

Commentary

Media sensationalize controversy over insulting Danish cartoons

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Watching images of angry Muslim protesters broadcast from around the world about the uproar of the Danish cartoon depicting Prophet Muhammad, one might not think twice about the issue. However, the significance this event holds for our society is worth examining.

According to British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), in September 2005, one of the most famous Danish newspapers, the *Jyllands-Posten*, released twelve insulting cartoons about Prophet Muhammad. The cartoons portrayed Prophet Muhammad as a radical. For example, one depicted the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb on top of his head. Immediately, Muslims in Denmark wrote letters to the newspaper and led peaceful protests to voice their disappointment about the rude portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad. However, the press ignored such concerns and the editor refused to apologize. The Danish Muslim leaders then tried working out a solution with the Prime Minister of Denmark. However, he refused to be involved in the situation.

In late October, an Egyptian newspaper, *Al Fagr*, reprinted six of the cartoons. At that point Danish Muslim leaders sought to make the cartoon public in January. They went to Mecca to talk with religious and political leaders and the cartoon became public. Angry masses of demonstrators replaced the peaceful and lawful protests. On Jan. 31, the newspaper finally apologized; however, the situation was already out of hand. Demonstrators had become violent throughout the Middle East. As usual, the media rushed to televise the angry Muslim mobs destroying everything they come across.

It is only when the media started broadcasting these images that I, like most people, became aware of the situation. Being a Muslim, my initial reaction to the violence was of utmost shock. I couldn't believe what was happening! As I found out the details of the story shortly after, I was upset at the media for only televising the angry protests that will catch everyone's attention to confirm the 9/11 stereotype: Muslims are terrorists. The cartoon originally came out in September and the media never broadcast the peaceful protests that occurred before. It seems that the only time Muslims are newsworthy is if they are violent.

However, as the event exploded, the question I kept coming across was: "Why are Muslims making such a big deal about the cartoon?"

While I condemn the acts of the angry protestors, I think in order to understand the situation, one must step into the Muslims' shoes. Muslims view Prophet Muhammad as the ideal human being. They hold the utmost love and respect for him, even more than their own families. When the editor disrespected him through the cartoon, he trampled over one of the most sacred symbols of Islam causing uproar. Muslims were outraged for two reasons. First, according to the Islamic faith taking pictures or drawing images of the Prophet are not allowed. This is in place so that, as Muslims strive to be like the Prophet, they don't worship him. The second reason for their disappointment is that the pictures portrayed a negative image of the Prophet Muhammad, showing all the characteristics he didn't possess. The Prophet Muhammad was a gentle being who symbolized peace, not vulgar and violent.

In order to understand the disappointment felt by the Muslims, let's look at an example from Niles West. On Halloween of 2005, a student imitated Jesus Christ as his Halloween costume and had another student occasionally whip him. Many students were insulted by the disrespectful act and complained to the deans. However, the deans were unable to do anything because the student had the right to wear whatever he or she wanted on Halloween. The disappointment and the anger felt by Christian students at West is parallel to the disappointment and disgust Muslims felt all over the world the moment that the cartoon was published.

When one takes something that another holds sacred, be it symbols or beliefs, and desecrates it, that person has crossed the limits of an underlying respect for one's values. The act not only disrespects another, but provokes them to defend their beliefs. In the Danish cartoon issue, the Muslim mobs were provoked, especially after twelve or so newspapers reprinted the cartoon. However, we must ask ourselves for what reasons did the issue become international when it could have been diffused locally?

It is an expected rule of society to be tolerant and respectful of another's values, however it seems society needs to be reminded of that idea. In order to live in a diverse world as ours, toleration has to be in place. A person needs to feel respected in order to give it back. Lesson to be taken from this: When the socially accepted limits have been crossed, diffuse it by understanding the context within which such occurrences happen and respond critically.

