

Globalizing Resistance: Global Media and the Political Psychology of Oppression and Liberation

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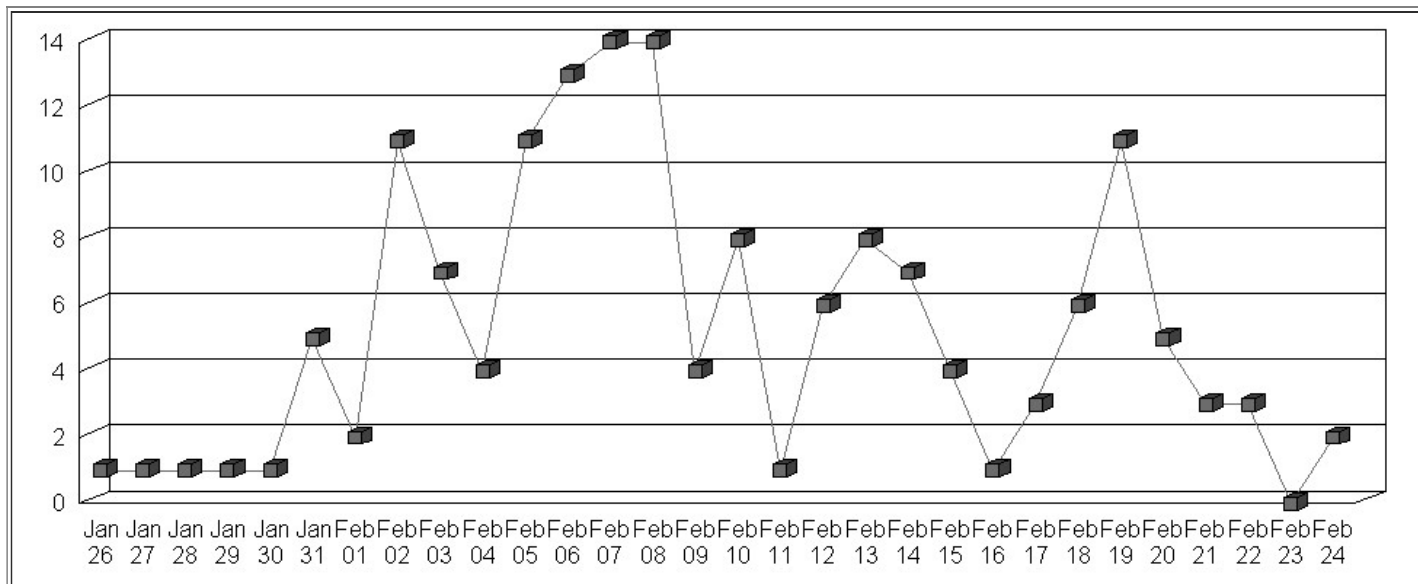
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On September 30, 2005 a large Danish newspaper published a set of twelve cartoons picturing the prophet Muhammad. The text was about freedom of the press; the cartoons, which the author knew would anger Muslims, were to demonstrate freedom as it was being exercised by the newspaper. Thirteen days later Aljazeera's English language website contained a brief report about a protest by muslim organizations in Denmark. Then nothing until the end of January 2006 when there was an explosion of news reporting about protests by Muslim communities demanding an apology for the descretation of their leader and their faith.

We will use this episode to examine the interaction of reporting and protest in the global domain.

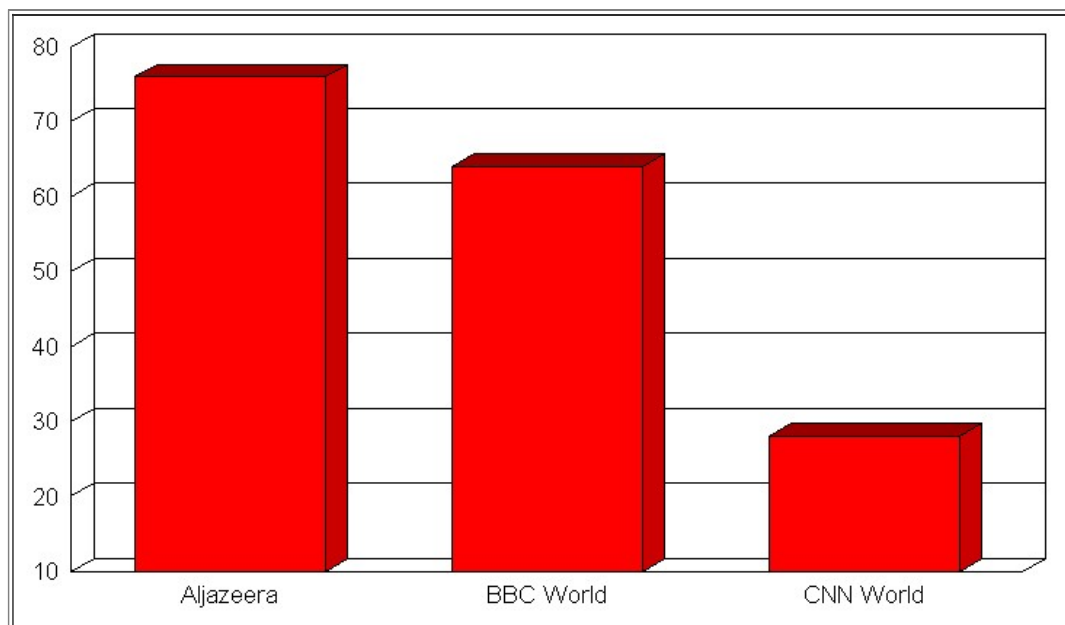
We have been investigating global media since 1998. CNN aired a news program, WorldView, that announced itself as broadcast live around the world. BBC World News reaches around the world. After 2003 we turned to websites because we could extend our analysis to include Aljazeera as well as BBC and CNN. For this analysis we use the websites captured between September 30, 2005 and February 28, 2006, and we are able to track the coverage of this episode on the three news websites.

This first figure traces the number of stories published on the three websites per day from the end of January through the end of February.



There is one story per day January 26 through 30. Then there is an explosion of stories reaching 14 per day on February 7 and 8. The number of stories per day declines after that though it surges up to 11 on February 19th. The last story is February 24, and the episode is over in these global news websites. At several points it dominates the news, and all other stories fade away, but it lasts only a month and it is over.

This second figure compares the number of stories published by each of the three global news websites.



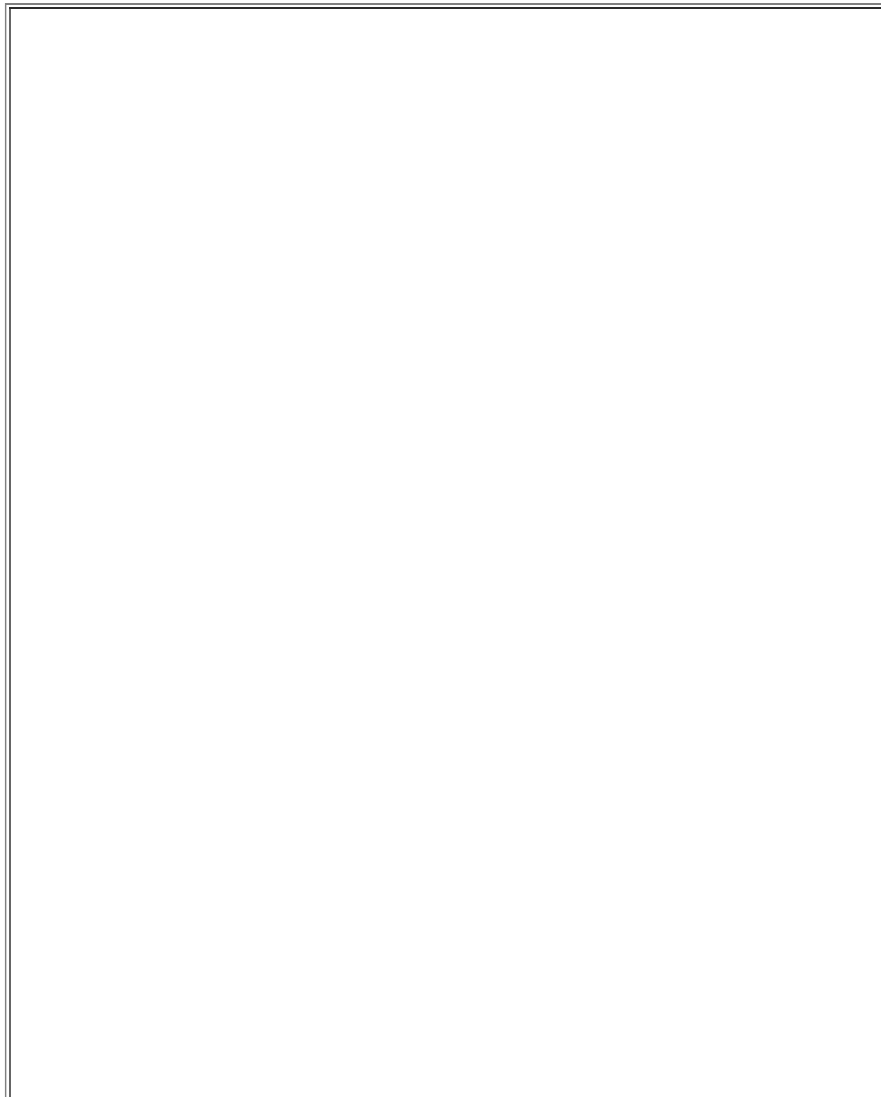
Aljazeera had the largest number of reports -- 74. BBC World was close with 62 stories about protests during the period. And CNN had substantially fewer reports -- 28. This is similar to the pattern we have found in other analyses. When the focus of the story is the muslim world Aljazeera has the largest

number of reports followed closely by BBC World. CNN has significantly cut its global news focus.

News organizations that aspire to a global audience adopt policies that are different from news organizations that are more local in focus. The first indication of this standard in operation is the handling of the cartoons in this episode. This is a story about cartoons. We found almost 200 stories on the three websites and many more pictures. However, the cartoons did not appear in any of these stories. The closest any of the three news organization came to showing the cartoons was a small photograph on the BBC website taken over the shoulder of a person holding a newspaper. The picture on the website was so small that all details of the cartoons are lost -- though when we enlarge the picture it is possible to make out some of the details.



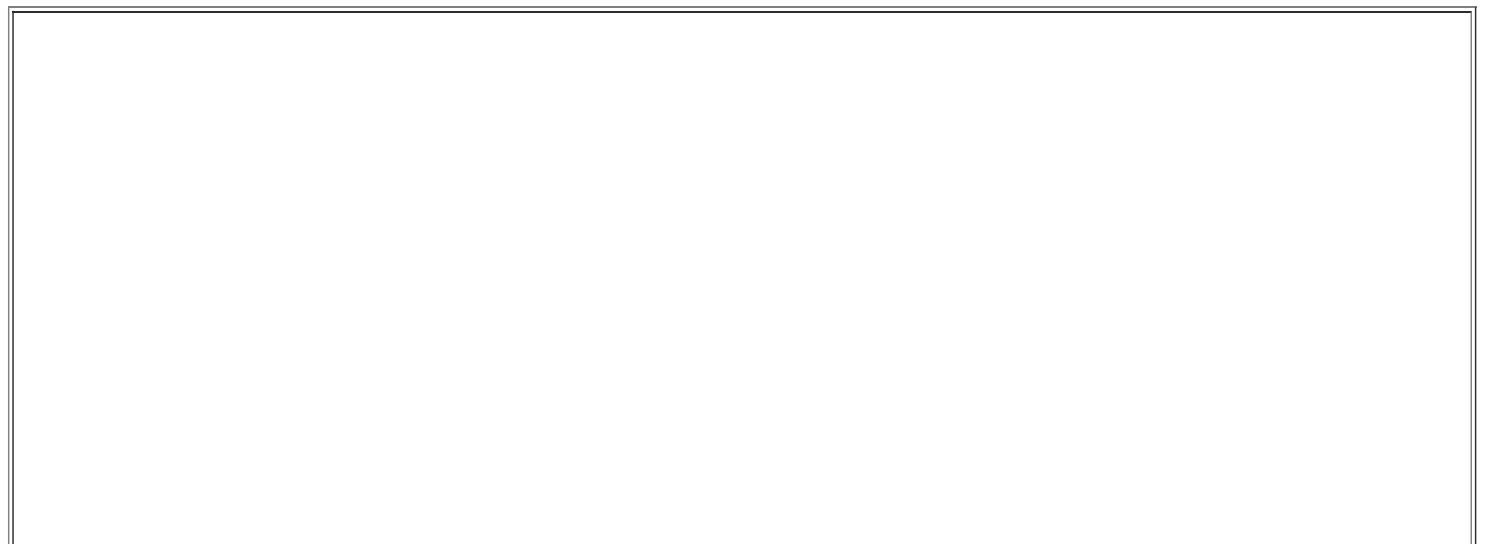
These are the twelve cartoon figures brought together on the website of the Danish newspaper.

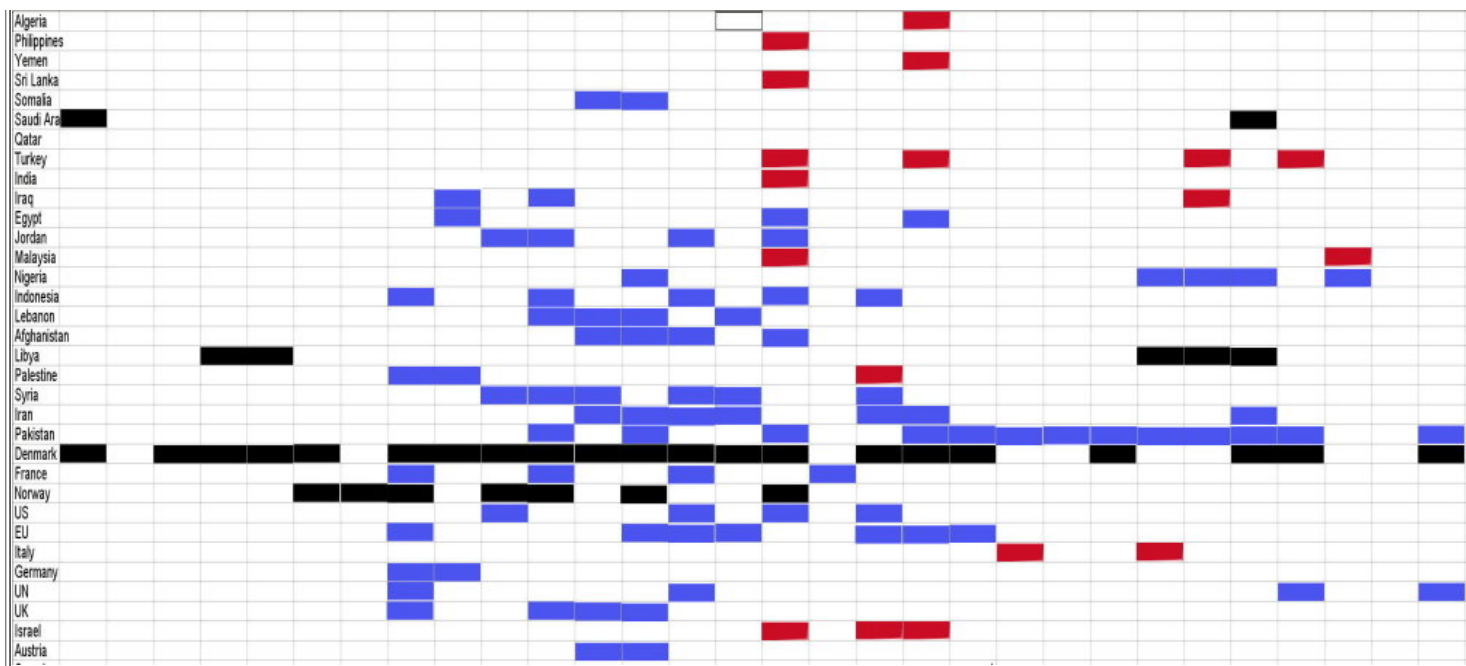




It is antithetical to the principles of the muslim faith to picture the prophet. These pictures precipitated the storm of protests, but only after a significant delay between publication and protests. October through January muslim organizations in Denmark were negotiating for an apology from the newspaper. When it was clear that the apology was not forthcoming the first protests occurred.

There were three waves of protest. This figure shows the countries mentioned on each day in the stories of that day.





The countries colored in black were mentioned on the first days. Denmark is mentioned on the first day and almost every day afterward. The countries above Denmark's almost solid black line are predominantly muslim countries. Those below Denmark are predominantly Christian countries. The second wave of reported protests started early in February. The countries first mentioned in this second wave are colored blue. The third wave begins in the middle of February, and the countries first mentioned after that point are colored in red.

The figure suggests a propagation or contagion pattern for the spread of the protests. The first stories are primarily about Denmark and Norway, where a second newspaper had published the cartoons. When the word is 'out' protests break out all over the world. In Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon and other predominantly muslim countries angry protesters stormed embassies to express their anger. As the second wave faded Algeria, Turkey, Malaysia, Nigeria and others joined in the protests. The waves seemed to flow from center to periphery animated by the communication of previous waves.

A second very clear indication of protests related to the reporting is an action in Italy followed by reaction in Libya. A member of the Italian parliament announced that he would distribute tee shirts with the cartoons on them. The next day 10 people died in protests when the Italian embassy was stormed by angry Libyans. The Italian member of parliament announced, the news media reported, and protests and death followed.

The interaction of protest and reporting does not stop here. We will 'read' this interaction in the images that tell the story as much as do the words. The media generate photographs by the thousands, but filter those to a few hundred that they show to their audiences. The criterion they use is their perception of what is important and especially what will be important to their audiences. Hence, the web was replete with pictures of the cartoons that were filtered out by a media that aspires to draw its audience from the muslim faithful as well as others. This is the media side of the interaction.

The protest side of the interaction is a desire to reach the broadest possible audience with their protests. They act locally. They march, shout, attack embassies in their own places/countries, but they think globally. They produce the shapes, the figures, the scenes that can be photographed for the eyes of a global audience.

It is in the mix of aspirations of media and protesters that what we see is produced.

A dominant image can be termed tit for tat desecration. If you walk on my faith I will walk on yours.



This is one of many pictures that feature desecrating the Danish flag. In this picture it is footprints. We will walk all over what you hold dear. We will walk all over you.

Fire does the tit for tat just as well.



If you disrespect us we will disrespect you by burning your flag. Your flag is destroyed just as you would destroy our faith with your pernicious act.

Notice that both of these pictures are carefully staged. The actors and the photographers cooperate to produce the image that the media filter into the record of this episode. And the image is: we will match your desecration with our own desecration.

There was also identity in the pictures.



We are warriors of faith. This is obviously a posed picture to let Reuters show the world that gun and Koran will unite in the quest for respect.

We are fury.





The fists are raised to the sky. The lines of faces contorted into the face of anger. The book is thrust forward. The crowds marched, shouted with the aid of loudspeakers expressing their reaction to a west that would profane their prophet.

Very quickly the focus of the protests broadened from the indiscretion of a Danish newspaper to grievances against the west. Embassies were burned. And western capitalism was also burned.



KFC, the worldwide symbol of American capitalism, is trashed and burned by a crowd out of control.

The countries that become the object of the protests become the west.



"Down with USA." "End the diplomatic and economic relations with European Union." By February 8 Denmark is almost forgotten as the protesters reach toward their much more general complaints against the west. The west becomes the object protested.

And the evil quartet is identified.



Terrorist Number 1 is George Bush. Terrorist Number 4 is Tony Blair. 'Terrorism' is turned back on the perpetrators of attacks on muslim people. Terrorism is killing innocent women and children -- even when justified in the name of fighting terrorism.

Protest generates media coverage. When people are willing to put their lives on the line the media senses importance for their audience. And media coverage generates protest. A triggering event sparks the first protests. Then they spread in waves around the world fed by the media coverage. For a month this is the focus of global attention. The world is becoming an integrated society -- a society in which the 'wings to the butterfly' here may generate a global catastrophe.