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Framing the Mohammad cartoons issue

A cross-cultural comparison of Swedish and US press

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate how Swedish and US elite newspapers framed the publication of cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mohammad in a Danish newspaper in September 2005, and the events that ensued from that publication. These cartoons proved to be very controversial, and, since the original publication has been reprinted several times, continue to stir controversy. In order to investigate how different frames emerged in the news coverage, the study includes all news articles published in the selected newspapers during a six-month period from the first publication of the Mohammad cartoons. Methodologically, the study uses quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Theoretically, the study is based on framing theory and international news determinants. The results show some interesting differences as well as similarities. In the conclusions, four propositions that might be explored in future research are offered.

KEY WORDS

framing ■ international news ■ Mohammad cartoons ■ news waves ■ Swedish press ■ US press

Introduction

Media scholars have shown that news can never be a mirror of reality. Instead, news should be perceived as the result of a number of more or less conscious choices, restricted by factors such as journalistic norms, values and newsgathering routines (Schudson, 2003), financial considerations (Hamilton, 2004), technology (Pavlik, 2001) and the need for, and pressure from, news sources (Manning, 2001). On a more abstract level, news is influenced by the media system and political system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), the political culture (Entman, 2004) and whether an

issue belongs to the sphere of consensus, deviance or legitimate controversy within a country (Hallin, 1986).

Based on these factors, it is likely that the news selection and the news framing of an event will be different across countries. However, there is no coherent theory with regards to *how* the news selection and news framing is influenced by factors related to different political systems, media systems and political cultures. Most studies in these areas are still single-country studies, and more often than not they tend to take factors related to the macro- (for example, the political system and media system) or meso-level of analysis (for example, the political and media institutions) for granted, despite the fact that neither news selection nor news framing can be fully understood without taking system- and institutional-level factors into consideration.

Thus, there is a need for more cross-cultural and cross-national research in the fields of political communication and international journalism, not only to expand the empirical database, but also to contribute to theory building that is less characterized by unwitting parochialism and naive universalism (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: Chap. 6). The purpose of this exploratory study is therefore to investigate how Swedish and US elite newspapers framed one topic that aroused heated debate around the world in the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006: the publication of cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mohammad in a Danish newspaper, and the events that ensued from that publication.

In order to study how different frames emerged in the news coverage, the study analyzes all news articles published in selected newspapers during a six-month period from the first publication of the cartoons. Methodologically, the study uses content analysis. Theoretically, it is based on framing theory and international news determinants.

Framing theory

News is not a mirror of reality. This proposition is at the heart of most framing studies, despite the different approaches to framing among communication scholars. Gamson (1992: 3) refers to a frame as 'an implicit organizing idea' which informs and shapes public discussion. This organizing idea may structure our thinking about issues by emphasizing what is important and relevant and what is not. At the same time, the importance of particular frames is partly dependent on the surrounding society and its political culture. As noted by Reese: 'Frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over

time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world' (2001: 11, emphasis in original).

Different frames draw attention to different problem definitions. According to Entman

[t]o frame 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. (1993: 52)

Stressing that framing is a way of constructing the surrounding environment leads to the idea that different media may present different pictures of reality. How to frame a topic is a dynamic process of ongoing struggles between political actors and media actors.

Many studies have analyzed the relationship between press and politics, journalists and politicians and the effects of this relationship on journalistic content. Hall et al. (1978) argue that elite political actors are primary definers of political issues. Whenever journalists need information or quotes, they turn to official and established news sources. This gives these sources an advantage in accessing the media, spinning the news and in framing the topic at stake.

Even though this theory has been criticized for ascribing journalists too passive a role as merely transmitters of official viewpoints (Campbell, 2004: 100), researchers still assert that the established political elite has a strong influence on the way political issues are framed in the news (Entman, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Bennett (1990: 106), for example, states that the media tend to 'index' the range of viewpoints according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate. This idea gives journalists a somewhat more active role as they are not always dependent on any particular source. Later research about the cascading model also suggests that foreign actors and mid-level sources can function as counter-framers to the official government frame (Entman, 2004).

At the same time, a study of the news coverage of the Abu Ghraib incidents showed that leading American media closely followed elite political discourse when reporting on the issue (Bennett et al., 2006). An abuse frame rather than a torture frame totally dominated the news coverage. The torture frame never reached the level of a counter-frame in the news coverage, despite support from some mid-level sources. One reason for this might be that the Bush administration, which sponsored the abuse frame, was much more successful than the sponsors of the torture frame in subsidizing (Gandy, 1982) and spinning the news (Manning, 2001), a task made easier as the abuse frame was culturally

more congruent in the US context than the torture frame. As noted by Entman: 'When the White House frames an event or issue by invoking the match with clearly relevant and congruent cultural assumptions, motivations among elites, journalists, and the public usually fall right into line' (2004: 17).

From this perspective, the independence of journalists appears to be based on their freedom to choose what actors and thus frames are regarded as relevant. To be able to influence how frames are built in the media, one thus has to be perceived as a relevant and legitimate source of information. In the case of the Mohammad cartoons, several actors tried to manage the debate and define what this topic really was about, that is, to frame the issue.

News waves: a dynamic approach to frame building

The idea of a dynamic approach to frame building originates from Downs's concept of issue-attention cycles. His main point is that

a systematic 'issue-attention cycle' seems strongly to influence public attitudes and behavior concerning most key domestic problems. Each of these problems suddenly leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then – though still largely unresolved – gradually fades from the center of public attention. (1972/1991: 27)

Another part of his argument (1972/1991: 22) is that most 'crises' do not reflect changes in the real world but reflect 'the operation of a systematic cycle of heightening public interest', rooted in real world events and the way the media system operates. The cycle usually starts with an 'alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm' caused by some real world events. As time goes by, attention to the problem at stake will fade away as members of society realize the costs and difficulties related to solving the problem.

Downs does not make any distinction between the political sphere and the media sphere, but this distinction is crucial in Wolfsfeld's (2004) Politics-Media-Politics (PMP) model. Although politics and media are deeply intertwined, he argues that events, actions or real world changes within the arena of politics spark media activity: the news media 'can be important agents in accelerating political changes within a given society, but to suggest that they initiate such changes contradicts most of what we know about how journalists operate' (Wolfsfeld, 2004: 29). Thus, according to Wolfsfeld's account, news construction is a reactive process (2004: 25–9).

The important idea in Wolfsfeld's work, though, is his concept of political waves and how it corresponds to Downs's attention cycle. According to Wolfsfeld, political waves are

sudden and significant changes in the political environment that are characterized by a substantial increase in the amount of public attention centered on a political issue or event. Such waves are often marked by triggering events such as a terrorist attack, a war or an election. (2004: 32)

However, in this study we will use the concept of 'news waves' instead of 'political waves', to denote that the focus is on the operation of the media.

Every wave opens up for framing contests between political actors and the media. As noted by Miller and Riechert: 'framing process evolves in phases marked by the nature of the persuasive efforts made by stakeholders and their effects' (2001: 111). They also use the concept of 'framing cycle' to denote a process made up of different phases: the emergence phase, the definition/conflict phase, the resonance phase and the equilibrium or resolution phase.

In order to investigate how such waves and framing processes work we turn to the discussion following the publication of the Mohammad cartoons in a Danish newspaper.

The case study: debating the Mohammad cartoons

On 30 September 2005, the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mohammad. In one of these he was portrayed as a terrorist with a bomb. The publication followed an invitation from the paper to 40 Danish cartoonists asking for sketches of the prophet. According to Flemming Rose, the editor of culture at *Jyllands-Posten*, there was a need to challenge what the paper saw as a self-regulated censorship in Denmark regarding Islam (Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006: 50).

Immediately after the publication, *Jyllands-Posten* received nearly 100 complaints from Muslims and, on 2 October several Danish Muslim organizations met to discuss the cartoons. Less than two weeks after the publication, on 11 October, the Arabic satellite network Al-Jazeera published an online interview with a Danish imam, Raed Hlayhel, about this issue (Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006: 57–9). On 14 October, 3500 Muslims gathered in Copenhagen for a demonstration against the publication of the cartoons.

What really made this an international issue though was the letter from 11 Muslim ambassadors to the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen on 12 October 2005. In the letter they stressed their worries about sentiments toward Muslims and Islam in Denmark and called for a meeting with Rasmussen to discuss this issue. On 21 October, the prime minister replied that Denmark is a country based on freedom of speech, freedom of religion and religious tolerance while also refusing to have a meeting with the ambassadors. Meanwhile, the story had been reported in the Saudi newspaper *Al Hayat* and the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

On 21 October, Rasmussen received a letter from the general secretary of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) who criticized the Mohammad cartoons while also pointing to anti-Islamic tendencies in Denmark in general. He also sent a letter to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expressing his views on the development in Denmark. On 25 October, the OSCE representative for fighting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims in Europe, Ömür Orhun, wrote a letter to the Danish OSCE ambassador asking for the official Danish view on the Mohammad cartoons issue and the situation for Muslims in Denmark. In another letter to the ambassador, Orhun emphasized his questions about the situation for Muslims in Denmark while also referring to several critical reports about the situation in Denmark.

Clearly several countries and international organizations were already involved in the Mohammad cartoons issue during the month of October. However, the issue was still handled on a diplomatic level, and attention to the issue in Arab media was also quite low. During the following weeks both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Union Commissioner for Justice expressed their concerns over this issue. Danish imams also made trips to Muslim countries in order to inform them about the situation in Denmark, actions that were later heavily criticized by the Danish government for fueling disproportionate anger. Larsen and Seidenfaden conclude that 'it's incorrect . . . [to state] that there "hardly were any reactions" during the first three months following the publication of the Mohammad cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten*' (2006: 72).

Magazinet, a Norwegian paper, published the cartoons on 10 January. This fueled more reactions in the Muslim world. The OIC again denounced the cartoons and, on 20 January, Saudi imams encouraged a boycott of Danish products. One week later, Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Denmark as an act of protest while the boycott was spreading throughout the Middle East. Soon members of the Palestinian

organizations al-Fatah and al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades demanded Danish citizens leave their country. This happened in the final week of January, and these protests sparked a chain of events. During demonstrations the Danish embassies in Damascus and Beirut were set on fire. As a counter-reaction, several newspapers published the cartoons and by the end of February at least 143 papers in 56 countries had published all or some of the sketches (Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006: 100).

Understanding the debate: three frames

According to Larsen and Seidenfaden (2006), there are three main frames through which one can understand the Mohammad cartoons issue. The first perspective is the *freedom of speech* frame, which, ever since 30 September, was propagated mainly by *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish government. According to this frame, the Mohammad cartoons debate is about freedom of speech and of the press. The purpose of publishing the sketches was to challenge an increasing self-regulated censorship in Denmark rooted in fear of escalating tensions vis-a-vis the Muslim community. Therefore, this fundamental principle of Western democracy must be defended.

The second perspective is based on the idea of a *clash of civilizations* (Huntington, 1993). Here the Mohammad cartoons debate is seen as part of an ongoing struggle based upon diverging value systems that stem from inherently different and incongruent cultures. On the one hand we have the 'West Christian world', and on the other we have the 'Islam world'. Confrontations between those are unavoidable, and if the conflict had not been about the cartoons, it would have been about something else.

The third plausible frame is the *intolerance* frame, which Larsen and Seidenfaden (2006) appear to be proponents of. When the ambassadors and other groups first expressed their concern about the issue, they focused mainly on the situation of Danish Muslims in general. The cartoons were seen as just the latest example of anti-Islamic sentiments in Denmark. The problem was not so much the publication itself, but the intolerance toward the Muslim minority. Therefore, attitudes against minorities in general and Muslims in particular were what this issue was about.

In this study we analyze these three frames in the leading newspapers in the US and Sweden in order to see how different actors framed this debate. Different political and media systems (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005) as well as the political relationships between the two

countries and Denmark suggest that the coverage of the cartoons might differ. Literature on international news flow presents some additional reasons for possible differences in the amount and type of coverage of the same event in two quite different countries. This literature is briefly summarized in the following section.

Determinants of international news coverage

Despite the fair amount of international news coverage in the Western world, studies on transnational information flow have found that the allocation of space varies considerably across countries (Chang, 1998; Gerbner and Marvanyi, 1977; Schramm, 1959). Two main research perspectives have emerged in trying to explain such cross-national differences.

Gatekeeper perspective

Wu's meta-analysis categorized 55 previous research studies about international news into gatekeeper and logistical perspectives (Wu, 1998). His study found that traditional newsworthiness factors, socio-cultural structure, organizational constraints and the agenda-setting impact of international wire services are all important determinants of international news flow. These factors fall under the so-called 'gatekeeper perspective'. Thus, the *gatekeeper perspective* focuses on factors that affect the selection process of newsworthy issues (Ahern, 1984). Anticipated reader interest is one example of the perspective (Chang and Lee, 1992). The influence of newswire services on international news is another example. For instance, Kaplan's (1979) study observed that the emergence of AP and UPI in the United States resulted in a sharp decrease in the diversity of perspectives in the news.

Ahern (1984) divided the traditional gatekeeper paradigm into intrinsic and extrinsic factors: the former focuses on the characteristic of the news itself whereas the latter concerns economic, political, or cultural motivation or hindrance of news selection. Unexpectedness, sensationalism, and human interest have been identified as intrinsic predictors of newsworthiness in his classification. The concept of deviance as a predictor of newsworthiness for international news coverage may be seen as part of the intrinsic characteristics of news events (Shoemaker et al., 1987).

Logistical perspective

The *logistical approach* branches out to identifying macro-level societal and geographic factors that cause an event to be selected as newsworthy. Wu subcategorized this model into several groups of factors. One is cultural affinity, where previous studies found that former colonial ties were positively related to the international news flow (Atwood, 1985; Skurnik, 1981, cited in Wu, 1998). Regionalism, although similar to geographic proximity, has historic, strategic, and sometimes ideological notions embedded into the definition. Other subcategories include political relations, communication resources, and national traits.

In her research testing the predictors of the US and British press coverage of the sub-Saharan AIDS crisis, Swain (2003) found that factors including military spending, scientific research, GDP, population, and proximity were among the most influential determinants of international news coverage of AIDS. Her study operationalized what were identified as the key predictors of international news coverage – *cultural proximity, geographic proximity, and power status* – to indicate the most influential factors of this news coverage. However, Shoemaker et al. state that timeliness and proximity are *contingent conditions* which are ‘key criteria only for judging the newsworthiness of marginally deviant or significant events’ (1987: 356). Instead, they argue that deviance should be seen as the major predictor of media coverage. The results of their study show that social change and normative deviance challenge existing social norms and operations. Therefore, they suggest that conflict and sensationalism are covered more frequently in news media as a form of social control through disclosure of a possible threat. They state that the ‘mass media publicity of deviance in other countries is the first step in controlling the threatened change’ (1987: 362).

To sum up, then, how the media in different countries cover a specific chain of events is affected by the national media systems and political systems, the frame-building processes within countries, intrinsic and extrinsic factors related to the gatekeeping processes, and logistical factors such as geographic proximity or cultural affinity. The overarching research question investigated in this study was: how was the Mohammad cartoons issue framed in the elite newspapers in Sweden and the United States? More specifically, this study asks the following four research questions:

- RQ1: What reasons were offered for the publication of the Mohammad cartoons and the reactions that followed?
- RQ2: How did *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times* frame the Mohammad cartoons issue?
- RQ3: How did the frequency of frames change over time?
- RQ4: What events appear to have triggered different peaks and frames in the news coverage?

Methodology and data

In order to answer the research questions this study utilizes a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, focusing on *Dagens Nyheter* in Sweden and the *New York Times* in the US. These newspapers were selected because they are considered the most prominent elite newspaper in each country. The study includes all news articles published between 1 October 2005 – the day after the publication of the Mohammad cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* – and 28 February 2006, the day after which the issue in essence disappeared from the news. Manual selection was employed to select articles that were published in the main newspaper section, and which referred explicitly to the Mohammad cartoons or the events, debates and diplomatic scenarios following the publication in *Jyllands-Posten* in either headlines or leading paragraphs. The unit of analysis was the individual news article, regardless of length.

The code sheet utilized in the quantitative content analysis included a number of variables. Most importantly, it included a number of pre-defined frames that were coded on a presence/absence basis. The first frame of interest was a *conflict frame* (whether there is a substantial level of conflict among the groups or actors in the article), which as a generic frame was included to study to what degree the papers framed this issue in terms of a conflict between different actors. Further, we also looked at the presence/absence of a *religion frame* (whether the article focuses on religious aspects of the cartoons debate), *freedom of speech frame* (whether the article focuses on freedom of speech or freedom of the press aspects of the cartoons debate), *democratic values frame* (whether the article focuses on democratic values in regard to the cartoons debate), *West vs Islam frame* (whether the article casts the events in the light of a broader tension between the Western world and the Islamic world, or in a clash of civilizations perspective), and *intolerance frame* (whether the article focuses on the tension between Muslims, Arabs, other minorities and Westerners or indigenous people as a sign of a lack of tolerance, or on

the need to increase tolerance toward other groups). All of these frames were identified as relevant for this specific issue, as they follow the lines of argument of the actors that tried to define the issue.

The code sheet also included a variable aimed at measuring the overall tone toward the original publication of the Mohammad cartoons. Coders could choose between 'positive', 'negative' and 'mixed/neutral'. A 'positive tone' refers to voices defending the publication as something good or necessary for a democratic society. A 'negative tone' refers to voices condemning or criticizing the publication. Furthermore, coders were instructed to record the possible reasons for the publication of the cartoons as well as what reasons for the reactions among Muslims were mentioned in the articles. The specific reasons or explanations for publishing the cartoons that were coded included 'anti-Muslim sentiments in Denmark', 'anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe' and if the publication was described as 'a way to defend democratic values'. The reasons for the Muslim reactions that were analyzed included statements about 'lack of integration of Muslims in Western countries', that the 'publication of the cartoons was a humiliation of Islam/Muslims' and, finally, arguments that the reactions were due to 'manipulation by Islamic fundamentalist leaders'. All these were coded on a presence/absence basis and selected because they follow the lines of arguments central to the cartoon controversy.

In addition, we also performed a qualitative content analysis. The main purpose was to identify what triggered the different news waves. Using the quantitative analysis to track where the news wave started we posed the question: 'What "real-world" events appear to have sparked the increasing media attention?' This was done by careful reading of those articles that first appeared in the beginning of the news waves. By close reading we could also see what sources were prominent in the initial phase of the wave and what frames they promoted. This analysis was mainly employed to answer RQ4.

Two coders were trained independently on the coding instrument. After revision of all definitions, one coder coded the Swedish sample while another coder was responsible for the US sample. Before doing the final content analysis that is reported in this article, a pre-coder test was employed; 32 percent of the US articles were randomly selected to check agreement. Inter-coder reliability was calculated to 0.98, using Holsti's formula.

Results

The manual selection of articles yielded a total of 147 stories from *Dagens Nyheter* and 38 stories from the *New York Times*. The difference in the amount of coverage of the Mohammad cartoons is interesting in itself and may be related to some of the international news determinants summarized above. The Mohammad cartoons issue first appeared in *Dagens Nyheter* on 15 November 2005. Another article followed on 30 December 2005. The first article in the *New York Times* entered the coverage much later – on 8 January 2006. The last article on the issue during the selected time frame appeared on 25 February 2006. There was more substantial coverage of the cartoons controversy during February 2006 compared with earlier months (see Figure 1).

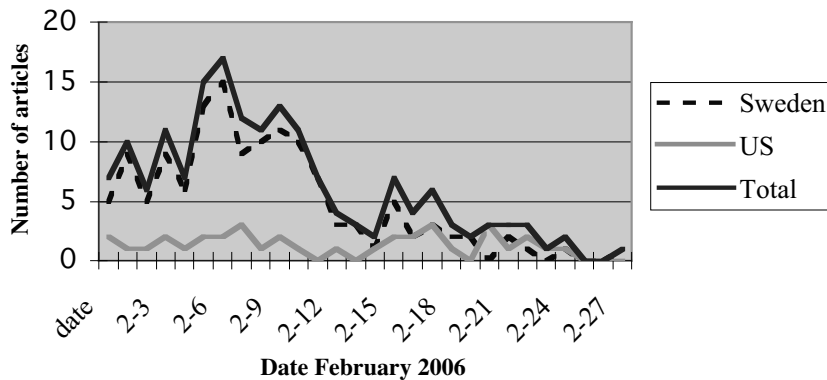


Figure 1 Number of articles about the Mohammad cartoons during February 2006

Based on Figure 1, it seems evident that it was not the publication of the cartoons itself that was deemed newsworthy, but the reactions to the publication. However, when the newspapers started to report on the issue, they did to some extent go back in time to report on the original publication of the cartoons. The news coverage also included statements that were both positive and negative. Looking at the overall tone toward the publication of the cartoons, the results indicate a clear difference across countries. In the Swedish case, 38.1 percent of the articles had a negative tone and 61.9 percent a mixed or neutral tone. No Swedish article had a positive tone. In the US case, 5.3 percent of the articles had a positive tone, 13.2 percent a negative tone and 81.6 percent a mixed or neutral tone. Thus, the coverage in the *New York Times* was more neutral, but also more positive than *Dagens Nyheter*. What, then, were the reasons offered for the publication of the Mohammad cartoons and

Table 1 Reasons given for the publication of, and the reactions to, the publication of the Mohammad cartoons

	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (n=147)	<i>New York Times</i> (n=38)	All articles (n=185)
The publication was the result of anti-Muslim sentiments in Denmark#	8.8%	7.9%	8.6%
The publication was the result of anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe#	2.7%	5.3%	3.2%
The publication was a way to defend democratic values***	6.8%	42.1%	14.1%
The reactions were a result of the lack of integration of Muslims in Western countries#	2.0%	10.5%	3.8%
The reactions were due to the humiliation/insult Muslims felt because of the publication**	31.3%	55.3%	36.2%
The reactions were a result of manipulation of Islamic fundamentalist leaders#	9.5%	15.8%	10.8%

Notes:

***, ** indicates Chi-square statistic is statistically significant at the .001 and .01 levels, respectively.
indicates that Chi-square tests could not be performed due to the low number of observations.

the reactions that followed among Muslims? This question is addressed in Table 1.

The results indicate that there were some interesting differences, although the low number of cases means that in many cases it is not possible to test for statistical significance. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference with regards to how often *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times* mentioned that the publication was a way to defend democratic values, or more specifically, freedom of speech and of the press. This reason was offered in more than 40 percent of the US articles as compared to fewer than 10 percent of the Swedish articles. With regard to reasons offered for the reactions to the publication, it was significantly more common for the *New York Times* than *Dagens Nyheter* to report that the reactions were a result of the humiliation or insult that Muslims felt as a consequence of the publication of the cartoons.

To answer the second research question, we examined the frequency of use of the freedom of speech, intolerance, West vs Islam, religion, democratic values, and conflict frames. The results show that the conflict frame was most common, being present in close to 70 percent of the articles. It seems that the coverage of the cartoons controversy was frequently presented as an episodic clash among various social groups.

Table 2 Frames used by *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times*

Frame	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (n=147)	<i>New York Times</i> (n=38)	All articles (n=185)
Conflict	66.7%	81.6%	69.7%
Religion	44.9%	31.6%	42.2%
Intolerance	42.9%	36.8%	41.6%
Freedom of speech	38.8%	47.4%	40.5%
West vs Islam*	10.2%	26.3%	13.5%
Democratic values	7.5%	10.5%	8.1%

Notes:

Table presents percentage of articles where respective frames were present.

* indicates Chi-square statistic is statistically significant at the .05 level.

This was common in articles in both the *New York Times* and *Dagens Nyheter*, even though it was slightly more common in the US newspaper (see Table 2). Since the frames were coded on a presence/absence basis we do not have data on dominant frame per article. Looking at the frequencies, however, reveals that in addition to the conflict frame, the following frames were quite common: religion frame (42.2%), intolerance frame (41.6%), and freedom of speech frame (40.5%). The democratic values and West vs Islam frames were less common overall (see Table 2).

We also examined whether there were any significant differences between *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times* in their use of the six frames. Using Chi-square statistics, we found a statistically significant difference in the use of the West vs Islam frame. This frame was more common in the US newspaper coverage and less common in the Swedish coverage. This finding also suggests that the coverage was more polarized in the *New York Times* than in *Dagens Nyheter*, as does the fact that the conflict frame was more common in the former than in the latter. Even in the *New York Times*, however, this frame was present in only about one-quarter of the coverage for the selected time period. The frequency of use of the conflict frame borders on statistical significance ($p=.08$).

The third research question asked how the frequency of the frames changed over time. To answer this question, we examined the coverage during February 2006 only since the vast majority of articles about the cartoons were published during that time. The month of February was divided into four weeks. We tracked down the frequency of use of the four most common frames – conflict, religion, intolerance, and freedom of speech – during that period, enabling us to see how these frames varied longitudinally in each country.

Table 3 Frames used by *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times* during four consecutive weeks (February 2006)

	Conflict		Religion		Intolerance		Freedom of speech		Number of articles each week	
	DN	NYT	DN	NYT	DN	NYT	DN	NYT	DN	NYT
Week 1	64.5%	81.8%	53.2%	36.4%	45.2%	27.3%	43.5%	63.6%	n=62	n=11
Week 2	63.5%	100.0%	44.2%	25.0%	48.1%	37.5%	38.5%	50.0%	n=52	n=8
Week 3	66.7%	66.7%	13.3%	33.3%	33.3%	25.0%	26.7%	50.0%	n=15	n=12
Week 4	60.0%	80.0%	20.0%	40.0%	40.0%	80.0%	40.0%	0.0%	n=5	n=5

Note: Due to the low number of observations Chi-square tests could not be performed.

As Table 3 shows, the conflict frame remains most prominent during the first week of February. The second most common overall frame for *Dagens Nyheter* is religion. The second most common frame in the *New York Times*, however, is the freedom of speech frame. It was present in 64 percent of the cartoons-related articles published in the *New York Times* during that period. The differences between the Swedish and US newspaper could not be measured statistically due to the low number of observations.

The conflict frame remained the most common in both newspapers during Week 2. It is interesting to note that the second most frequent frame in the US newspaper was the freedom of speech frame, similar to Week 1. The second most frequent frame in *Dagens Nyheter* was the intolerance frame, which was present in 25 of the 52 articles. Week 3 of the February coverage of the cartoons controversy shows a similar pattern: the freedom of speech frame remains second in rank in the *New York Times* while the intolerance frame remains second in *Dagens Nyheter*, following the still most prominent conflict frame.

The last week of coverage during February 2006 shows some interesting trends. First, there is general decline in the amount of coverage in both papers, with only five articles per paper being published during that week. Second, the conflict frame remains most prominent. The *New York Times* emphasizes the intolerance frame for the first time while the Swedish framing remains a little more balanced. Overall, it seems clear that the coverage was conflict-oriented during the four weeks, especially in the *New York Times*. The cartoons issue was not framed in religious terms in either newspaper even though religion came up in more than half of the Swedish articles during Week 1. *Dagens Nyheter* provided more frequent discussion on intolerance in the context

of the Mohammad cartoons, whereas the *New York Times* offered coverage that framed the event in terms of freedom of expression rather than intolerance or religion. The freedom of speech frame was mostly used as a defense for publishing the cartoons or as a reason for why the Danish government could not act against editorial decisions made by an independent paper.

Clearly, both the Swedish and the American news coverage of the cartoons issue were extremely limited during the first four months following the publication of the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten*. In *Dagens Nyheter*, the news wave starts on 31 January, and lasts somewhere between two and three weeks. Even though it might not be correct to talk about a 'wave' in the *New York Times* due to the much lower number of articles published, it is worth noting that the increase in coverage starts simultaneously and develops in a similar pattern.

Explicit threats coming from Palestinian organizations and directed toward Danes, Swedes and Norwegians visiting or working in the Middle East seem to have been the 'triggering event' sparking the wave in *Dagens Nyheter*. That made the issue more relevant and socially closer to home from a Swedish perspective. On 31 January, there was a big headline spread over two pages saying 'Northerners forced to flee from Gaza after threats'. Seven articles related to the cartoons were published on that day. The *New York Times* had only one article on that day and never published more than three articles per day. The triggering event in the *New York Times* seems to be the boycott of Danish goods across the Middle East and its economic impact. The events and protests taking place in Gaza were mentioned in the last paragraph of the article. The *New York Times* reporter let the readers know that this issue is 'a case pitting freedom of the press against religious sensitivity'. Despite the fact that the boycott was led by prominent Muslims, the three dominant individual sources in the article were a spokesman of the Danish company Arla, a Danish consul and the culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten*. The consul supported the freedom of speech frame used earlier in the article by stating that 'We have a freedom of the press and the government can't get involved in these kind of matters'. The freedom of speech frame was also prominent in the next day's *New York Times* article, where the headline states: 'Dane Defends Press Freedom as Muslims Protest Cartoons'. The prime ministers of both Denmark and Norway were quoted as emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression.

The balance between the intolerance frame and the freedom of speech frame was more even in *Dagens Nyheter* than in the *New York Times* during the first week. Compared to the American paper there had

already been a few articles published in *Dagens Nyheter* on this topic before the news wave started. Therefore, different relevant actors had already been introduced in the news coverage by the end of January. Several of the 'pre-wave' articles covered how Muslim leaders and governments criticized the cartoons. These stories introduced not only the intolerance frame but also the religion frame and the freedom of speech frame. The religion frame was very frequent during the first part of the coverage where the focus was on the Muslim actors. The intolerance frame was also at work in an article in *Dagens Nyheter* on 1 February. The story focused on two interviews with two Danish imams. One of them, imam Fatih Alev, was quoted as saying: 'That Danish Muslims were insulted, and have been insulted for years, doesn't seem to bother the prime minister'. In an analytical and interpretive article published on the same day the journalist himself explained that *Jyllands-Posten* depicted the prophet as a wily terrorist, and that this was a common Islamophobic cliché of an Arab. He also concluded with the statement: 'to depict a Jew correspondingly would have been classified as clear anti-Semitism'.

After a couple of days of steady reporting on more demonstrations and comments from around the world, there was a new phase in the coverage in *Dagens Nyheter*. A triggering event, this time the torching of the Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus, led to heavy coverage in *Dagens Nyheter* on 5 February. Pictures of flames and demonstrators dominated both the front page and two pages inside the paper, under the headline 'Northern Embassies in Syria on Fire'. The following day a similar amount and type of articles were published in *Dagens Nyheter*, but this time the events had taken place in Beirut. However, the Damascus incident was hardly given any attention at all in the *New York Times*. The demonstrations and torching of embassies in Syria were mentioned, but only briefly within an article about several demonstrations taking place in the Middle East. Interestingly, the freedom of speech frame was not present in any of the six Swedish articles published on February 5, but mentioned four times in the only US article about this event. Each time freedom of speech was mentioned it was attributed to a different source: the 'paper' *Jyllands-Posten*, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the German chancellor Angela Merkel and 'the Vatican'.

Discussion and conclusions

Our results show some interesting differences as well as similarities in the coverage of the Mohammad cartoons issue in *Dagens Nyheter* and the

New York Times. First, it is obvious that the newsworthy event was not the publication of the cartoons in itself, but rather the reactions among Muslims that followed several months afterwards. Moreover, it was the threat of violent reactions that were deemed most newsworthy, perhaps meeting the deviance criterion for news selection (Shoemaker et al., 1987). As shown above, there were a number of diplomatic actions taken during the fall of 2005, but these actions were almost invisible on the pages of *Dagens Nyheter* and, even more so, in the *New York Times*. Thus, the tension between the two sides of the issue – on the one hand, those promoting the freedom of speech frame, and, on the other, those promoting the intolerance frame – could build up off the media radar. This might have encouraged the Danish imams that traveled to the Middle East to inform others there about the situation and to gain support. This, in turn, might have provoked the more violent actions that followed and that were deemed more newsworthy across different countries. Contrary to Wolfsfeld's PMP model, it seems that it is not necessarily changes in the political sphere that trigger news waves, at least not when the political initiatives are peaceful and diplomatic rather than violent and dramatic.

When the cartoons issue eventually attracted media attention, it was more heavily covered in the Swedish elite newspaper than in the US elite newspaper. *Dagens Nyheter* published more than three times as many articles about the cartoons as did the *New York Times*. This might be due to the geographic proximity of Sweden and Denmark, and could be expected based on studies of international news flow. Naturally, after the threats from Palestinian organizations, the cartoon publication became a major issue in Sweden.

The overall tone of coverage toward the publication of the cartoons was more negative in the Swedish than in the US newspaper. When looking at the reasons for publication mentioned in *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times*, one can see that the *Times* tended to frame the publication as a way to defend democratic values in general, or the freedom of speech or of the press in particular. This suggests that the coverage in the *New York Times* was relatively more sympathetic toward the Danish newspaper and the stance of the Danish government. The qualitative analysis also suggests that the Danish government influenced the framing of the issue more in the case of the *New York Times* than in the case of *Dagens Nyheter*. Perhaps this is an indication that the news media are even more likely to rely on official sources when an issue is rather remote than when an issue is closer to home. The lower prominence of Danish officials as sources might also be due to the different

relationships between the Danish government on the one hand, and the Swedish and US governments on the other. With regards to the relationship between the Danish and US governments, the former has been supportive of the latter, for example by deploying troops to the 'coalition of the willing' in the Iraq war. The relationship between the Danish and the Swedish governments, on the other hand, has been somewhat tense, as Denmark has had a center-right government dependent upon a xenophobic right-wing party in Parliament while Sweden at the time had a Social Democratic government and a Parliament with a consensus about the need to fight racism or xenophobia.

In any case, the results indicate that the freedom of speech frame was more common in the *New York Times* than in *Dagens Nyheter* on an overall level as well as in the news coverage during the three first weeks in February. The results also indicate that the intolerance frame was more common in *Dagens Nyheter* than in the *New York Times* during the same period. In addition to these noteworthy differences, we also found some similarities across the two newspapers. Most importantly, the news coverage peaked at approximately the same time in both newspapers. This indicates that with regard to news selection both *Dagens Nyheter* and the *New York Times* operate similarly, although the threshold for the issue to gain attention was higher in the case of the *New York Times* than with *Dagens Nyheter*. This brings us back to the question of the determinants of international news coverage and frame building processes. Although this is only one study with a small sample size, our research suggests some propositions that might be explored in future research.

- News coverage relies more on governmental sources, the more distant an international issue is. Consequently, governmental sources might have more power in the frame building processes when the international issues are remote (geographically and culturally) rather than closer to home.
- The more distant an international issue is, the more important it is for the news media that the issue involves conflicts that are easily understandable and that can be visualized. The triggering events might be the same regardless of whether the issue plays out at a remote place or closer to home, but the threshold is higher in the former case; hence, the need for conflict, violence and visuals is more urgent the more distant the location where the issues take place.
- When framing foreign events, the news media will most often choose frames that fit already existing schemas, and these will likely be the frames that are promoted by the domestic government or

the foreign government. If there is a framing conflict between the domestic and the foreign government, the media will follow the domestic government. Where there is a lack of a frame promoted by the domestic government, the media will, to a considerable extent, let the foreign government shape the news framing of the issue.

- If the country in which a medium operates is geographically, culturally and socially close to a country involved in an international issue, this proximity will lead to more attention in the news media but also to a process of framing struggles that are mostly played out between domestic actors. On the other hand, if the country in which a medium operates is geographically, culturally and socially distant from a country involved in an international crisis, this issue will receive less attention in the news media, but the framing of the issue will be more influenced by international and foreign actors.

Admittedly, this study does have several limitations. Most importantly, it covers only one newspaper in each country. The low number of articles published in the *New York Times* made it impossible in most cases to test whether the differences are statistically significant. Thus, this study should be expanded to include more newspapers per country. To advance theory building, future cross-national and cross-cultural research such as this should also include more than two countries. Nevertheless, we hope this study has its merits, as a small step on the long road toward a coherent theory about how news selection and news framing is influenced by factors related to different political and media systems and political cultures, as well as journalistic news values and routines.

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