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## Cyber Media Cartoons Controversies and the Use of Different Journalistic Strategies in Countering 'Othering'.

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**Abstract:** *Cyber media cartoons controversy was the first transnational issue which reached across three continents and led to diplomatic crises, riots, economic boycotts, assaults on embassies, and even the loss of lives. The coverage of this controversy is an example of 'othering'. The discussion in this article is based upon the available literature on this topic. It explores whether the publication is to be perceived as the freedom of speech or as an act of blasphemy and stigmatization of Muslims. The study focuses on global media as a common place for diversity and mutually reflective dialogue. It also explains whether and how Peace Journalism contributes to counter 'othering'.*

**Key Words:** Othering, Cyber media cartoons, Global Media, Journalistic Ethics, Peace Journalism

### 1. Introduction

Within the last few decades, the fast flow of information and a revolution in the communication is rapidly changing the world's scenario. The way how different media in the world portray and represent 'others' is important for the interpretation and construction of the identities. In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten*, published a collection of 12 drawings depicting Prophet Mohammad. These drawings have been further referred to as the Mohammad cartoons.

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Ever since they have been published, the event has been over discussed and analyzed from different perspectives. Perhaps one of the most debated issues regarding the cartoons is whether their publication is to be perceived as the freedom of speech or rather as an act of blasphemy.

The presentation of western media regarding Mohammad cartoons in the context of 'othering' is an interesting phenomenon to study. Although it has not been proved that the publication of these cartoons was a deliberate attack on a minority groups but in my view, the process of othering can be well exemplified by relating it with the binaries of 'us and them'. It deals with the projection of freedom of expression associated with the western media, and the portrayal of Muslims as fanatics, by showing a caricature of Mohammad with a bomb in the turban. Among various definitions of othering, the most appealing definition of this phenomenon for me is "the projection of one's own positive identity through stigmatization of others". Therefore, in this case of Mohammad cartoons controversies, it somehow depicts the possible attempt of western media to exclude marginalized groups particularly Muslim immigrants in the Europe. And also it reflects that how the Muslim folks present in Europe have been excluded from the mainstream. This is about the contribution of western media for giving the negative image of Islam and Muslims.

## **2. Mohammed Cartoon Controversies as an example of Othering**

Mohammed cartoon controversies can be taken as a particular example of 'othering' in media. Because at first place it deals with the existence of Diaspora in Europe and then secondly, it is important in determining that how in this case the identity of Europe, with regard to religion, has been figured by extrication from some differentiated or imagined other. This can be well understood in the light of Edward Said's analysis that "how the 'West' (especially the Britain, France and later the United States) through the academic field of 'Orientalism' has been constructing an image of Orient as Other to strengthen its identity". (Said in Fursich, 2002: 64)

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This is really very important to study that how the news about Mohammad caricature has been encoded by the global media. In this attempt, Hervik explains that how the news story of a bomb blast at Danish Embassy in Pakistan was presented by International media (Reuters) in which they published true but partial facts, and they completely bypass certain realities. (Hervik et al, 2008: 30)

In the light of the above-mentioned detail, I would like to draw some important points regarding the Mohammad cartoon controversy. In the Western media, the event has been framed first and foremost as a “free speech issue” (Hervik et al. 2008: 34). Mostly it has been related to the freedom of speech or the freedom of expression in western circles. But here a question arises about the democratization of media that whether this representation of Muslims fulfills the requirements of democracy. And also another important question is about the representation of different viewpoints.

James Curran describes that "A basic requirement of a democratic media system should be that it represents all significant interests in society". (Curran in Phillips, 2008: 100). But when it comes to the question of representation it has been often seen that media seldom gives equal representations of all voices. Foucault is also relevant to this study with his theory on discourse as a system of representation. According to Foucault, discourse is a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment, usually by the powerful. His focus is on 'the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern (western) society' (Foucault in Fursich, 2002: 63).

The global media landscape is dominated by media conglomerates, and these corporations are more inclined towards making money and selling audience. Therefore, in fulfilling their motives, many times they do not signify all viewpoints. An immensely influential proposition in this regard is by Peter Golding and Graham Murdoch. While talking about the extension of corporate reach, they argue that "Corporations dominate cultural landscape in two ways. Firstly, an increasing proportion of cultural production is directly accounted for by major conglomerates with interests in a range of sectors, from newspapers and magazines, to television, film, music and theme parks. Secondly, corporations which are not directly involved in the cultural industries as producers can exercise considerable control over the

direction of cultural activities through their role as advertisers and sponsors.” (Golding and Murdoch, 1989: 20-28)

Therefore this actually directs attention towards analysis of the structure of ownership and control of media and to the way media market forces operates. From this point of view, the media institution has to be considered as part of the economic system with close links to the political system. The predominant character of what the media produce can be largely accounted for by the exchange value of different kinds of content, under conditions of pressure to expand markets, and by the underlying economic interests of owners and decision-makers (McQuail, 1994; 82). Hence, because of the profit motives of media moguls, the dominant media are incapable of representing all people. So, those who do not have power are less able to define themselves within the dominant discourse of the society in which they live.

Same is described by Phillips in her article that "those outside the lines are the "others" of the dominant discourse. They are present in every society, and when they speak, as Spivak explains, they cannot be heard". This is also evident from the findings of Angela Phillips. In her study, she has tried to figure out that in this whole debate of Mohammed Cartoons, who spoke and who was heard? She says that in twenty first century Europe, the most disempowered groups are, arguably, migrant populations (Phillips, 2008: 101). So, Mohammed cartoon controversy was not only a debate about the freedom of expression but, it was also a matter of democratic values in the society which empowers everyone to put forth his ideas.

The idea here is also endorsed with the description of an editorial in The Daily Mail, a right wing British daily, "Freedom of speech is a treasured characteristic of a civilized society. But great freedoms involve great responsibilities. And an obligation of free speech is that you do not gratuitously insult those with whom you disagree". (p. 105)

In my view, a common place in global media landscape and especially with the perspective of pluralism is really very difficult. More importantly, a place where everyone finds a sufficient room for expressing and reflective dialogues is hard to find.

The concept of "transnational literacy" by Gayatri Spivak is interesting in this regard in which she emphasizes upon "the ability to read the world in its differences, it allows us to sense that the other is not just a

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'voice' but that others produce articulate texts, even as they, like us, are written in and by a text not of our own making. It is through transnational literacy that we can invent grounds for an interruptive praxis from within our disavowed hope in justice under capitalism" (Spivak/Sanders in Eide et. al, 2008: 23). As the cartoon issue is intense in its nature, therefore Spivak's notion of transnational literacy and the ability to read the world in its differences is extremely helpful in getting each other's point of view. In my opinion, it is important to expand the links between both media practitioners and the media analysts as well to encompass more people, ideas or things.

This issue of othering for Muslims in Europe can also be seen and exemplified in the light of British colonization, in which they tried to exclude 'colonized' by identifying 'others'. Lindsay Ferriter says that as the Empire thought it its duty to civilize the barbarians of conquered and colonized territory, the British immediately "othered" these people as inferior and in need of British assistance to show them the way. Because certain people were different, they required ruling, supervision, and order. As politicians successfully stereotyped and "othered" the colonized, the British at home had no other knowledge or agency to know otherwise. They "othered" the people of these place as well. (Ferriter, n.d)

However, it reveals that the issue of othering is not always talking about minorities. It is also about considering yourself different from 'others', or in a more appropriate way, it can be said that it is actually excluding others from the state of normalcy. During their colonial period in sub-continent, the British brought many changes on political and social levels in the area. The people from sub-continent, constituted as 'others' were refrained from many privileges and sometimes high profile jobs.

This idea is further strengthened with the work of Afrina Choudhary, in her essay about 'The impact of cultural cringing and othering in Bangladesh'. She says that one of the most difficult tasks facing the Indian sub-continent is to free one's own mind from the racist colonial discourses which deem this sub-continent inferior. She further says that it will be a challenge to separate the effects of globalization and media. However, globalization may be seen as a form of neo-colonization which takes us into a broader sphere. (Choudhury, 2010)

The precedent for the Danish cartoons was Salman Rushdie's exercise in magical realism, *The Satanic Verses* (1989), "an odd kind of post-

modern humor” (Davies 2008: 2), whose portrayal of the Prophet and his wives greatly offended Muslims at the time. Rushdie’s book was published in Britain and the British Muslims tried to get the English judges to censor it but discovered that there was no law under which this could be done. William Nygaard, Rushdie’s publisher in Norway narrowly survived an attempted assassination in Oslo in October 1993. However, the controversy about the Mohammad cartoons was the first transnational “humor scandal” which reached across three continents and led to diplomatic crises, riots, economic boycotts, assaults on embassies, and even the loss of lives.

This issue, which was seen as 'insulting' for Muslims was not only objected by them but it was also taken as offensive by some of the Christian communities as well. As Alhassan says, "the issue arises not only with Muslims, Indeed some major Christian organizations and secular entities found the cartoons offensive as well". (Alhassan, 2008: 39). In his study which is based upon semiotic and discourse analysis, Alhassan gives the background to the production of cartoons.

He further says that "given the political and cultural environment in Denmark under which the cartoons were initially produced and consumed, the socio-cultural framework of meaning was obviously anti-Islamic and anti-Arab. Presenting the discursive analysis of Kurt Westergaard cartoon (one of the authors of the original Jyllands-Posten cartoons) with the 'weaponized head' as a nodal point reveals a clearly unambiguous message of Muslims, suicide bombing, and terrorism as commutative " (Alhassan, 2008: 49). Therefore, literally speaking, it tells us that how through the twelve cartoons selected; Muslims are such a widespread social phenomena in Europe. On the basis of this, I can make the argument that powerfully coded elements have been used for projecting Muslims as terrorists and suicide bombers, such as the bomb showing in the turban of supposedly Mohammad's sketch. These cartoons one way or another depict Muslims as associated with fundamentalism, despotism and the oppression of women (showing them in *Niqab*). The cartoons somehow give a reflection of contradiction between west and Islam. They have given the negative images of Islam in the west, presenting them as fundamentalists and terrorists. Although the issue is related to the freedom of speech but at the same time it also deals with the fact that how a certain segment of Europeans represents Muslims, and

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hence excluding them from the mainstream. Therefore, in my view, it shows the inability of some European segments to pay respect and recognition to the "others".

Media has played an important part in turning this issue a global affair. However, these cartoons were extremely provocative in a country like Pakistan. The reaction of cartoons' publication was so strong in Pakistan as compare to the other world. The state religion of Pakistan is Islam and almost 95% of the population is Muslim. So they are the strong believers of the Prophet Muhammad. Pictorial depictions of the Prophet are forbidden in Islam. There are some blasphemy laws in the constitution of Pakistan. The basic purpose of those laws is to protect Islamic authority and to promote the Islamic way of life.

Particularly Government of Pakistan strongly condemned this act. Spokesman of foreign ministry said "I think this Islamophobia and acts of this nature create the divide between religions which we are making efforts to bridge" (Daily Times, November 8, 2005). Facebook and YouTube were banned and there were violent protests across Pakistan against cartoons. People strongly condemned such kind of action in respect of their Holy Prophet.

Pakistani press played a significant role in this regard. Instead of reprinting the caricatures, it published the editorials and articles on the issue and covered the protests and rallies against the newspapers which published the cartoons. The press also published the reaction of other Muslim world by reproducing the stories of international press. (The News, -----)

Besides the reaction of general public, majority of intellectuals and media analysts in the country also opposed the publication of these cartoons in Danish and later Norwegian newspaper. This led to protest across the country some of which escalated into violence. Even the bomb blast outside the Danish embassy in Pakistan is related to this event. The boycott of Danish and Norwegian firms is also the part of this.

Another interesting thing in this regard is about the role of media in Pakistan. Mainly the media is in native language which is Urdu. Whereas almost twenty five percent of print media is in English language. Similarly except for two or three English TV channels, rest of the TV channels are in Urdu or different local languages. As far as English media is concerned it is mostly consumed by the elite class of Pakistan. While handling the issue of Mohammed cartoons, English

media remained stuck to the neutral approach. The content published in editorials and newspaper columns was more inclined towards tolerance and liberalism. Some of the intellectuals also offered to find a way for a civilized protest. However, the situation was a bit contrary in Urdu media. The content of the writers who contributed articles in this media was provoking and stimulating. And in community media, which is in regional languages, more space was given to rouse the issue.

### **3. Global media and a common place for diversity and mutually reflective dialogue**

Eide. et.al remark about a common terrain of global media for diversity and reflective dialogue, especially in the context of Mohammed cartoon controversy is extremely true. I endorse this statement because in my opinion, while publishing these cartoons, the editors did not consider the sentiments and reactions of Muslim Diaspora in Europe, where these Muslim communities might deem these caricatures as insulting or offensive. Therefore, it leads towards a new thought for the existence of Diasporas in Europe. Perhaps they will have to prepare themselves for more struggle and effort for mutual respect and honorable existence. While discussing about the cartoon-controversy Eide et.al, talk about the "double standard discourse" in which they put forth the example of David Irving (Eide et. al, 2008: 22).

In this case, they give the example of David Irving, a famous British Historian, who was sentenced to jail for three years because of denying the Holocaust. "Editorials in Pakistan would challenge European for not taking the caricaturists to court, while the Europeans were at it, since they had imprisoned Irving for what the Pakistan editorials considered equally hate-filled utterances". (Eide et. Al, 2008: 22).

Now although the affair has ended but this issue continues to be raised in discussions about Muslim minorities in the West, that directly or indirectly leads to the discussion on 'clash of civilizations'. Muthesius says that it is no coincidence that the conflict, which owes its origin to the freedom to speak or freedom to offend principle was provoked by twelve cartoons that broke the Islamic ban on depicting the face of the Prophet Mohammed. For the 'cartoon war', ranged against a



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disadvantaged Muslim minority in a western state, broke out precisely because of the established properties of cartoon themselves, which are capable of excluding the other parading at the same time as a celebratory exercise in free speech. (Muthesius, 2009: 151).

Another worth-mentioning thing in this regard is France's ban on Hijab. Anyone wearing a niqab or burqa in public was fined. This law was widely criticized by Muslims across the world as intruding in their religious freedom. Wing and Smith argue that "because of France's Islamophobic tendencies, the Muslim community in France has been "thwarted in its attempt to be both visible and naturalized." Muslims have reacted to the exclusion from the French and European societies in a variety of ways. For some, becoming more devout in the practice of their religion is a peaceful anchor, providing solace in a culturally and religiously alien environment. For others, their fundamentalism may lead to radical and dangerous extremism". (Wing & Smith, 2006: 753).

However, one might think that wearing a niqab or burqa is an issue of freedom for practicing religion in a democratic society. Eide, et al discuss this in the context of 'double standards', where on one hand, the publication of cartoons, which for Muslim Diasporic communities are humiliating, is justified on the basis of freedom of speech, and on the other hand, by imposing ban on hijab, Muslim women are not given the freedom to exercise their religion. Therefore, in my view, it needs to be respectful of diversity in order to ensure liberty and equality for everyone. Global media and journalism must find ways of nurturing diversity while fostering different identities through transnational media networks.

In a time of media-saturated ere, it is very important to find and devise new journalistic strategies for reporting on the 'other'. The role of journalists should be providing and accommodating mutually reflective dialogues, where everyone is represented and have different potentials for democratization. And the goal of the media should be to ensure societal integration.

#### **4. Code of Ethics for Countering 'Othering'**

Although the dos and do nots of journalism vary from society to society, depending upon its culture, but a common way out can be found for all by suggesting and implementing ethical values. People faced another challenge after the publication of Mohammed cartoons, and this controversy led to many conflicts, protest and even violence.

This situation, without any doubt, threatened multiculturalism and more importantly 'the peaceful co-existence'. Therefore, the issue must be addressed with a pragmatic approach; otherwise it may lead to various religious and social conflicts.

In case of Mohammed cartoons, the publication is defended by the notion of 'freedom of expression', but this is again questioned with the provision of absolute freedom. One important thing here is not about the limiting the freedom of expression but it is about ridiculing and hence insulting an entire civilization. Although it is about drawing Holy prophet, which is not accepted in Islamic circles, but it also deals with the wrong portrayal of Muslims as terrorists and extremists. By showing "weaponized head" and "green crescent", 'it conveys the message of the green threat that is often reported in non-conservative narratives that conflate terrorism and Islam, arguing that they pose the major threat to western civilization. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, many in the western media have switched from dire **warnings about "the red threat" to a green one**'. (Alhassan, 2008: 41).

In my opinion, the projection of Muslims as bombers or as a threat should not be justified ethically. The way Muslims dress up i.e., having beard, wearing turban or hijab does not necessarily indicate the inner thoughts for those who are targeted by the fear of Islamic fundamentalism.

While discussing Mohammed cartoon case, Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri, a famous intellectual and analyst in Pakistan describes, "to give respect to an individual's honour and dignity is a fundamental human right protected by law as is the prohibition on blasphemy and defamation as well as the right to religious freedom. The UN Charter, Constitutions and Laws from many countries provide protection to these rights. It is recognized in Article 1 (iii) of UN, Article 9 of European Convention of Human Rights, and the Amendment I of bill of rights in the Constitution of USA". He further gives the details of blasphemy laws in other countries and then says that 'it is evident from these laws that freedom of speech is a fundamental right, but this right is not absolute'. (on web, Qadri, 2010).

Hence, it is vivid from the above discussion, that how freedom of expression is legitimized by law. However, it is necessary to look upon the issue with ethical point of view because the freedom should

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be exercised within the spirits of tolerance and mutual respect for everyone. "The topic of Mohammed cartoons was raised at a forum called Global Inter Media Dialogue in the late summer of 2006, and it was suggested that such a code of ethics could evolve with the assistance of UN". (Eide, et al, 2008: 22).

## **5. Contribution of Peace Journalism**

The phenomenon of 'othering' is well understood in the binaries of "us and them". The same concept is important for the better understanding of peace journalism while reporting both sides (us & them). In the process of othering, the marginalized groups are excluded as 'others'. In this regard, you identify irrational and fundamental as "them" who threat "us" because we defend freedom of speech.

In practicing peace journalism, it is obligatory for journalists to present and give equal importance to the both sides of the picture. To paraphrase Noam Chomsky, there should be consideration of both 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims. (Herman & Chomsky, in Ottosen, 2004: 111). Peace Journalism focuses on giving platform for all voices regardless of us and them. Instead of seeing 'them' as a problem, peace journalism lays emphasis upon seeing the whole conflict as a problem. It leads towards non-violent consequences in which the truths of all sides are exposed. Here, I would argue that peace journalism with its manifesto of giving voices to all parties with empathy and understanding gives a complete solution for the countering of 'Othering'.

Ottosen gives the analysis of two Norwegian newspapers in his study in which he mentions the use of the term devil in *VG(Verdens Gang)*'s editorial headline, one of Norway's popular tabloids. He says that, "by using the term "devil" in the title, *VG* ascribes the connotation of evil to the people behind the attack and therefore rules out any political analysis that could show them in a human light". (Ottosen, 2004: 120). He further says that when a member of the elite uses the language in a particular manner, it is up to the journalist to either refer to it uncritically or set it in context (p 110). So it becomes clear from the above mentioned example that how the words selected for journalism, are important for portraying others. In most of the newspapers in Europe and US, Muslims were portrayed as enemies.

The same thing is also endorsed by Curran's statement in which he says, "a basic requirement of a democratic media system should be

that it represents all significant interests in society". (Curran in Phillips, 2008: 100). So giving representation to all voices includes practical methods for handling and countering biases against each other.

Jake Lynch argues that, since the essence of propaganda in preparing for war is to build up the will to use force, a journalist's duties include presenting the alternatives to the audience. (Lynch, in Ottosen, 2004: 109). Lynch's definition of peace journalism upholds the best in this regard in which he emphasizes upon the choice of media persons for the coverage of news which further creates opportunities in society to consider and value non-conflict responses. Without any doubt, this is the best ethical approach to meet the challenges of othering.

However, in some cases journalists might face pressure either from their respective governments or from different pressure groups. All trying to make the journalists present the things in a way which is not the way journalists would choose, but Journalists should try to work within a professional code of ethics and try to defy all these forms of pressure.

## **6. Conclusion**

The issue of Mohammed cartoons claimed hundreds of dead and injured, and left a trail of physical destruction, desolation, resentment, humiliation and anger. The Danish cartoons event has disturbed peace and harmony among many countries and has accelerated racial differences within Europe. Because of transnational media networks, the crisis travelled across geographical boundaries. And then the reaction was so intense that some cartoonists had to face the death threats. Many people died in anti- Danish and more generally anti-Western protests. Therefore, my intention here is to argue that if western media is enlightened as it claims to be, then it should also be respectful for people's beliefs and religious practices. People should not be offended in the name of humor, because it is very much necessary for the peaceful co-existence. So in this world of transnational's, a big duty lies over the shoulders of media, which should be socially responsible in communicating messages.

Another important analysis which I want to give is being a Muslim. Islamic doctrine does not lead people towards violence or aggression. Islam is an Arabic word, and its meaning is 'peace'. When Muslims

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meet someone, they start with the greetings of peace, by saying 'Assalam-o-Alaikum', which means, 'may you always live in peace'. The teachings of Islam promote peace, tolerance and patience. Therefore, violent demonstrations, setting buildings into fire, destruction and bombing which takes the lives of innocent people is not accepted and strictly discouraged in the religion. Here, again I would argue that responsibility lies over the shoulders of media practitioners in Muslim countries. Decidedly, media can persuade and educate people. Instead of just arousing and igniting the general masses about the event, media can give solutions and inform people about the civilized protest.

As far as Mohammed cartoon controversy is concerned, it produced a kind of frustration and discomfort among many ethnic minorities of Muslims living in Europe. Media should its purpose for providing a 'platform' which reflects the diverse approaches of everyone, although, finding such examples at present is difficult but it can be attained by adhering to the professional ethics and practicing peace journalism in true sense.

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