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The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics 2007; 12; 131
DOI: 10.1177/1081180X07307869

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<http://hij.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/4/131>

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Facing the Muhammad Cartoons: Official Dominance and Event-Driven News in Swedish and American Elite Press

Adam Shehata

Past research has shown that official actors have an advantage when it comes to accessing and framing political issues in the news media. This study examines the dynamics of official dominance and event-driven news from a comparative perspective, focusing on the Muhammad cartoons controversy. A model of official dominance and event-driven news, taking media system factors into account, is developed and tested using a quantitative and qualitative research design. The results show that an intolerance frame dominated over a freedom-of-speech frame in both the Swedish and the American elite press. Furthermore, although dramatic events opened windows of opportunity for unofficial actors, the consequences of intensified coverage for the ratio between unofficial and official voices were more profound in the United States. Finally, there is some evidence of more active journalistic framing in the Swedish papers.

Keywords: *framing; indexing; event-driven news; objectivity; journalism; comparative research; news coverage; Muhammad; cartoons*

Research has yielded substantial support for the claim that official actors have a significant influence over how events and issues are framed in the news media. Studies of the relationship between journalists and sources, for example, have disguised the inherent dependency that binds official actors and journalists (Cook 2005; Gans 1979; Sigal 1973). In simple terms, the sources provide the information and raw material required by journalists to perform their jobs, whereas the media offer the most important arena for political actors who want to reach a mass audience. Modern journalistic norms and values regarding objectivity, combined with practical constraints surrounding their daily work, have meant that journalism has become highly dependent on official sources for the collection and validation of information. Sometimes the news-gathering process

Press/Politics 12(4):131-153

DOI: 10.1177/1081180X07307869

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is even described as a negotiation of newsworthiness between journalists and political actors (Cook 2005; Tuchman 1978). This systematic advantage in media access is therefore translated into influence, according to this body of research (Campbell 2004: 86).

Occasionally, however, the routine pattern is broken by sudden changes caused by dramatic events that alter journalistic news criteria regarding what voices to include in the news reports on a given topic. Such changes might open a window of opportunity for unofficial voices to challenge frames promoted by official actors (Bennett and Livingston 2003b).

The purpose of this article is to comparatively investigate the dynamics of official dominance and event-driven news by studying a political issue that gained considerable attention worldwide in the first months of 2006: the controversy that followed the publication of 12 cartoons in late September 2005 in the Danish daily *Jyllandsposten*, depicting the holy Muslim prophet Muhammad (Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006; Rynning and Schmidt 2006). This issue was characterized by a clear framing contest involving different actors, as well as dramatic events, including mass demonstrations and the torching of embassies. The controversy finally became a global foreign affairs issue and a crisis in some countries—particularly for Denmark—pitting at least two deep-rooted and widely held values against each other: freedom of expression and religious tolerance.

This article studies the issue of official dominance and event-driven news; it uses a comparative design and focuses on elite papers in Sweden and the United States. Theories regarding official dominance and event-driven news were developed within an American context, thereby leading to questions concerning their validity in other countries.

Official Views and Independent News

The official dominance model has been the prevailing perspective within the field of political communication when it comes to issues of influence on media content. In other words, official political actors and sources within established institutions in society possess a certain amount of leverage with reference to defining problems and therefore shaping the terms of policy debates (Anthonsen 2003; Bennett 2007; Bennett and Livingston 2003a; Entman 2004; Gitlin 2003; Hallin 1986; Riegert 1998). Hall and his colleagues argued almost 30 years ago that official actors were the primary definers of political issues. That is, their powerful position in society offered them advantages in accessing the media and influencing subsequent discussions (Campbell 2004: 86; Hall et al. 1978: 55ff.). Another important contribution to the official dominance model originates from work done by Bennett (1990). News coverage, according to Bennett, closely follows the arguments and actions promoted by key actors in the political system. The presence or absence of established opposition voices to administration policy—most important, those coming from Congress members in the

United States—is the most crucial factor influencing whether the news media will present views that challenge those held by the administration. In Bennett's own words, "mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government and debate" (106).

The mechanisms behind official dominance can be understood through the lens of Hallin's model of spheres (1986). According to Hallin, journalistic norms, such as objectivity and balance, are put into practice only under specific circumstances, depending on the level of conflict and consensus surrounding the issues at hand. He argues that journalists strive for objectivity only when dealing with topics that are within a sphere of legitimate controversy. For other issues—belonging to either a sphere of consensus or one of deviants—balanced reporting is not regarded as being necessary. It is quite reasonable that journalists use the indexing mechanism to evaluate the legitimacy of a controversy. When making decisions regarding how to cover a story, journalists consciously or unconsciously evaluate the level of conflict surrounding the issue within established political institutions. Legitimacy is based on the presence of critics within those institutions. In contrast, critical voices outside these institutions are not regarded as being legitimate when their views are not backed up from inside.

The official dominance model does not, however, cover the entire picture. Despite the bias of official voices, several studies have suggested that critical voices may, under certain conditions, enter news coverage despite the absence of open conflict among official sources (Entman 2004; Lawrence 2000; Wolfsfeld 2004). A central tenet in this research is the focus on what has been called *news waves*, *political waves*, or *media waves* and how these waves create a window of opportunity for unofficial actors to influence news coverage and voice alternative problem definitions. Therefore, this theory is also called the *event-driven model* (Bennett et al. 2006). For example, in her work on police brutality Lawrence develops a model based on a distinction between institutionally driven problem definition and event-driven problem definition (Lawrence 2000). Institutionally driven news is officially dominated "routine news," pegged to the daily activities and debates within major political institutions. Event-driven news and problem construction, on the other hand, are "cued by the appearance of dramatic news events erupting within or outside these news beats and the story possibilities that those events present to journalists" (173). Therefore, dramatic events triggering significant media coverage actually increase the opportunities for marginalized groups to voice their concerns. Furthermore, Entman (2004) has shown that a substantial amount of critical problem definitions may enter news coverage on foreign policy matters even if a strong consensus exists within the domestic political elite. These alternative perspectives stem from foreign sources ready to challenge American policy.

Rather than view the official dominance and event-driven perspectives as two opposing theories, one should see these as complementary models. Such a view draws attention to the dynamics of news coverage and to questions regarding the conditions under which the news is dominated by official problem definitions and when unofficial voices may enter the news. As stated by Bennett and his colleagues (2006: 469): "What becomes important for theory building is to understand more precisely the limits of indexing and the room provided by events for more independent press framing."

Framing Politics

The notion of problem definition is closely related to another concept that has gained significant scholarly interest during recent years, namely, framing. A long tradition of agenda-setting research has focused primarily on the relationship between issue salience in the media and issue importance among the public (McCombs 2004; McCombs et al. 1991). Framing research is more interested in the selection and emphasis of different aspects or perspectives on a given topic that are made consciously or unconsciously (Callaghan and Schnell 2005; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; D'Angelo 2002; Entman 1993; Ghanem 1997; Neuman et al. 1992; Patterson 1993; Reese 2003; Reese et al. 2003; Scheufele 1999).

Many framing studies focus on how political issues are covered in the news or are adopted and promoted by various actors. The view offered by Graber (2006: 161), for example, is that framing concerns "reporting the news from a particular perspective so that some aspects of the situation come into close focus and others fade into the background." The notion of a frame as an organizing idea or principle (Gamson 1992: 3; Gamson and Modigliani 1989: 3) that structures and organizes stored as well as incoming information illustrates the potential power and consequences of frames. Gitlin (2003: 7), when writing about social movements some thirty years ago, argued that

frames enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences. Thus, for organizational reasons alone, frames are unavoidable, and journalism is organized to regulate their production.

It is important to note that framing is as much a consequence of political factors described in the previous section as it is one of media-related factors, including journalistic norms, practices, and technological constraints (Delli Carpini 2005; Iyengar 1991).

The connection between primary defining and framing is clarified in Entman's classic working definition of framing (1993: 52). According to Entman, framing

is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” for the item described. Problem definition is the most important function of the frame because it predetermines what follows (Entman 2004: 6). The struggle over problem definitions is crucial for those who want to influence policy making and public opinion (Callaghan and Schnell 2001; Fridkin and Kenney 2005; Gabrielson 2005; Levin 2003). As Pan and Kosicki (2003: 40) have stated,

framing is an ideological contest over not only the scope of an issue, but also over matters such as who is responsible and who is affected, which ideological principles or enduring values are relevant, and where the issue should be addressed.

Bennett (1994) and Norris et al. (2003) distinguish between one-sided and two-sided information flows, where the former characterizes a situation where one frame totally dominates the political discussion whereas a two-sided flow denotes a competitive environment with two frames. Depending on the specific flow of information, the salience of different frames and actors may vary.

Comparing News in Different Countries

Theories of indexing, official dominance, and event-driven news were developed within an American system of press and politics. How valid these models are in other countries is, of course, a question that should be addressed in empirical research. A growing body of literature has stressed the importance of doing comparative research to determine how national and institutional settings influence political communication processes and outcomes (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 2004; Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Hallin and Mancini 2004a; Semetko et al. 1991). It might be the case that differences at the institutional level affect the mechanisms described by theories of indexing, as well as the dynamics of official dominance and event-driven news.

The comparative focus of this study is centered on what are sometimes referred to as “quality” or “elite” papers in the United States and Sweden. From a national perspective, these papers can be thought of as functional equivalences; that is, they have similar roles within the information systems in their countries (Wirth and Kolb 2004: 88) in the sense that they are both “quality” papers. However, comparative perspectives on political communication draw attention to the structural and institutional settings that affect the operation of aspects such as news production (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Hallin and Mancini 2004b). In the words of Donsbach and Patterson (2004: 252),

Western journalists operate in societies that are not identical in their press histories and traditions and in their media and political structures. These differences can be expected to produce differences in the way that journalists see and do their jobs.

Thus, despite being functionally equivalent, quality papers in the United States and Sweden might differ in important ways. Hallin and Mancini (2004b) provide a comparative framework that is valuable when thinking about system-level differences that might affect issues related to news coverage. The two media system dimensions of particular importance in this study are the development and nature of the newspaper industry and the level of journalistic professionalization. I argue that these might very well affect how the papers acted when faced with the controversy surrounding the Muhammad cartoons.

Newspaper Industry

One of the characteristics distinguishing the three models developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004b) is the manner in which the newspaper industry developed. In Sweden—and other countries belonging to the democratic corporatist model—a mass circulation press was an early development. Even today, Sweden is one of the countries with the highest levels of newspaper consumption (Hadenius and Weibull 2003: 402; Hallin and Mancini 2004b: 23). The United States—perhaps the most typical case of the liberal model—also developed a mass circulation press at an early stage but has lower newspaper sales per one thousand adults than Sweden does. Thus, it is possible to characterize the democratic corporatist countries by high newspaper circulations, whereas the liberal countries are distinguished by medium newspaper circulations (Hallin and Mancini 2004b: 67). Additionally, in spite of the fact that all the newspapers involved in this study may be regarded as elite papers within their own media systems, their market share and relationship to actual and potential readers might affect editorial decisions. Entman (2005: 59) states that a

media organization's market position affects what it does and how it does it. For instance, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post* achieve much of their economic value by refusing to cater to the average member of the public's limited interest in political and policy details.

Similarly, Underwood (2001: 103–4) argues that when faced with increasing commercial pressures, the more prominent American elite papers have continued to focus on informative journalism for highly educated readers interested in public affairs:

A handful of news organizations—particularly some of the larger prestige newspapers like the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Philadelphia Enquirer*,

and the *Washington Post*—have rejected the *USA Today* approach and instead have decided to build readership by producing in-depth, informative journalism designed to appeal to an educated audience interested in public affairs.

By contrast, Swedish quality papers are operating within a significantly smaller market, which makes such market segmentation more difficult. In addition, according to Hadenius and Weibull (2003: 129–30), the social segregation of the press market that is present in many countries is not found in Sweden. The authors argue that “while the press system in other countries is dominated by national prestige papers on the one hand, and popular sensationalist papers on the other” (82), a strong tradition of local papers is the cornerstone of the Swedish press system. In fact, it is not common in Sweden to categorize news outlets by type of content or the readers to whom they are appealing—that is, quality or popular papers. Therefore, the Swedish quality newspapers must, to a greater extent than their American counterparts, appeal to broader segments of the market. Stated more simply, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* can be viewed as more catch-all papers than the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, despite being functional equivalents within each national setting.

Professionalization

Journalists today are highly professionalized in countries belonging to the liberal and the democratic corporatist models (Hallin and Mancini 2004b: 67; Petersson et al. 2005: 138ff.). There are common understandings, norms, and practices among journalists that distinguish them from other professionals. At the same time, some research suggests that such norms vary cross-nationally (McQuail 2000: 252ff.). For example, there are indications that journalists in the United States and Sweden have a different understanding of ideals, such as journalistic objectivity. According to a cross-national survey by Patterson (1998), American journalists adhere to the idea that objectivity refers to “expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute,” whereas Swedish journalists stress the importance of “going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute.” According to Hallin and Mancini (2004b: 226), “the dominant form of professionalism in North America is different in that it is tied to the notion of objectivity.” The authors contrast this view to a European journalistic perspective. During interviews made with American and European journalists covering conflicts in Central America in the 1980s, American journalists criticized their European colleagues for incorporating their opinions into the news stories, whereas the Europeans complained that the Americans did not exercise independent judgment and were too constrained by balance and objectivity. Differences such as these could demonstrate a heavier influence of the “he said, she said” journalism of the United States in comparison to the press of Sweden, in which journalists play a more active role in the

framing process. Before turning to these questions, I present a brief summary of the case at hand.

The Muhammad Cartoons: Actors and Frames

On September 30, 2005, the Danish daily *Jyllandsposten* published twelve cartoon pictures of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. According to Flemming Rose, *Jyllandsposten's* cultural editor, the purpose was to make a clear statement in the name of freedom of speech by challenging what he saw as a climate of fear in relation to Islam (Rynning and Schmidt 2006: 11). What followed during the subsequent months was a political struggle over not only policy but also different problem definitions between several actors. The eventual outbreak of financial boycotts, mass demonstrations, the torching of embassies, and lethal violence all around the world has been described as the most serious crisis for Denmark since World War II (Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006: 9). More important, through the lens of this study, the cartoons fueled an intensive controversy with regard to what these sketches typified.

According to Rynning and Schmidt (2006), the attention development and debate over this issue can be divided into three phases. During the first, the phase of escalation, the conflict was relatively undramatic and confined within the Danish borders. Immediately after the publication, there was no untoward public reaction, and *Jyllandsposten* received only some letters of protests. At this point, several Danish Muslim organizations met to discuss the cartoons. On October 12, eleven Muslim ambassadors wrote a letter to Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen requesting a meeting. In the letter, the ambassadors pointed not only to the publication of the cartoons but also to several incidents involving the media and other high-level public representatives, incidents that they referred to as an "on-going smearing campaign in Danish public circles and Media against Islam and Muslims" (quoted in Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006: 324). Approximately ten days later, Rasmussen received another letter, from the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which has a membership of 57 Muslim states, in which the focus on intolerance and Islamophobia in Denmark and Europe was even more explicitly underlined. The letter listed several incidents, among them the cartoons, and argued that "the Muslim Danish citizens are considerably alarmed and feel threatened in the face of this ever increasing trend of intolerance and degrading discrimination against them, in which every Muslim is treated as a potential terrorist and criminal." The letter also stated that "these dangerous developments in Denmark . . . neither will facilitate our common endeavors against xenophobia and Islamophobia" (quoted in Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006: 328). Additionally, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which is involved in fighting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims in Europe, wrote letters to the Danish government, asking for its official view on the situation for Muslims in Denmark.

Rasmussen refused to meet with the ambassadors and, in a letter written in response to the ambassadors, emphasized the importance of freedom of expression: "The freedom of expression is the very foundation of the Danish society. The freedom of expression has a wide scope and the Danish government has no means of influencing the press" (quoted in Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006: 328). Thus, during the first phase (escalation), several actors were involved in this dispute, and a clear framing contest was building up.

The second phase, internationalization, involved an international intensification of the debate surrounding the cartoons. Several Muslim organizations placed the issue on their agendas; the UN Human Rights Commission asked for the Danish view; and the foreign ministers of the Arab League criticized the Danish government in late December. The Norwegian paper *Magazinet* published the cartoons on January 10, which sparked renewed protests. Muslim leaders in Saudi Arabia encouraged a boycott of Danish goods, and one week later, at the end of January, the Saudi government closed its embassy in Denmark as a sign of protest. All this set off a chain of events that took place around the world during the following weeks. This third phase, climax and crisis management, saw some of the most violent confrontations, for example, the burning of Danish embassies in Syria and Lebanon. By the end of February, 143 papers in 56 countries had published at least some of the cartoons, for a variety of reasons (Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006: 100).

In summation, from the outset of this controversy, there was certainly a framing contest taking place. *Jyllandsposten* and the Danish government attempted to define this issue in terms of freedom of speech, posing the Muslim reactions as being the crucial problem, while several governments in Muslim countries, multiple Muslim organizations, and a variety of other actors promoted an intolerance frame, pointing to anti-Muslim sentiments in Denmark as being the fundamental problem. This study asks questions concerning how these frames were reported in Swedish and American elite newspapers and how the dynamics of news coverage made it possible for different actors to define this issue.

Research Question and Hypotheses

This article investigates the dynamics of official dominance and event-driven news by focusing on the controversy surrounding the Muhammad cartoons. Additionally, this study uses a comparative design to analyze whether national differences in media institutions might influence news decisions and the use of official as well as unofficial sources in the framing process.

The Muhammad cartoons issue had the potential to resemble a so-called two-sided information flow: There were official as well as unofficial actors promoting both the intolerance and the freedom-of-speech frame. The research question concerns the possible balance or dominance between these two frames.

Research Question: How did the American and Swedish press frame the Muhammad cartoons controversy?

Because past research on official dominance and event-driven news has pointed to the dynamics of institutional news definitions and the creation of windows of opportunity for unofficial voices when reporting sudden and dramatic events, the expectation is that the number of unofficial sources will increase as the amount of news coverage increases, irrespective of the number of official sources. This can be considered the ratio between unofficial voices and official voices. The amount of coverage is used as an indicator of opportunity windows. In addition, the impact of events on the number of unofficial sources is expected to be stronger in Sweden than in the United States, owing to the differences in media systems outlined earlier. Given that the American quality papers operate from a different market position and have a stronger focus on journalism for well-educated people who are interested in public affairs, they will not be as prone as the Swedish quality papers to peg public affairs issues to dramatic and triggering events. Having a more catch-all character, the Swedish papers must appeal to broader segments of society, with groups of people not necessarily interested in politics and public affairs, which makes the Swedish papers more sensitive to dramatic events, such as those taking place in late January and early February 2006.

Hypothesis 1: The ratio between unofficial voices and official voices will increase as news coverage of the cartoons issue increases, and this positive relationship will be stronger in the Swedish papers than in the American.

In addition, based on the alleged differences between Swedish and American news organizations in terms of the professional values and notions of objectivity discussed previously, there might be differences in the roles played by journalists in the framing process. Therefore, it is expected that Swedish journalists will be more active in defining what the cartoons controversy is really about and whether it should be understood as a freedom of speech issue or as a question of intolerance.

Hypothesis 2: Swedish journalists, as compared to American journalists, will be more active in framing the Muhammad cartoons in the defining phase of the conflict.

Method and Data

These hypotheses and the research question are analyzed by combining a quantitative content analysis with a qualitative approach. A codesheet and a

codebook were constructed and used to analyze all news items concerning the Muhammad cartoons issue published during the five months between October 1, 2005, and February 28, 2006. Two daily quality newspapers in the United States—the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—and their functional equivalents in Sweden—*Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*—were selected because they were considered to be the main national quality papers in each country. The American articles were selected using the electronic database of each newspaper. Using the keywords *Denmark* in the first round and *Jyllandsposten* and *cartoons* (using the Boolean “OR” to expedite the process) in the second round yielded 91 American articles. The keywords actually produced many more articles, but only those concerned with the Muhammad cartoons issue were selected for analysis. The Swedish articles were gathered using a manual selection procedure. All the articles explicitly concerning the Muhammad cartoons were analyzed, which involved all news items whose headlines or leading paragraphs referred to the issue. A total of 242 Swedish articles were collected.

The codesheet included several questions relevant to this study, which used each article as the unit of analysis. Every article was analyzed for the presence or absence of two frames: the freedom-of-speech frame and the intolerance frame. Specific words were used to detect fragments of the frames in the news texts. Comments such as “freedom of speech,” “freedom of the press,” and “freedom of expression” were central to detecting the freedom-of-speech frame as well as arguments about the role of independent media. The presence of the intolerance frame was coded every time the article mentioned the insulting, provocative, or offending nature of the cartoons. Contextualizing claims about discrimination or anti-Muslim sentiments in Denmark were also regarded as fragments of the intolerance frame. The coder was asked to determine the dominant frame in each article. Furthermore, the codesheet included several source variables relevant to the assessment of official dominance in news coverage. An intracoder reliability check was conducted by recoding 10 percent of all articles. The result showed high overall agreement (97 percent). The intolerance and dominant frame variables had the lowest figures, even though they could still be considered high. The dominant frame showed a percentage agreement level of 91 percent. Because measures such as percentage agreement are often regarded as being too liberal, Cohen’s kappa was calculated. This measure takes randomness into account, and it produced a satisfactory value of .83 for the dominant frame variable. The significantly lower value for the intolerance frame (85 percent and Cohen’s kappa = .78) was dealt with by joining the three-level ordinal scale into a dichotomy; that is, the absence–presence–dominance scale was transformed into an absence–presence variable. This was also performed for the other frame variable. Given that a separate dominant frame variable with a high reliability value still existed, no information was lost because of this procedure.

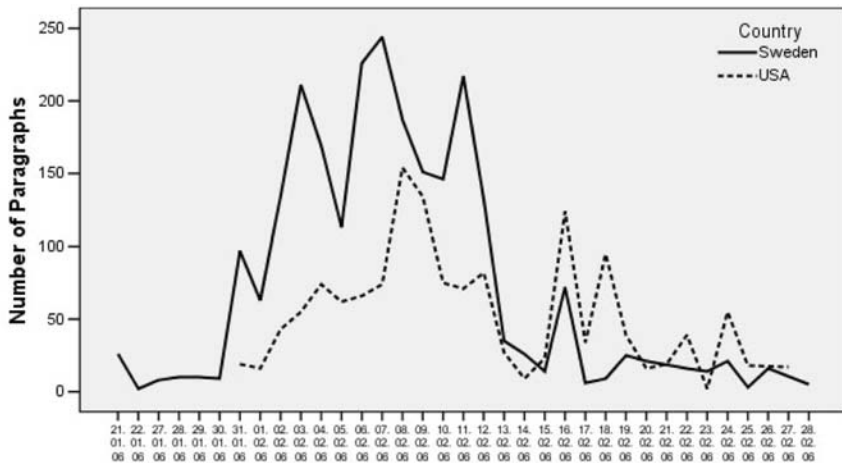


Figure 1

Amount of News Coverage in Sweden and the United States

A qualitative analysis was conducted to answer the second hypothesis, regarding the role of the journalists in framing the Muhammad cartoons controversy. This part of the study focused on what could be called the *definition phase of the issue* (Miller and Riechert 2003: 111). Included in this analysis were articles that had a “defining character,” that is, news stories where some actor attempted to frame the issue or in which a framing dispute was the primary focus. The analysis was conducted in a rather straightforward manner by constructing a simple analytic device. Whenever the freedom-of-speech frame or the intolerance frame was present, the person promoting it was noted. It was also noted whether the journalist promoted any one of the two frames without attribution to another source. This procedure made it possible to evaluate the role of the journalists in defining the Muhammad cartoons issue.

Findings

Figure 1 gives an initial presentation of the dynamics of news coverage of the Muhammad cartoons issue. Interestingly, the U.S. press published no news items on this issue during the fall of 2005. The first American articles appeared on January 8, 2006. The Swedish press had only a few “in brief” stories during this early period. Because the nature of the news items differed between the two countries in terms of article length—the average Swedish article length is 10.23 paragraphs, compared to 16.46 in the United States—the curves in Figure 1 represent the number of paragraphs involving the cartoons issue published each day. Thus, although the number of articles was much higher in Sweden (242 compared to 91), each Swedish news item was considerably shorter.

Table 1

Dominant frames in Swedish and American press coverage of the Muhammad cartoons

	Sweden	United States	Total
Intolerance	28.5% ($n = 68$)	31.9 (29)	29.4 (97)
Freedom of speech	11.3 (27)	6.6 (6)	10.0 (33)
Total	239	91	330

Table 2

Present frames in Swedish and American press coverage of the Muhammad cartoons

	Sweden	United States	Total
Intolerance	57.7% ($n = 138$)	69.2 (63)	60.9 (201)
Freedom of speech*	44.4 (106)	58.2 (53)	48.2 (159)
Total	239	91	330

* $p < .05$ (chi-square).

Nevertheless, taking the number of paragraphs into account does not change the overall finding that the controversy surrounding the Muhammad cartoons was a more significant news story in Sweden. The heavier coverage might also be explained by the greater proximity between Denmark and Sweden. In addition, the Swedish newspapers reacted more quickly and with a greater intensity when mass demonstrations erupted during late January 2006, whereas the American papers paid little heed to these events. This finding indicates that *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* were more likely to report dramatic events such as these than their American counterparts were. As will be shown, this enabled unofficial sources to voice their concern.

An Even Framing Contest?

With reference to the research question, Tables 1 and 2 display the prominence of the two frames that different actors attempted to promote during the cartoons' controversy. Table 1 displays the proportion of articles in which either the freedom-of-speech or the intolerance frame dominated. Table 2 shows the proportion of articles in which they were present. The tables display a rather clear pattern for the news coverage in both Sweden and the United States.

Overall, there are strong similarities in the Swedish and American coverage. In fact, only one difference is statistically significant, namely, the presence of the freedom-of-speech frame, which is more common in the American press. With reference to frame dominance, there are no significant differences. Most strikingly, the ratio between the frames is the same in both countries. Intolerance is clearly the dominant frame. A plausible explanation for the higher prevalence of all frames in the American press is that longer articles, by definition, should contain more information.

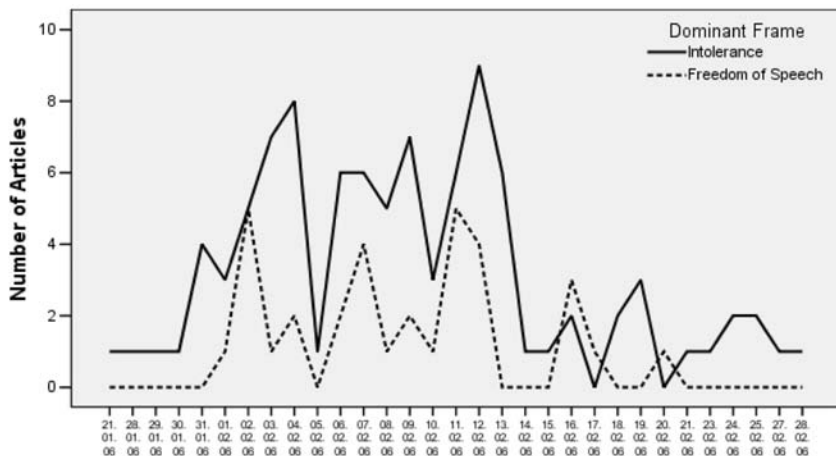


Figure 2

Dominant Frames in the Muhammad Cartoons Coverage

Figure 2 reveals the relative strength of the intolerance and freedom-of-speech frames at different points. The first notable point is that the intolerance frame dominated the news coverage from the outset. It was not until February 1, 2006, that the first article with freedom of speech as the dominant frame was published. The intolerance frame was, in fact, never really threatened from then on, apart from a sporadic shift around January 16.

Events and Windows of Opportunity for Unofficial Actors

The first hypothesis concerned the relationship between official and unofficial sources. Past research has shown that official actors dominate the news during times of routine day-to-day coverage, whereas the influence of unofficial sources tends to increase during news waves created by sudden, spontaneous, and dramatic events generally not under the control of official actors. With regard to whether this dynamic was true in the Mohammed cartoons controversy, the expectation was that the number of unofficial sources would increase as the amount of news coverage increased, even when controlling for the number of official sources. Again, the amount of coverage is used as an indicator of opportunity windows. As can be seen from the results of the overall regression model in Table 3, this part of the hypothesis is confirmed. Stated differently, the amount of coverage changes the ratio between unofficial and official voices. As coverage increases, so does the prominence of unofficial voices relative to official voices.

The second part of the first hypothesis states that the impact of the amount of coverage on the number of unofficial sources would be stronger in Sweden than in the United States. Adding an interaction term to the overall model tests

Table 3
Two regression models predicting the number of unofficial sources

	Overall Model		Interaction Model	
	Unstandardized <i>b</i>		Unstandardized <i>b</i>	
Intercept	.022	(.221)	-.389	(.350)
Number of paragraphs	.041***	(.005)	.069***	(.011)
Official sources	-.048	(.079)	-.112	(.077)
Country			.314	(.449)
Number of Paragraphs × Country			-.029**	(.011)
R ² adjusted	.459		.514	
Standard error of regression	1.422		1.348	

Note: *n* = 101. Standard errors of the coefficients are presented in parentheses. One case represents everything published in a particular newspaper on a given day, which means that number of paragraphs is the total number of paragraphs devoted to the cartoons issue by each paper on a single day. *Official sources* represents the total number of Danish government and opposition party sources, Muslim government sources, and domestic government and opposition party sources.

** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

this hypothesis. The results are presented in the third column of Table 3. The *b* value for number of paragraphs now represents the impact of the amount of coverage on the number of unofficial sources when the number of official sources remains constant, and, specifically, when the country variable is equal to zero. This is the effect in the American case, and it remains positive. The interaction term represents the difference in this effect when studying the Swedish papers. As can be seen, the interaction term is significantly different from zero, but the effect of number of paragraphs, though still positive, is weaker in Sweden than in the United States. Therefore, the second part of the second hypothesis is not supported by the data. For some reason, an increased amount of coverage—perhaps owing to sudden and dramatic events—leads to a greater change in the ratio between unofficial and official sources in the American papers.

As an illustration to these results, Figure 3 displays the relative prominence of a few types of sources during the controversy. According to the curves, the struggle for dominance appears to be even during the first couple of days. However, from approximately January 30, Danish official sources briefly gain some leverage, but there is only a limited time lapse before they are again heavily outnumbered by Muslim organizations. Overall, spokespersons for Muslim groups, many of which are local imams, clearly dominate the news coverage of the cartoons issue. Danish officials and Muslim government sources also appear frequently, but *Jyllandsposten*—the initiator of the controversy and main promoter of the freedom-of-speech frame—almost disappears when compared to other actors.

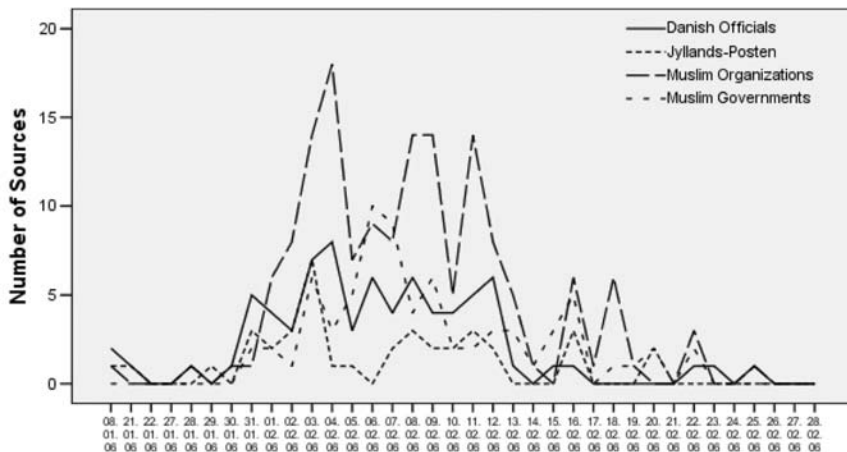


Figure 3

Sources Used in News Coverage of the Muhammad Cartoons Controversy

Role of the Journalist during the Defining Phase

The last part of this study attempts to determine how active the Swedish and American journalists were in defining this issue in the initial phase of the news wave. It was expected that Swedish journalists would show a more profound activity in defining this issue. The first American article was published in the *New York Times* on January 8, entitled "Denmark Is Unlikely Front in Islam-West Culture War." The primary definers in this article are Flemming Rose, the editor of culture at *Jyllandsposten*, and the Danish imam Abu Laban, who came to be regarded as one of the driving forces for the Muslim point of view in the cartoon controversy. Although Rose is promoting the freedom-of-speech frame and Abu Laban the intolerance frame by referring to a growing "Islam phobia" within the country, the journalist, though discussing the 200,000 Muslims in Denmark, writes that "Many of them say the cartoons reflect an intensifying anti-immigrant climate that is stigmatizing minorities and radicalizing young Muslims." Later in the article, in paragraph 11, the journalist makes his own frame contribution by placing the cartoons issue into a broader frame: "The cartoons were published amid the growth of an anti-immigrant sentiment in Denmark, reflected in the rise of the far-right Danish People's Party." Thus, although the article presented two competing actors and allowed them to define the issue, Abu Laban was not alone in setting the intolerance frame. The next American news story on this issue appeared three weeks later.

Dagens Nyheter published an interview with Carsten Juste of *Jyllandsposten* ten days before the news wave started. Despite this clear framing opportunity for Juste, his main counterframer was the Swedish journalist. Juste totally dominates

the article but is placed into a defensive position by the journalist, with the headline having a clear intolerance bias: "The Intention Was Never to Insult Anyone." Although referring to a number of actors critical to the cartoons, the journalist acts as a strong promoter of the intolerance perspective by posing questions about the insulting character of the cartoons and saying that Muslims in Denmark are an "already vulnerable group." Two or three brief articles were published in the Swedish papers during the following days, before the wave broke out on January 31. These news items focused on actions taken by Saudi officials and international Muslim organizations.

The wave occurred in Sweden when members of the Palestinian organization al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade threatened Danes and Swedes living in the area. Although the focus of the articles was the threats, the members of the brigade focused their anger on the insulting and provocative nature of the cartoons. This intolerance frame is backed up by a Norwegian peace worker who was interviewed in one of the articles as an eyewitness to the events. But the main problem-defining article in *Dagens Nyheter* on this day, again, places *Jyllandsposten* and Prime Minister Rasmussen into a defensive position, using the headline "Jyllands-Posten's Excuse Is Not Enough." Two aspects are interesting to note. First, both *Jyllandsposten* and Rasmussen, though still promoting the freedom-of-speech frame, are themselves legitimizing the intolerance frame. Rasmussen is quoted as saying that he would never portray Jesus or Muhammad in a way that would insult anyone. In addition, *Jyllandsposten's* editor-in-chief is apologizing for the consequences of the cartoons because they have "unintentionally offended many Muslims, which we apologize for." Second, the journalist himself concludes that Rasmussen's refusal to meet with the ambassadors has "insulted the Muslim world as much as the sketches." At this time, *Svenska Dagbladet* focuses less on defining the problem, whereas both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* cover the issue by relating it to the ongoing boycott of Danish goods. The conflict is reported by allowing the Danish actors to defend the freedom-of-speech frame and having intolerance voices attributed to several different actors, including Kuwait, Islamic critics, a Danish political scientist, and *Jyllandsposten*.

This pattern was repeated the following day. In a *New York Times* article, the Danish and Norwegian prime ministers defended the freedom-of-speech frame while, with *Jyllandsposten* and *Magazinet*, legitimizing the intolerance frame. Again, the journalist at *Dagens Nyheter* helps to promote the intolerance frame by using words such as *racist* when describing the cartoons and by stating that the publication was a "deliberate provocation on behalf of the paper." The paper also published an article with two Danish imams speaking on this issue from an intolerance perspective while the journalist remains passive by not raising the question of freedom of speech.

There was a boost to the freedom-of-speech frame the following day when all papers reported that additional European papers have published the cartoons as an act of solidarity with *Jyllandsposten*. The French paper *France Soir* was a

prominent freedom-of-speech promoter on this day, particularly in the Swedish press. However, both papers presented several critical voices condemning the new publications and pointing to intolerance aspects. In particular, the French Muslim leader Dalil Boubakeur, who appeared in several articles in Sweden and the United States over the next few days, gained a prominent opportunity to frame the issue. The American news stories still relied heavily on voices from both sides, but sporadic fragments of active journalism could be seen in, for instance, a *Washington Post* article headlined "Offending Cartoons Reprinted," in which the journalist writes that "many of Western Europe's 15 million Muslims feel alienated by cultural barriers and job discrimination and stigmatized by anti-immigration movements and anti-terrorism laws that they believe unfairly target members of their faith." This contextualizing claim is not attributed to any source, but it is a claim made by the journalist.

The intolerance bias lingered in the Swedish press the following days. The imbalance was upheld by the overwhelming presence of a variety of Muslim groups and local imams, while the freedom-of-speech promoters appeared to be almost completely absent. But the intolerance perspective could not be emphasized any clearer than by the Swedish journalist writing on relations between the West and Islam:

Freedom of the press may not be seriously threatened by what has happened, as some have claimed. However, one might be worried that the tolerance that we as Northerners always have praised ourselves for, is eroding. The conflict over the images has brought a lot of underlying islamophobia and xenophobia. (Winiarski 2006)

The American coverage had a much more balanced use of freedom-of-speech and intolerance promoters, most of them already established during the first days of reporting.

In summation, the qualitative analysis reveals that a few actors were key players in defining the cartoons issue during the initial phase. More important, the initial phase shows an active role played by the journalists at *Dagens Nyheter*, who were strong promoters of the intolerance frame from the outset. Such an active role was not, however, evident in the other Swedish paper, calling into question the idea that this issue was a result of cross-national differences. The two American papers appear to have more in common with *Svenska Dagbladet* in this regard; that is, all three displayed a more passive role by allowing outside actors to do more of the defining job.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study analyzed the dynamics of official dominance and event-driven news by employing a comparative research design focusing on the news coverage of

the Muhammad cartoons controversy in Sweden and the United States. Overall, the findings support the relationship found in past research, between the intensity of news coverage and the opportunity for unofficial sources to voice their concerns in the news media. Official protests and diplomatic actions during the fall of 2005 did not result in any media coverage until the actions became dramatic and violent. The events of mass demonstrations, threats, and violence toward the end of January provided the raw material and story cues that the media responded to, by quickly increasing the amount of coverage of this conflict. In addition, as the news wave broke out, Muslim organizations became prominent actors in the news coverage in the American and Swedish press. This is certainly one explanation why the intolerance frame came to dominate over the freedom-of-speech frame during the whole controversy.

As part of a larger research agenda attempting to understand the function of news media under different national settings, a crucial part of this study was to move beyond a strictly national perspective by comparing the coverage of American elite papers to the coverage of Swedish elite papers. I argued that media system characteristics would operate as interaction factors influencing the impact of opportunity windows on the ratio between unofficial and official voices. Specifically, I expected the effect of the amount of coverage on this ratio to be stronger in Sweden because of the different market positions between Swedish and American quality papers. This expectation, however, was not supported by the data. Instead, the results indicate that increasing news coverage leads to a greater change of the ratio of unofficial voices to official voices in the American papers. The window of opportunity created by intensive coverage altered the prominence of unofficial sources to a greater extent in the United States than in Sweden. What might explain this? Perhaps there was greater room for such changes in the American press. According to this line of reasoning, the logic of including and excluding voices during routine news coverage in Sweden is different from that in the United States. If American journalism focuses more tightly around official actors on average, then there is certainly more to be gained from the creation of windows of opportunity for unofficial actors. Similarly, if unofficial actors have a greater ease of access to Swedish news coverage on a regular basis, then the windows of opportunity created by sudden and dramatic events do not significantly change the prominence of unofficial voices relative to official voices. Of course, these issues were not addressed in this study but should be in future research. Studying the logic of inclusion and exclusion during times of routine coverage should prove useful in providing a better understanding of the dynamics of official dominance and event-driven news from a comparative perspective.

The rapid response from the Swedish papers to the sudden and dramatic events taking place in the Middle East, as compared to the response of the American papers, might indeed say something interesting about the role of events for elite paper journalism in the two countries. In simple terms, the cartoons

controversy was evaluated as a much bigger news story by the Swedish elite papers than by their American counterparts, perhaps owing to the level of conflict and drama provided by such story cues. Of course, the different levels of news attention given to this issue in Sweden and the United States might very well be due to their dissimilar proximity to Denmark. For the purpose of this study, however, this fact does not change the main research problem of interest: the degree to which intensified news coverage changes the possibilities for unofficial actors to gain access to the media. Interestingly, the intensive Swedish reaction did not change the relative prominence of unofficial voices as much as the less intensive reaction by the American papers.

This study also hypothesized that Swedish journalists would show a more active role than that of their American colleagues when defining this issue. This hypothesis was only partly supported given that the journalists working at *Dagens Nyheter* were active in promoting the intolerance frame whereas those in *Svenska Dagbladet* were not. The American journalists were also not active. Even though there were sporadic instances of journalistic framing, it was always backed up by outside sources. More research is definitely required to better understand how different norms translate into daily practices and journalistic output. Like studies on official dominance and event-driven news, this research would gain much from more extensive, larger-sample research designs. The range and types of issues should also be expanded. Doing comparative research requires a combination of case studies exploring the causal mechanisms linking system-level factors, journalistic practices, and output in addition to large-sample research to evaluate the external validity of these studies.

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