The Journalism School
Knight Case Studies Initiative
Columbia University

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# Caricatured: *Le Monde* and the Mohammed Cartoons
# Teaching Note

## Case Summary

Over the last several decades, increased flows of both people and information across national borders have complicated the reporting of controversial issues. News outlets must take into account the information needs and cultural values of diverse local populations. At the same time, circulation of news online makes it hard to determine where the audience begins and ends. How can news outlets address a potentially global audience, while remaining culturally sensitive to the many factions within it?

This case explores how one newspaper, the French national daily *Le Monde*, confronted these issues when deciding whether or not to republish controversial cartoons depicting the Muslim prophet Mohammed. By February of 2006, the effects of the cartoons' original publication in Denmark had been percolating in the Muslim world and throughout Europe for several months. Diplomatic pressures on Denmark's government by local and foreign Muslim leaders as well as violent protests in several Muslim countries had forced a domestic Danish affair onto the world stage.

France had seen its own share of sectarian violence over the previous several years, culminating in 2005 riots on the outskirts of Paris, so *Le Monde*'s editorial staff has no doubt the cartoon controversy is legitimate news. But how to cover it comprehensively and fairly presents a major challenge.

Students follow the decision-making process of *Le Monde*'s chief editors as they weigh their options. Is not publishing the cartoons a concession to those who would limit free speech—or is it a show of respect for the beliefs of a religious minority? If they do not show the cartoons at the heart of the controversy, how can readers make up their own minds on the issue? Does *Le Monde* have a responsibility to publish the cartoons out of solidarity with news organizations that have already done so?

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Editors buy time by commissioning an original cartoon about the controversy itself. But as other major dailies in Europe begin to republish the original cartoons, pressure mounts at *Le Monde* to do the same.

## Teaching Objectives

Use this case to foster debate about the role of a political cartoonist; news organizations' responsibilities to their increasingly diverse audiences; self-censorship; covering religion; how online circulation of published material—especially graphics—changes the game of journalism; and how a news outlet's relationship to its competitors can affect decisions about how to cover controversial material.

The case highlights ways news outlets must juggle conflicting responsibilities to their audiences. On the one hand, *Le Monde* feels a strong sense of obligation to inform its readers about the controversy. Showing the cartoons is a key part of that. On the other hand, as cartoonist Plantu points out, the cartoons may be humiliating to a large French minority. Is showing them strictly necessary if it risks offending this population? Students should consider whether the responsibility to inform readers in this case outweighs the obligation to avoid potential insult to a subset of that readership.

Ask your class to discuss the role of the political cartoonist. Is a cartoonist essentially the same as an editorial page columnist, or is the role somehow different? Plantu says that a cartoonist's job is to be provocative, arguing, "We have to goad, we have to disturb, we have to exacerbate, we have to be violent." Do students agree? Encouraging critical thinking is a worthy goal, but how do cartoonists and their editors avoid unnecessarily offending people, especially minorities? Should they even worry about causing offense? Students can debate whether or not certain topics should be off limits for political artists, and what these might be.

The case can also be framed as a conflict between competing values of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. While these principles may have rarely conflicted in periods of greater domestic homogeneity, as audiences diversify, news organizations confront questions of when to self-censor to avoid offense. This case highlights that question, as news outlets from *Jyllands-Posten* to *Le Monde* must consider whether it is more important to exercise their right to publish the cartoons as a matter of principle, or if doing so unnecessarily offends a particular religious group.

The case also raises the question of whether upholding principles should even be a primary concern when doing so may have serious practical consequences, like propagating hatred or violence. The case concludes with some editors arguing that the principle of free speech must be upheld. Other editors argue that the practical matter of causing offence and, possibly, violence should outweigh more abstract concerns about principles. Ask students to consider who is right in

this situation: Should values like freedom of speech trump practical concerns about potentially inciting violence or lending fuel to anti-Western sentiments abroad?

All of the questions raised by this case are further complicated by the frictionless circulation of potentially offensive material online. When the case begins, the publication of the cartoons in other European countries has already been blamed for deadly riots in the Muslim world. From a Western point of view the riots may seem an overreaction; nonetheless, they raise very real concerns about the potential consequences of publication, both domestically and abroad. Is it capitulation to extremists to take into account the possibility of violence—or is it the responsibility of every news outlet in a globalized world? Plantu points out that images are especially powerful, and online they can be manipulated and interpreted anew in different contexts.

The case also highlights questions about reporting religion more generally. In a national environment already primed for religious conflict, to what degree should *Le Monde* take recent immigrant riots and anti-Muslim sentiment into account in their reporting on the cartoons? *Jyllands-Posten* editors argue that they initially printed the cartoons to raise awareness about self-censorship, to "start a community conversation" about artists afraid to discuss or represent certain aspects of Islam. Is it the responsibility of news organizations to host such a conversation? Ask students to consider how journalists should cover religion: is anything off-limits? Is fostering debate about religious beliefs a valuable goal for a news organization? How do you report on specific aspects of a belief system when doing so may be offensive to the believers themselves?

Finally, the case raises questions about the relationship among news outlets. *Le Monde* feels pressure to take a stand on the issue because other publications in France and elsewhere have done so. Does *Le Monde* have a responsibility to show support for other news organizations who have printed the cartoons and faced persecution as a result? Or is the real question one of competition? Other papers have seen spikes in readership when they printed the cartoons—can *Le Monde* afford to miss this opportunity? Or does taking into account the decisions of other news organizations mean capitulating to outside pressures rather than doing what they believe is right?

## Class Plan

Use this case in a class on political cartooning; international media; religion reporting; or ethics.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) Should *Le Monde* publish some or all of the cartoons? Why or why not?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions:* The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80–90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) There is little doubt that *Le Monde* editors have the legal right to publish the cartoons, but they are torn over the ethical implications of doing so. What are the key ethical issues they should take into account when making the decision? List on board.

b) Should *Le Monde* republish the original cartoons? Ask for a show of hands. Either call on students to defend their positions individually, or set up a debate. List arguments for and against on the board (f.ex. responsibility to inform readers vs threat of humiliation to subset of readers).

c) Discuss the role of political cartoonists and other opinion journalists. Plantu argues that they have a responsibility to disturb and provoke, but they also have the potential to humiliate and offend. Should satirizing some topics, such as religion and ethnicity, be off-limits for political cartoons in mainstream publications?

d) The publication of the cartoons had already provoked bloodshed in other parts of the world. To what degree should *Le Monde* take this into account in its decision to publish the cartoons?

e) At the end of the case, some editors argue that because they are in France, where they have freedom of speech, they must publish the cartoons on principle. Others argue that there is no reason to fan the flame of controversy. Who is right?

f) Was JP's publication of the original cartoons a legitimate way of "starting a community conversation" about free speech and religion, or was it a deliberate provocation? Is it the role of news organizations to start conversations—or to provoke action—over controversial issues such as religion?

g) A number of publications decide to republish the cartoons to show their support of *Jyllands-Posten.* Do news outlets have a responsibility to stand in solidarity with other news outlets in cases like this—especially across national boundaries?

h) Should *Le Monde* feel more or less pressure to republish the cartoons once other major news outlets in France and elsewhere have done so? Consider questions of competition; accessibility of the cartoons to the public; support of other outlets; and *Le Monde*'s reputation as a politically moderate paper of record.

i) *Le Monde* is owned by its journalists, but the most important decisions are made by a small, often like-minded group. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of concentrating decision-making power in so few hands. Greilsamer wants to consult with *Le Monde*'s Middle East correspondents. Is this enough, or should additional views be considered?

j) Consider the editorial team's decision to commission the Plantu cartoon. What are the pros and cons of doing so?

## Suggested Readings

Tony Dokoupil, "Newspapers are killing cartoonists—another brilliant business move," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 11, 2007.

SYNOPSIS: Author Dokoupil provides good food for thought on the editorial cartoonist's role in American journalism and political discourse. He notes, "Cartoons excite readers in ways that editorial essays can't. Their simple strokes allow complex ideas to bypass the mind and *kaboom* through the nervous system, offering instantaneous understanding, and depending on one's personal politics, an unalloyed dose of pleasure or pain."

http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/newspapers_are_killing_cartoon.php

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John Hansen, "The editor and the 12 cartoons," *Jyllands-Posten*, December 18, 2005.

SYNOPSIS: In this interview published in his own paper, Carsten Juste, *Jyllands-Posten* editor-in-chief, describes the decision to commission the Mohammed cartoons, his reasons for refusing to apologize for them, and the threats his staff has received as a result. He explains that despite accusations to the contrary, their intent was never to provoke the Muslim population, but instead, "to find out whether self-censorship exists in Denmark to a greater degree than generally acknowledged." For all it is intended to clarify the decisionmaking process, students may find this interview raises more questions than it answers about the true intent behind the cartoons' publication.

http://jp.dk/udland/article177647.ece

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Phillip Hensher and Gary Young, "Does the Right to Freedom of Speech Justify Printing the Danish Cartoons? When one person's liberty collides with another's values, there is no clear occupant of the moral high ground," *The Guardian,* February 4, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: British critic Hensher and *Guardian* columnist Young debate one of the central questions of this case. While acknowledging that some of the cartoons are in poor taste, Hensher argues that journalists' capitulating to pressures from conservative factions in the Muslim world would be a blow to democratic values in the West and a boon to anti-democratic forces elsewhere. Young counters that there is no doubt newspapers had the right to publish the cartoons, but that nonetheless they were wrong to do so. Citing routine anti-Muslim racism in Europe, he argues that had another group been offended by the publication of the cartoons the journalism world's response would have been more conciliatory. Students and instructors will find their views helpful in forming their own points on the case.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/feb/04/mainsection.garyyounge

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Jytte Klausen, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: In this comprehensive scholarly book, Danish-born political scientist Jytte Klausen systematically examines how the publication of the Mohammed cartoons led to a worldwide controversy. Based on interviews with Danish journalists, European Muslim leaders, and Middle Eastern politicians, she ultimately concludes that the violence that arose was more orchestrated than spontaneous. The book's publication caused a minor controversy of its own when Yale University Press chose not to reprint the cartoons.

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Lawrence Pintak, "Western, Arab Journalists Miles Apart in Cartoon Rift," *Columbia Journalism Review,* February 3, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: Reporting from an *Al Jazeera*–sponsored conference for international journalists, the author provides welcome counterpoints to the more European-centric arguments Juste and Fleming give for publishing the cartoons. He quotes a variety of views from Muslim leaders and journalists, including those who see an anti-Muslim conspiracy at work, and others who argue that publishing the cartoons is simply playing into the hands of fundamentalists.

http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/western_arab_journalists_miles.php

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Flemming Rose, "Why I Published Those Cartoons," *Washington Post,* February 19, 2006, p. B1.

SYNOPSIS: *Jyllands-Posten* culture editor Flemming Rose here explains the wider Danish context for the publication of the cartoons, listing recent examples of artists and authors fearful of making open statements about Islam. In this thoughtful op-ed, he argues that the media should be on guard against "calls for self-censorship on the grounds of insult," noting that, "this is a popular trick of totalitarian movements." He further notes that the publication of the cartoons has brought about widespread debate over free speech and religious freedom—the paper's original intent.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499.html

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Sten Rynning and Camilla Holmgaard Schmidt, "Muhammed Cartoons in Denmark: From Freedom of Speech to Denmark's Biggest International Crisis Since 1945." *UNISCI Discussion Papers,* May 2006.

SYNOPSIS: In this article for UNISCI, a scientific journal on international relations and security based out of Madrid's Complutense University, scholars Rynning and Holmgaard Schmidt explore the consequences of the cartoons' publication for Danish businesses and international relations. This piece is a helpful reminder of the very real consequences editorial decisions can have for domestic and foreign affairs.

http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/pdf/767/76701102.pdf

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David Wallis (Ed.). *Killed cartoons: Casualties from the war on free expression.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

SYNOPSIS: In the introduction to this collection of cartoons "killed" by American newspapers, Wallis argues that news outlets have become increasingly timid about printing provocative material. The collection includes several American cartoons drawn in response to the Mohammed cartoon controversy. Individually the cartoons in this book raise questions about where to draw the line between potentially insulting subsets of the public and raising awareness of complex issues. The collection as a whole paints a picture of an American press far more cautious than the European press outlined in this case.