

Do members of the list think there is any point in trying to pursue this discussion through their own national media? If so, I would ask that they please do so. If not, we need to ask "why not?" If the answer is something along the lines of "my country's media would never publish any criticism of this nature," then we have to ask ourselves a few more soul-searching questions about the power of the media and possibilities of resistance. And when those questions lead to no answers, other than the palms of our hands facing upwards in resignation, what then?

Brian Moeran

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Porcelainshaven 18A, DK 2000 Frederiksberg,  
Denmark

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**Brian Moeran** [bdm.ikl@cbs.dk](mailto:bdm.ikl@cbs.dk)

Deborah, the answer to your question is, surely, "all the time" -- precisely because every newspaper has to position itself vis-à-vis its competitors every day, as well as attract the necessary advertising.

Moreover, "telling" the news is one thing; stepping back, taking stock, reflecting upon and analyzing it is quite another!

Brian

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**Sarah Pink** [S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk)

This discussion seems to me to be raising important questions about how anthropologists can participate in public debate, which are relevant more generally. Just to pick up on a few comments so far: Brian Moeran has just urged anthropologists to engage with our own national media; Mark Peterson pointed out that when anthropologists collaborate with media we are inevitably going to be working in frames already established by the media; and Peter

Hervik demonstrated how when an anthropologist's analysis is critical of media then it might be sidelined anyway. Have any anthropologists become engaged with the issue of the cartoons in amore public domain? (perhaps in Norway?)

Sarah

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**Guido Ipsen** [guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de](mailto:guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)

As an answer to Deborah's question, I should like to point out the importance of what Peirce calls "collateral experience". In short, the interpretation of an information depends on the experience that may be connected to the issue in question. Child pornography, e.g., is, as a term, easily interpretable only as a term. A "Mohammed cartoon" or "Mohammed caricature" is too lofty a term. it requires more collateral experience to correctly interpret the term.

Hence, I perceive the newspapers' claim that we have to see the cartoons as valid. Otherwise, there would be a need for an alternative description, in high detail, in a verbal form. Child pornography also sometimes requires verbal explanation, and in very rare cases I have seen sample images in newspapers (with the victims made anonymous). However, I think that all of this goes beyond the Muslim perspective in the first place, as also a very positive image of Mohammed would be an offense.

As a semiotician, however, I find the discussion ridiculous. As we know as media psychologists as well as philosophers, the "idea" is already mediated in the mind. The proscription of visual imagery is off the point, as we may mediate Mohammed in so many different ways: or maybe the Koran is just not flexible enough to embrace the modern world of the media. As an example: Is the collage of letters, a smiley and a few strokes in the attachment an image of Mohammed?

Best, Guido

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**Mark Peterson** [petersm2@muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

Back when I was a grad student and newly minted PhD I was still a working journalist with the Washington Press Corps, I was often asked to colloquia on this issue of anthropology participating in mediated public debate.

Some has been published:

1991 "Aliens, ape-men and whacky savages: Anthropologists in the tabloids." *Anthropology Today* 7(5): 4-7. Reprinted in Benthall, Jonathan. 2002. *The Best of Anthropology Today*. Routledge. Pp. 161-171

2001 "Making It Public: Anthropology and the Media. Review of the AAA 99th Annual Conference, San Francisco, 15-19 November 2000. *Anthropology Today*, 17(1): 25-26.

1993 "Anthropology and the fourth estate. Report on the Royal Anthropological Institute's 150th Anniversary Symposium." *Anthropology Today* 9(4): 20-21.

I've presented at least five other papers that have not been published. I attach one from 1993. My last contribution to this issue was organizing, co-chairing and serving as discussant at an invited double session of the National Association of Practicing Anthropologists entitled "Anthropology's Public Face: Encounters with the Media" at the 2000 American Anthropological Association annual meetings in San Francisco. Co-organizer Merry Brunns and I toyed with the idea of editing a volume on this topic--Altamira expressed interest--but it just never gelled.

Every session had its cheerleaders, people who tried to claim that if we could just write better, the media would flock to us. But most of us with direct experience in journalism felt differently. I noted at the 2005 AAA meetings in Washington a session on the same topics hitting most of the same themes we touched on five and ten years ago: the media doesn't need our insights, they already have sources; media frames tend to be co-optive; anthropology's counterintuitive arguments tend to get marginalized or radically recontextualized if they are used at all; what stories they come to us for comments on are determined by frames they have about anthropology ("primitive," "exotic"). Obviously, some of this will be different in Scandinavian countries where anthropology, I'm told, is a very popular undergraduate major.

Mark

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**Daniel Taghioff** [danieltaghioff@yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)

These are very interesting questions about media and anthropologists, and the problems of questioning cultural assumptions, when they form much of the basis of journalistic communication, as well as having a bearing on circulation figures. However, I'd like to point out there are some shades of grey between, 'mainstream' media and discussion lists like this:

Take for instance Fred Halliday's article on the topic we are discussing, found on Open Democracy: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/blasphemy\\_3262.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/blasphemy_3262.jsp)

And the many articles from academics that have accompanied this. Perhaps one of 'us' (the virtual tribe of media list totem) with experience of the Danish context, or the middle Eastern context of response, should submit something, although the moment has cooled somewhat (the media being a fickle dancing partner.)

Here is info on how to write for them: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/about/write\\_for\\_oD.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/about/write_for_oD.jsp) Plus they have discussion forums, but we have one of our own already -(-);-)We could treat it as an experiment of sorts...

Daniel

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**John Postill** [jpostill@usa.net](mailto:jpostill@usa.net)

Yes, I agree entirely with Daniel. I think that's a good example of the kind of web space we could share with colleagues in other fields.

John

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**Yazan Doughan** [yazan@soas.ac.uk](mailto:yazan@soas.ac.uk)

I'd like to thank everyone for a very engaging discussion, particularly Peter for his account on Danish media representations of Islam. I would like to have heard more from him about why he finds some of the references I have made irrelevant. I also have to agree with Jens that the Danish populism is the only one involved in the whole issue, Islamist populisms are certainly just as involved.

As for Guido's last post, it seems to me it was mis-informed. Contrary to popular belief that Islam prohibits the representation of animate objects, particularly prophets and saints, the truth is that the matter is much more complicated. What is clear is that the Quranic text in itself does contain any such prohibition. The ban on such representation in the Islamic discourse is usually based on the Hadith (purported oral traditions of Muhammad) and the Sirah (his purported acts) which serve as the prime context for the interpretation of the text. However, there is also evidence from the Hadith and Sirah that Muhammad did not mind such representation including having it in his own house. Historical evidence suggests that the ban had actually taken place much later in Islamic history and was pragmatic decision to prevent the worship of idols, but later became a tradition. In a sense, Islamic iconoclasm is akin to that of the Jewish tradition and the Byzantine Christian. Nonetheless, this was not practised throughout Islamic history or equally in different places. For example, Iran and Central Asia seem to have been more liberal than the Semitic parts of the Islamic World in that respect. Similarly, Shia heterodoxy was more liberal than Sunni orthodoxy. As far as I know, images of Muhammad as well as the Imams Hassan and Hussein (sons of Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son in law) are in use today in Iran. Even in the Sunni tradition there have been cases of visual representation of the Prophet (e.g. Rashid al-Din's 'Compendium of Chronicles' <http://www.lacma.org/khan/4/popup3.htm>). More importantly, what is prohibited in mainstream Sunni Islam today is not the representation of Muhammad as such but rather the mimetic visual representation, which in Peircian terms would be one particular type of signs: 'icons'. Therefore, I don't find reference to Peirce of much relevance here.

For a good introductory account of the issue of representation in Islam, I can suggest two references:

Grabar, O. (1973) 'The Formation of Islamic Art' New Haven; London: Yale Uni Press (Particularly ch.4: Islamic attitudes towards the arts) Arnold, T. (1928) 'Painting in Islam' Oxford: Uni Press

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**Guido Ipsen** [guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de](mailto:guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)

A comment here to Yazan's opinion:

- > As for Guido's last post, it seems to me it was mis-informed. Contrary
- > to popular belief that Islam prohibits the representation of animate
- > objects, particularly prophets and saints, the truth is that the
- > matter is much more complicated.

I presumed so. But, since Yazan assumes that references to Peirce are of no relevance, may I add that his elaboration of the development and interrelatedness of Islamic visual representations of animate objects and religious figures is a mapping of the semiosis of these signs; hence Peirce is relevant here. Also, his brief survey shows that it is by no means only one class of signs (hypoicons of, e.g., Mohammed, not icons) which may or may not fall under the proscription.

I still find the question relevant who decides what kind of representations are banned and which are not: a question concerning the nature of the representations in question. In the case of the Danish cartoons, the proscription is, in effect, a proscription of discourse, and that is why the issue of freedom of speech is concerned. "Certain things must not be drawn". Apart from the difficult task of telling apart what is a belief and what is a statement of extremist position, I find the fact compelling that discourse on the cartoons is governed by those who are, in effect, extremist: It were them who triggered the protest (and in the end caused the loss of lives, which we all should be concerned about. This is NOT an intellectual playground).

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A final statement, in the humorous spirit of our Danish colleagues: As the theoretical discussion on this board assures me that I may perceive the otherness of religious fundamentalism as something rightful as well as a just cause, I have now decided that I will also turn religious. I just bought myself a copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. /I appreciate it's not a piece of enlightened literary culture, but what the heck. I just learned I don't have to be enlightened to be respected. I will now gather a group of people who share my religious zest and I think we shall in the future accuse people of turning our milk sour, causing us misfortune, and we will maybe also torture and burn somebody once in a while. After all, we will be able to claim that we may cause a few deaths, but in no way are we as degenerated as the so-called enlightened Europeans who produced industrialized mass murder. We shall then bring the entire thing to the media, maybe have our own TV channel. I will gladly accept anybody's offer to discuss my beliefs seriously in talk shows, and we will make it to the title pages of the globe's press by burning flags of countries that do not accept the Lord's prime rule. And naturally we will also have a series of religious mainstreams, and maybe a few liberal believers (who will not find my appreciation, however), so that others may discuss that we're not just a monolithic bunch of religious fanatics, but a multifaceted group of religious enthusiasts. Then, believe it or not, media anthropologists will step in and they will actually ignore all this stupid mindless crap, they'll put aside their own enlightened position (at least for a while) and, wow, they'll even appreciate our belief! We will also demand that the US President will have to come to Europe, cross the Alps on his bare feet and ask the Pope for forgiveness, as was custom in the good old Middle Ages when worldly rulers had to abide by clerical law. Maybe I can also convince the Pope to take back this preposterous acceptance of Galilei's heresy, who indeed believed the Earth was not the center of the universe - it's ridiculous. Oh, and then women. They should wear a scalf, all the time, after all, as they should hide their shame from the Lord.

Please, anybody who would like to join me in my newly discovered interest in non-enlightened discourse, come and have as much fun as I will have. We will be the subject of serious investigation and if we are lucky, there will be even some professorships denominated for our newly-formed world religion. We just have to be enough people not to be ignored. Furthermore, I hereby declare that freedom of speech is only valid in the delimitations set by the Old Testament, where people who disagree with the Lord will soon perish....

Cheers, Guido

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**Mark Peterson** [petersm2@muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

Let me add to Yazan's list the following:

Bakker, Freek L. 2005. The image of Muhammad in *The Message*, the first and only feature film about the Prophet of Islam. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7(1) 77-93

This paper covers the tremendous efforts the international crew underwent to get approval from Al-Azhar and the Sh'ite Council in Lebanon (also the two groups Abu-Laban says his group originally showed the binder of cartoons to), their efforts to stay within the fatwa, their ultimate failure (although this feature-length movie about the prophet does not at any point represent the Prophet), and the controversies that followed their decision to release it anyway.

Also useful is Asad, Talal (1990) *Ethnography, literature and politics: Some readings and uses of Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses*. *Cultural Anthropology* 5(3): 239-269.

Asad is exceptionally good at demonstrating the extent to which most of the protests about Rushdie's portrayals of the prophet (which, intratextually, were part of a madman's drug-induced dreams and hence not really representations of the prophet at all) were very much about other issues for which the garbled accounts of Rushdie's work allowed people to coalesce and rally.

Mark

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**Sarah Pink** [S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk)

The Media Anthropology Network list is in the news, "Anthropology News" that is, see <http://www.anthro.uci.edu/html/News/MarcusAN.pdf> I'm definitely not suggesting we start a self-reflexive discussion about the role the list is playing in contemporary anthropology, but Marcus's comments do bring to the surface the idea that we are engaging in an emergent form of academic media practice

Sarah

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**Mark Peterson** [petersm2@muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

"constructing anthropological knowledge" no less!

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**John Postill** [jpostill@usa.net](mailto:jpostill@usa.net)

----- Original Message -----

Received: Thu, 16 Feb 2006 08:45:03 PM GMT From: Jay Ruby

<[ethnographic@EARTHLINK.NET](mailto:ethnographic@EARTHLINK.NET)>To: [VISCOM@LISTSERV.TEMPLE.EDU](mailto:VISCOM@LISTSERV.TEMPLE.EDU)

Subject: Web Site CAMERA/IRAQ <http://www.camerairaq.com>

The Cinema and Media Studies Department at Carleton College in Minnesota has created a website, CameraIraq.com, which gathers news and commentary about public and personal photographic image practices associated with the "war of images in the Middle East." Items in their collection include photos of the dead bodies of Saddam Hussein's sons, the beheading of Nick Berg, the Bush "Mission Accomplished" photo op, and a variety of real and faked images depicting human rights abuses, atrocities and other staples of wartime propaganda.

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**John Postill** [jpostill@usa.net](mailto:jpostill@usa.net)

Dear all,

A warm welcome to Sean Jacobs (Michigan) and Wallis Motta (UCL) who've recently joined the list. I'm planning to close our ongoing session on the Danish cartoons tonight at around 10 pm Central Euro Time. Erkan Saka, who started this discussion, has kindly agreed to sum up the discussion and offer some concluding remarks, and Peter Hervik will also try to send in some final thoughts. You're all welcome to do likewise by writing directly to [medianthro@abyznet.net](mailto:medianthro@abyznet.net) by 10 pm CET.

We'd then like to make a PDF of the discussion transcript, headed by Erkan's summary, and post it on our Mailing List webpage. This is the second unplanned discussion we post, the first one was on the definition and purpose of media anthropology, see <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/maillinglist.htm>

If any participant would like us to omit their contribution from the PDF please drop me a line off-list.

Best

John

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**Peter Hervik** [Peter.hervik@imer.mah.se](mailto:Peter.hervik@imer.mah.se)

Dear list,

There are two lingering two more items that I would like to address and clarifying the Cartoon discussion here on the verge of closing the debate.

First Yazan suggesting that Baudrillard's notion of seduction could be useful for understanding a "never ending game of reciprocal exchange\*" Yazan is also evoking both Laclau and Bakhtin, whom I can't comment on here. Bakhtin's "dialogues" by the way seems to be a perfect fit for analyzing media-bites with reported speech and images, written by different authors. Without knowing the details of Baudrillard's talk of seduction, I feel uncomfortable with the metaphor, since it may hide the relations of power between Jyllands Posten and the target of its alleged "irony." Jyllands Posten is the largest paper here and the economically most powerful. So, you have a powerful institution insisting on its free speech right to offend Muslims in Denmark in its paper. Nothing can stop them from doing it. But ethnic minorities in Denmark certainly do not have access to a national audience. Who ever

Baudrillard is letting whom seducing whom, it doesn't work so well. Perhaps this would be different if any Muslim journalist worked for Jyllands Posten.

Second, there have been some scattered remarks on populism and the insistence that there is different (Arabic) populism involved as well. I don't know what "Arabic populism" is, like how many kinds and what they look like and so on. But I do know something about populism in Denmark from research. Generally, it has involved since Denmark experienced a gap between politicians and the population during the two Maastricht treaties in 1992 and 1993. 5 out of 6 politicians recommended a "yes" during the first of two referenda. This gap was then used by the press 5 years later when the tabloid paper, Ekstra bladet teamed up with Danish People's Party in the same populist campaign against foreigners and immigration politics (1997): For "the people" against "the elite" who had betrayed "the people." The corners of this triangle evolved since. "The people" is strictly speaking the supporters of your view. The elite - whose politics were seen as naive and "political correct" ignored the "real" problems concerning immigrants (we later learned the real problems are the "ticking bombs") and the immigrants who insisted on their rights and then took our money culture from us.

Another side to "the people"'s corner of the populism triangle saw the light in 2001, when Anders Fog Rasmussen came to power. He brought a new strategy of political communication with him inspired by Blair and Clinton, and behind them Gould and Giddens. Now you know where I am heading. Contract politics, design politics, focus groups and a whole new way of approaching the media. No visions just do and say to the media what the focus groups tell you. If you have a spin doctor, he would prepare three punch lines for you whenever you are interviewed.

Now turn to the governments' spin strategies used for damage control once there actions to the Cartoons began.

- 1) maintain that this is a question of "free speech" (debate transforms into "we have free speech and they don't")
- 2) Blame the imam travelling to the Middle East (A classic spin: if you are attacked, do not become defensive, but counterattack). This diverts attention from blunder of not meeting with the ambassadors in the early phase of the case.

There are two more strategies, but I need to stop. The point is here to highlight what the government spin doctors are doing and then seeing to what extent it has been successful. And in the Danish and Swedish population it worked. In terms of media anthropology, this relationship between political spin and popular consciousness \* for me at least \* is an important issue to be addressed.

**John Postill** [jpostill@usa.net](mailto:jpostill@usa.net)

Dear list,

I'd like to close this session on the Danish cartoons issue by thanking all participants for a superb discussion. Erkan Saka will be posting his summary and final remarks shortly.

Best wishes John

**Erkan Saka** [erkan@rice.edu](mailto:erkan@rice.edu)

Istanbul, 19 February 2006 **Summary and Concluding Remarks** of an EASA Media Anthropology Network e-discussion on the Danish Cartoon Row  
By Erkan Saka

I would like to thank John for pushing me to start this discussion:) In my humble opinion this discussion has three main avenues to continue and explore. First of all and with much more space, contextualization of the cartoon debate is discussed. Secondly, there is brainstorming of how can anthropologists intervene publicly to this row and finally, though with relatively little discussion, the role of IT/new media is mentioned.

## I

Started by Jens, there is the need to immediately contextualize the cartoon row so that “cartoons will be situated more in terms of the actual contexts and event(s) that brought them about in the first place, as well as in terms of the subsequent events that, as it turned out, yielded them wider attention...” Anthropologists have to shift the debate that is cast in terms of 'purely theoretical' terms, structural/general principles, e.g. 'freedom of expression' versus 'cultural relativism', etc to actors' intentions and thus we will be able to escape from reifications of religion or other possible fields of conflict. It is to our benefit that the discussion immediately brought observations from Denmark, Jordan, Japan, China, Spain, Iran, Canada etc. and I will prey upon the Turkish case a little bit later. Jacky (Sutton)'s feedback from Iran is one of the attempts in line of Jens' perspective. “Hamshari's Holocaust Cartoon Competition has moved debate away from the legal right of Freedom of Expression and editorial independence to the political manipulation of democratic freedoms. It's not a particularly novel position - governments all over the world are doing it...”

Peter (Hervik) strongly supported Jens' position and gave us insider's knowledge about the Danish context: “It must be added that Jyllands Posten is no exception in the Danish press, when it comes to bringing anti-Muslim representations during the last decade. In fact, there is a general anti-Islamic sentiment in the majority of the Danish news media and in the Danish population....One should also remember that Jyllands Posten is the most widely read newspaper in Denmark and the most powerful...” Brian (Moeran) agrees with Jens and Peter in the way the Danish scene is contextualized.

“As I have discovered to my own disadvantage in the past, any written word of criticism of Danish society on the part of any foreigner (of what ever colour or creed) is met with a torrent of abuse and demands that one return to whence one came....”

It is in this sense Brian (Street) stated that “an anthropological perspective would unpack 'offense' and differentiate the kinds of concern individuals might feel at different representations.... we might need to differentiate these from institutionally and ontologically more grounded conceptions of being which the cartoons of Mohammed evoke and which are of a different order...” As a rhetorical move Brian suggested we can defend ourselves pointing out ethnocentrism of those who might attack anthropologists as relativists...

## II

Anna (Horolets) is another contributor in favor of immediate contextualization. But she also begins to point out anthropologists' ambiguous state of being vis a vis the intense news flows: “As far as the position of anthropologists in such debates is concerned, it seems to be quite an

ambiguous one. On the one hand, anthropologist is expected to take press discourse seriously, or alternatively take a stand on the public issue. (Taking it seriously could be difficult if one reconstructs the emergence of the texts and all the sequences). On the other hand, with a lot of sensitivities to the constructed nature of the events and a tendency to give complex rather than straightforward answers, most anthropologists are doomed to be unheard in the public debate. Most answers that are heard are political (or political science). Perhaps, it's a hasty generalisation though....”

John (Postill) contrasts temporalities of academia and 'the media'. But he is more optimistic about anthropologists' possible contributions referring to new media: “But I'm wondering whether we're forgetting that the web operates at many different speeds. Wouldn't it be perfectly feasible to publish online anthropologically informed pieces on (re)current affairs at our own pace? Journalists would then come to our archives as well as referring readers/viewers to our website.

Mark (A. Peterson) lists all the possible contexts, situations and actors and the complexity of the cartoon row in a global scene: “Each of these vents--the Danish controversy between the imams and some members of the Danish press, the publishing of the cartoons, the delegations by the Imams to Egypt and Lebanon, the reproduction of the cartoons, the various responses from boycotts to riots--are separate events. They are linked by the cartoons, and in many cases probably merely by oral reports of the cartoons. The links--actual flows of people and signs from context to context—are important, and need to be described, but so do the local contexts.” However, Mark is not very optimistic about how anthropologists can contribute to media production. Referring to the way journalists produce knowledge all events for instance listed above will be “reified by Western media accounts as a single "affair...” What the media does is reify all these events into a single event, which can then be labelled (as free speech vs. respect for religious beliefs, or whatever)...”

Simone Abram also hesitates about contributing media: “One of the dangers of speaking to the media as an "expert" is then one answers their questions; from within their frames, rather than the kinds of questions one would ask as an anthropologist...” She is cautious to be involved with media production: “In order to offer any in-depth understanding of such complex issues, the ground needs to be prepared in an appropriate way, and that is unlikely to be in the context of media escalation. (When is an audience likely to be receptive to a considered academic response to a crisis?)

### III

Jerry Eades moved the discussion to another venue and pointed out the role of IT/New Media in mobilizing protests. He also emphasized the role of media men in coloring and spreading the news... Although this may not be a direct engagement with what is in the agenda, I believe the whole issue of new media is crucial to our understandings and they can open up new opportunities for us in our public interventions. Daniel (Taghioff) would later emphasize Jerry's points and would ask “as a counterpoint, I wonder what debates in multi-ethnic democracies with large Muslim populations, such as Indonesia, or India look like: Is our sense of a 'global event' here mythical in the face of diverse commentaries?... And as anthropologists, with 'local' concerns, how do we cope with such rapid and broad responses: Aren't new media making our job harder for us? How do we avoid reifying, but cope with such wide ranging co-ordination?”

I liked John's reference to a classification of iconoclasms. Yazan's and Mark's references to the history of iconoclasm in Islam were really informative. But I believe the iconoclasm

debate or let me say Yazan vs. Guido polemic (!) wasn't too productive. In fact, Daniel and Kira's contributions enriched the dialogue and honestly if Guido did not repeatedly try to kill the debate this line of dialogue could be more productive. I think I understand Guido's concerns but I cannot believe any of the network members are into burning embassies or into doing similar activities. So there is no need to play the "law and order" representative here. Then I take Guido, whom I found very informative in previous e-seminars, enacted the role of Danish PM Rasmussen or a member of freedom of speech side to demonstrate how we can engage with the world of media? In his person, then, we attempted to challenge the dominant media patterns (!). In a final note here, Guido's suggestion to give up Barthian understanding of myth, the distinction between denotative and connotative meanings is ok with me. But this seems to be contrary to his argumentation in general. To give up this distinction will open up radically new interpretation, a moment that Deleuzian impacts will penetrate into the interpretive processes and in the end this will be an even greater blow to a traditional enlightenment position Guido seems to support...

I tend to be more optimistic for future media interventions. Daniel asked "aren't new media making our job harder for us?" I would like to argue that new media is a double edged phenomenon. It can be a tool for promoting our attempts of intervention. Just to give an example of what I am trying to say, I would like to state that my blog was quoted by Financial Times, Jan 9 for something I wrote on bird flu epidemic in Turkey. Yes, I wasn't identified as an anthropologist there but let's think it could be a sign of what can be done in future. I have been thinking of writing a paper on blogging and fieldwork and I will be giving more examples there but let me say that since last September I have corresponded with many scholars, journalists or mere citizens all over the world who found me through my blog writings. I believe anthropologists have to be more careful than ever on discovering and appropriating emerging social and cultural phenomena for their own purposes... I believe exactly in this sense Daniel's post on "common ground" gives theoretical insights for our interventionists attempts.

For the Turkish context, as far as I could observe, no newspapers thought of publishing them. There was a surprising consensus among the country's elites and population in stating their discontent on the use of "freedom of expression" to justify the publication of insulting cartoons. However, PM Erdoğan had a joint statement with his Spanish counterpart in order to appease the row.

As far as I could observe, there were no violent protests that could be compared to what happened in other countries with Muslim majorities. Active protests were led by ultranationalist groups and cartoon row immediately turned into a pretext to attack the EU. Islamic groups later began to takeover leadership but I feel like the heat of row is already gone by now...

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