

**Cartoons and global media events:
Constructing the free speech spectacle**

Review by

Muzammil M. Hussain

[University of Washington](#)

***Transnational Media Events: The Mohammed Cartoons and the Imagined Clash of Civilizations*, by Elisabeth Eide, Risto Kunelius & Angela Phillips (eds.). Goteborg: Nordicom, 2008. ISBN 978-91-89471-64-1. 290pp.**

The twelve editorial cartoons printed in September 2005 by Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten (then reprinted globally by others) sparked a transnational reaction of anger and outrage in the Muslim world that was unexpected. Following the violence and burning of embassies, the Danish Prime Minister termed it the worst international relations incident for Denmark since World War II. Since then, questions, curiosities, and concerns have abounded regarding the roots of such frustration in Muslim communities, European nations' growing challenges in accommodating minority immigrant populations, and the scope of free speech within multicultural liberal democracies. Responding to such needs, the editors of this volume have assembled an impressive collection of perspectives and findings to address these and other concerns. Thus, the main focus, as implied in the title, concerns refining our approaches towards understanding global media events taking place in increasingly internationalized media systems.

Accordingly, the fourteen chapters of this book approach the Muhammad cartoons as a case-study in two important ways: first, by articulating and understanding what happened, how, and why; and second, by using this event to develop our scholarly understanding of transnational media events, and the factors that increasingly shape them today. Some chapters, for example, are more concerned with explaining the roots of certain grievances, while other focus on more conceptual questions such as thinking about what constitutes transnational/global public sphere(s). The chapters are

organized in three sections, though one can read them in different orders as they both compliment each other thematically, or add perspective analytically. In this sense, there is clearly and active collaborative dialogue present in the book. This is not surprising, and reflective of the dialogues that were surely required for such a transnational volume to be produced and compiled.

Part one includes three chapters, which provides the theoretical framework and organization, then introduces the reader to the temporal messiness reflective of a global event, followed by exploring the symbolic ambiguities of the cartoons themselves. After the introduction by the editors, Hervik, Eide and Kunelius (Chapter 2) identify the difficulty in marking the beginning of the story about the cartoons and what ensued. But they identify at least three ways of doing so: one could narrate the story from when the cartoons were published. Or, start a few weeks before, when a Danish author had difficulty finding an illustrator for his children's book on the Quran and Prophet Mohammed. But one could also start the story at the point Jyllands-Posten's sought forty-two cartoonists for submissions. As they point out, where one chooses to start the story shapes our understanding of who acted, and who reacted, which also influences how different audiences decided whom to blame. Alhassan (Chapter 3) then takes a semiotic approach and discursive inquiry to deconstruct and unpack the cartoons. The discussion is especially good in illustrating the cartoons' levels of interpretive ambiguity (from patently antagonistic, strategically ambivalent, to having meta-commentaries). With different levels of ambiguity, more "frames of meaning" are available to readers than intended by the cartoonists (expanded on further by Hahn's discussion on polysemic images in Chapter 11).

Part two focuses on more professional issues regarding news management, journalistic discourse, and the surprisingly homogenous global framing of the event with the dominant "freedom of speech" frame. Hervik (Chapter 4) identifies that although free speech was not the key issue at the beginning, it quickly became one following governmental spin to manage the ensuing crisis. Kunelius and Alhassan (Chapter 5), like Hervik, also think through the idea of free speech, and offer a four-dimensional

framework to understand how free speech spaces can be created in liberal democracies and “struggles over communicative rights [can] take place.” In the remaining chapters of part two, we see both these earlier chapters’ theoretical frameworks applied at different capacities. Phillips (Chapter 6) and Becker (Chapter 7) examine the transnational flow and variations between different countries’ news cultures in negotiating free speech versus multiculturalism issues. Craft and Waisbord (Chapter 8) then conclude by comparing US and Argentine coverage, finding that journalistic norms and values hindered domestication and localization of the story (despite significant local Muslim populations) and therefore maintained it as an international controversy.

The last part of the book, detailed with the richest analyses, moves towards focusing on the intercultural and transnational interpretations of the cartoons, bringing in perspectives from Denmark, Egypt, Argentina, Pakistan, Canada, and more. Eide (Chapter 9) observes the event through the concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism. By some, the latter concept of Occidentalism is argued to offer a process of liberation (through completing the process of decolonization), but others share concerns of generating less tolerance and a “clash of civilizations.” Next, Saleh (Chapter 10) explores Islamic identity more centrally and the social and political context of some Muslim societies which informs our understanding of their grievances in more detail. With Boe and Hervik (Chapter 12) and Phillips and Nossek (Chapter 13), we return to a Euro-centric perspective to observe how press coverage attempted to foster “integration through ridicule” of outsiders into insiders. The latter also illustrate that rather than simply vouching for free speech, the press was also engaged in a complex negotiation with the boundaries of national identity. In the remaining chapters, Kunelius and Nossek (Chapter 14) draw together the insights from part three, theorizing them as media spectacles under the rubric of transnational public spheres, and Peters concludes by suggesting a reconsideration of liberal philosophy of free speech to be more open to global diversity.

As has been previewed, this volume on the Mohammed cartoons and transnational media events is loaded with rich analyses, mixed-methodological, and even multiple

epistemological approaches to understand an important and complex phenomenon. It is well suited for any reader interested in understanding the nuances and difficulties being faced by European nations dealing with changing demographics and increasingly multicultural environments. Conceptually, the volume makes effective use of the case-study to ask and address questions regarding global media events and transnational public spheres. The theoretical offerings of this collection are also reflective of the international cast of authors, and help deliver a more global understanding to a truly transnational media event.