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## **Media and Multiplicity**

*Journalistic practices and the resurgence of xenophobia in Europe*

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*Published in:*  
Translocations

*Publication date:*  
2010

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Blaagaard, B. (2010). Media and Multiplicity: Journalistic practices and the resurgence of xenophobia in Europe. *Translocations*, 6(2). <http://www.translocations.ie/v06i02.html>

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## **Translocations: Migration and Social Change**

An Inter-Disciplinary Open Access E-Journal

ISSN Number: **2009-0420**

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### **Media and Multiplicity: Journalistic Practices and the Resurgence of Xenophobia in Europe**

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#### **Abstract**

In the past few years continental Europe has experienced a resurgence of right-wing party politics, nationalism and xenophobia. In this nationalist revival the media and advanced communications technologies have played a significant role, as evidenced by the debates following cases such as the Danish cartoon controversy, and Dutch politician Geert Wilders's film, *Fitna*. Simultaneously, however, the media is more diverse and rhizomatic than ever and offers potential for cosmopolitanism, transnational ethical relations as well as radical anti-racist and anti-fascist interventions. This article explores the tensions within the relation between journalistic practice and the construction of the idea of the nation and the multiplicity of media and cultures which inhabit the spheres of journalism and nation.

**Keywords:** Journalism, new media, transnationalism, nationalism, cartoon controversy, *Fitna*, cultural citizenship, cosmopolitanism, citizen journalism, freedom of expression.

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#### **Introduction**

The past decade has presented continental Europe with a number of challenges and paradoxes concerning freedom of expression and integration. These paradoxes are in turn closely connected to the media and the senses of belonging to community that they represent. This article explores the politically charged field of global, mediated connections in a context of 'regressions' to forms of overt nationalism. Using recent cases of political and journalistic debates about integration of Muslims into Denmark and the Netherlands, the article contends that despite the global potentialities of online journalism and citizen journalism, the imagined community of the nation and the state continues to significantly shape their horizons. The contextual discussions presented in this article are a departure from both celebrations of online potentials and dystopian visions of transnational racism. Rather through recent examples the discussions are presented as a cautionary tale about the uses and abuses of mediated transnational relations.

The upsurge in centre-right and right-wing party politics and movements across Europe was underlined on 4 June 2009 when European citizens voted in the EU parliamentary

election. The election showed a significant rise in popularity for these parties in countries like the Netherlands, Denmark and the UK. The parallel resurgence notwithstanding, the nationalist parties in UK, the Netherlands and Denmark are not the same and their popularity does not rest on the same rhetoric or issues. The national specificities of colonialism, World War II and migration history explain differences within the nationalist parties in Europe (Griffin & Braidotti 2002, Gilroy 2004). UK commentators on the EU election 4 June 2009 downplay the importance of the British National Party's (BNP) entrance into the EU parliament and urge us 'to be wary, but not panicky' (Guardian 2009) about the result. However, in countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, what played out in these elections is not a recent development. In these two countries, conventionally praised for their 'tolerance' and sexual freedoms, anti-religious and anti-migration policies have been high on the agenda for more than a decade and have enjoyed a high media profile. In Denmark, for instance, issues of 'integration' were the main topics in the national elections of 2001 and 2005, and raised Dansk Folkeparti (the Danish People's Party) - a right-wing party that drove a debate on integration and 'integrating' Muslims in particular to the mainstream political arena - to become the third largest party in parliament and the main supporting party for the Liberal/Conservative Government. The Government has, since 2001, been actively supported by Dansk Folkeparti, and migration policies have been increasingly tightened and on several occasions have been criticised by human rights groups. As Hervik (2008) and Wren (2000) have documented, this political constellation has been shaped by concerted support from the popular press, including a discourse of 'values-based' journalism involving an explicitly nationalist lens.

This right-wing and populist resurgence has taken place in an era characterized by rapidly expansive and unevenly globalizing developments in communications technology. While national political actors and public figures must continue to fix on the imagined community of the nation-state, transnational, mediated connections across nations and communities are held to offer the potential of new proximities and empathy between distant strangers (Chouliaraki 2006, Silverstone 2007). Blogging, social networking sites, multiple digital platforms, satellite television, and mobile communications devices and applications offer constantly expanding means by which residents of Europe have been able to communicate, engage personally and emotionally with each other, and participate in the democratic debates in national and European networks. Although many of these technological advances are commodity forms and therefore restricted in terms of access, there is enough variety in the ways in which communication opportunities have developed to speak of a general expansion of, or a multiplication of access points into, what Habermas calls the 'public sphere'. This in turn enables a shift in the meaning of the public sphere, creating a tension between the national and the global.

In this article I will explore the tension between the transnational cosmopolitan potential of new, mediated proximities and what they may generate, and the nationally focused expressions that tap this potential to initiate and engage in anti-migration and anti-Islamic debates. I will use two cases, Denmark and the Netherlands, to develop my argument that despite the transnational and viral character of new journalistic genres like citizen journalism, social media and blogging, to a large extent journalism and news sharing

remain wedded to the nationally imagined community. Nevertheless, the new 'journalists' present the potential of transnational change by enabling connectivity and possible understanding and solidarity across national, ethnic and religious borders. Such developments are necessary to fight global crises such as the environmental crisis and financial and political crises that energise current populist, racist and proto-fascist movements. It is the imbrication of digital technology and the social (Sassen 2006) that shapes the argument in this article. Advanced media technologies and national communities are interdependent, and it is within the structural framework of the national that transformative socio-political communities may appear.

These debates are related to the events following the Danish cartoon controversy (2005 - 2008) and the broadcasting of Geert Wilders's film *Fitna* (2008). The Danish cartoon controversy began with the publication in a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands Posten*, of twelve specially commissioned satirical cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. The cartoons were meant to critique the allegedly self-imposed censorship that artists, journalists and other public performers practiced after 9/11. The accompanying text specified several incidents in which Danish stand-up comedians and authors (most famously Kaare Bluitgen, who was authoring a book about Muhammed's life and reportedly had difficulties finding an illustrator) had felt limited in their freedom to express themselves on the topic of Islam. The publication sparked angry responses and violence across vast geographical and virtual spaces and threw Denmark – the nation and the state<sup>1</sup> – into a politically turbulent, thoroughly globalised, debate. *Fitna* (2008) is a short movie by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders, which aims to posit causal links between the Qur'an and terrorism, and makes use of explicit and repetitive images of violence, assassinations and mortified bodies. Although both texts were political interventions in what has been framed as 'domestic' debates on the integration of Muslims into predominantly Christian societies, they have different starting points and trajectories in relation to the media, the national and the transnational. I will examine them in order to discuss issues of cultural belonging constructed and maintained through journalistic practices and social media.

### **Multiplicity of media, multiplicity of cultures**

How does journalism relate to emerging discussions of transnational ethics or cosmopolitanism? Transnational ethics or cosmopolitanism is significant when coupled with journalistic practice for at least two reasons. Firstly, journalism and the idea of the nation-state have a common history (Anderson 1991). In support of the national community, journalism constantly and overtly builds on the idea that there is a common 'we', a common frame of reference, to which the news items implicitly refer. Often that frame of reference follows the boundaries of the nation-state or a slightly wider (or at times narrower) ethnically, linguistically or religiously-defined community. This allows journalists to routinely reproduce social imaginaries through repetition of cultural constructions and memories that *may* result in the exclusion of minority groups and/or gloss over unrecognised multiculturalism. Secondly, moving from predominantly national community formations to transnational and globalised communities based on the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using "nation" to mean the imagined community which I will return to shortly, and "state" to mean the political and legal community.

internet and other new media communication, journalistic practices are challenged and changing. These two aspects of the relations between cosmopolitanism and journalism confront the cosmopolitan potential of technological advances with journalistic conservatism, and those same journalistic practices are confronted by technological advances.

Research on journalism and globalisation tends to focus on the technologies. Technology is seen to enable (citizen) journalism to reach beyond national and cultural borders and posits journalism as either the (universal) fourth estate or a direct political and democratic power (Anderson and Ward 2007, Durham and Kellner 2001, Berry 2005). A fifteen-second film made on a mobile phone showing Iranians on the streets of Teheran during the election in 2009 may be posted online, cover unprecedented virtual grounds, and end up looped in national and international broadcast media, urging politicians to comment upon or condemn the Iranian election. However, technological developments also change the power relations within journalistic practice. The editorial power held by journalists and editors – the gate-keeper role – is, of late, dispersed to a billion mobile phone users, bloggers and webmasters and has blended the private and public spheres. Nick Couldry (2009: 438) argues that digital media is now integral to how selves appear. While it is a myth that there is a mediated centre to which we all need access in order to dialogically engage in constituting the public sphere and a common society, this myth is simultaneously challenged by media habits: despite an abundance of media outlets, broadcast media and newspapers are still favoured for sourcing news, rather than the multiple voices and interpretations available online. (Hafez 2007). In effect, “[m]edia production and use are proving conservative cultural forces in many parts of the world. They are generating a reality which the ‘globalization’ approach struggles to cope with” (Hafez 2007:2).

Elaborating on this struggle, Nick Couldry argues that these conservative cultural media will not undergo radical change and decline, rather ‘new media’ create a struggle between “market-based fragmentation” and “continued pressures of centralisation that draw on new media related myth and rituals” (Couldry 2009: 447). This ambivalence is central to the cases under discussion. The Danish cartoons were published in a national newspaper, and the controversy was localised for the first six months and remained a national issue for many journalistic, academic and political participants in the debate. *Fitna* was likewise embedded in Dutch ‘integration’ politics, although it connected itself to a broader European debate by using a particularly provocative cartoon drawn from the Danish cartoon controversy years earlier in the film’s intro and end.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Wilders deliberately posted *Fitna* online rather than using national television, creating both a viral dynamic and a conventional debate about self-censorship at the national level.

### **Citizen(s) and journalism(s)**

The Internet is not divorced from the social, material and economic world behind the keyboards and computer screens – it is embedded in and extends them. This structure allows for a different kind of participatory mediation: citizen journalism. Citizen

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<sup>2</sup> Wilders was subsequently sued by Westergaard for using his cartoon without permission.

journalism comprises two major concepts in democratic sustenance: citizenship and freedom of the press. Citizenship is the legal but also social and cultural relation (Slade 2010) between the private and the public, whereas journalism can be seen as the professionalisation of this relation adding craft, ethical codes of conduct and routines and formats to the practice. Citizenship as well as journalism is shaped by a number of rights and obligations: The right to speak but also the obligation to listen (Silverstone 2007) and understand others in order to live convivially in a common society (Gilroy 2004). In relation to issues of integration and migration, citizenship is not merely a legal contract and a passport of a certain nationality, but it is a far more complex and multilayered cultural connection that draws on imagined communities in terms of race, sex, religion and language. Journalism is at the heart of the construction of this cultural citizenship on the national level. The media helps construct a nation-state that supports “an idea of a fundamental connectedness between members of the nation” (Husband 2003). Charles Husband writes that “[t]his view of the world is usually constructed and sustained by a supportive “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in which a selective amnesia toward the past allows for a consistent and positive account of the ‘national history’ to be disseminated (2003: 202). However, with an increase in citizen journalistic approaches and contributions to the public sphere and to mainstream media, cultural citizenship is potentially revolutionised from within because of the potential social, cultural and political diversity in journalistic products and participation.

Citizen journalism can be divided into three categories. Firstly, when citizens have used the web to share their knowledge and experiences it has often been in times of crisis. From 9/11 to the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and Iranian election demonstrations in 2009, “ordinary citizens using the web, [has] fostered a heightened sense of personal engagement for ‘us’ with the distant suffering of ‘them’” (Allan 2010: 23). Secondly, political and issue-based blog sites and discussion fora have enabled political communities and debates and potentially radical interventions in mainstream party politics. Finally, online opinion writing and visual expressions may take the much looser form of viral life and develop in rhizomatic structures throughout the web using social media networks. This new and relatively flexible power structure allows the *citizen* in citizen journalism to hold a *potential* cosmopolitan or trans-national citizenship and connect across borders and boundaries, while the practice of nationally focused *journalism* remains nationally bounded in terms of culturally constructed ideas of ‘them’ and ‘us’. In this article, citizen journalism refers to journalistic products from and news sharing among ‘ordinary’ users, which are uploaded, shared, and commented upon online but also in mainstream media. It is journalism to the extent that journalism is news and knowledge sharing and a format through which the social, cultural and political contract of citizenship can be engaged. Citizen journalism is not a purely online phenomenon, although the examples in this article are focused on the online and viral potential of citizen journalism. Moreover, it encompasses what is often called ‘meta journalism’, or social news, which involves the practice of re-postings and virally distributed news. This three-fold idea of citizen journalism involves a multiplicity and connectivity that poses a challenge to the myth of the mediated centre. It is easy to see why citizen journalism is heralded (Beckett 2008) as a radical development which questions both the idea of journalistic practices in national news media and the social and cultural practices of

integration through media use and presents the potential of a cosmopolitan media and journalistic practice.

Nevertheless, arguments about these potentialities must recognise how ‘new’ media are always already embedded in histories and practices of commercialisation, market, and regulatory control (Fenton 2010), and deployed in networks of personal and political affiliation. It is mainly in contrast to mass mediated culture that virally distributed cultural representations come into focus, as they pop up in and from unexpected places and often unintentionally go viral. Although, many citizen journalism sites, or social media sites, have ways of controlling and gate-keeping the content, viral cultural representations are not only based on the interests of the viewers, the number of ‘clicks’ on the sites, and the viewers’ decisions to pass on the word. They are also often based on items produced by the viewers themselves, by citizen journalists or simply people broadcasting themselves on YouTube, for instance. In viral cultural formations, the boundaries between the producers of culture and nation and the users of culture and nation are blurred.

A further challenge to the myth of the mediated centre is *multiplicity within societies*. As Benedict Anderson argues, “[...] nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they came into historical being [...]” (1991: 4). In *Imagined Communities* (1991), Anderson discusses print-capitalism and its role in the construction of the nation-state. Historically, linguistically and culturally, the media is strongly connected to the idea of the nation. The repetition of “common-sense” within the media continually sustains the idea of the nation as being “immemorial” and “glid[ing] into a limitless future” (Anderson 1991: 11-12). The media also tends to construct the nation as homogenous and unified. However, today the nation-state is increasingly experienced, if not always valued, as a multicultural space. Nick Stevenson (2003) writes that cosmopolitanism needs to be coupled with ideas of multiculturalism. Identity and national belonging are constructions that have established themselves and sustained themselves through the exclusions of others. Stevenson suggests breaking apart the notion of a unified identity by emphasising how we are all out of place, somehow. This dovetails with the work of postcolonial thinkers and feminists. Paul Gilroy (2004), for example, argues for *cosmopolitanism from below* – an estrangement, or a disloyalty to civilisation, as the feminist writer Adrienne Rich (1979) calls it. The point in these theorists’ work is that a multiplicity of voices within as well as outside the self needs to be represented, with clear ramifications for media work. Disparate voices need to be heard in the media in order to give a more inclusive and accurate picture of the society, and nation. This is what *hospitality* or an *obligation to listen* means to Roger Silverstone (2007).

### **Journalistic Nations: Rights and Obligations**

Nevertheless, the boundaries of the imagined communities of Denmark and the Netherlands are drawn dramatically on the bodies of migrants and – in the case of the Netherlands – postcolonial subjects. Public debates surrounding second and third generations of ‘migrants’ emphasises the durable power of the migrant ‘mark’. Although a person may hold a Danish passport, he or she may not be recognised as a Dane in the

general Danish media (Andreassen 2007). In the last decade, Denmark has developed the strictest regulations on immigration in Europe<sup>3</sup>. It is in these contexts that the publication of the twelve cartoons of Mohammed and *Fitna* as political statements must be understood. The cartoons were justified as a response to self-censorship in the public sphere imposed by ‘zealous Muslims’<sup>4</sup>, and *Fitna* aimed to shed light on the political and totalitarian ideology perceived to inform Islam.<sup>5</sup> As such, both media events laid claim to a status as watch-dogs and guardians of democracy. But they were also statements of cultural homogeneity under attack: Western freedoms versus Islamic terror. The multiplicity of societies and voices today was ignored by both products, indeed it was Muslim Otherness that was presented as the problem.

Where does this leave the cosmopolitan aspirations of public communication in a digital era? As Roger Silverstone states,

[t]he cosmopolitan individual embodies, in his or her person, a doubling of identity and identification; the cosmopolitan, as an ethic, embodies a commitment, indeed an obligation, to recognise not just the stranger as other, but the other in oneself. Cosmopolitanism implies and requires, therefore, both reflexivity and toleration. In political terms it demands liberty and justice. In social terms: hospitality. (2007:14)

As opposed to a right-based claim – for instance the right to free speech or free assembly – an obligation takes responsibility as its starting point, what one ought to do, a conception of the good. As such, obligations serve as a framework for rights. Obligations strive for communication, Silverstone argues, they presuppose a receiver or a communication partner, and they are not simply self-expression but must also sustain the conditions of communication. So when Silverstone talks about obligation to listen he is also talking about hospitality in the sense of Kant’s notion of man’s right to presentation, to present him/herself. Silverstone translates this readily into the mediated space as the right to *representation*, to be listened to, and heard. Silverstone thus envisages media – and to Silverstone, media is *all* media – as an ideal ethical, cosmopolitan relation between others. In political terms, press councils are supposed to help the press balance freedom and fairness (Ritter and Leibowitz 1974, 2009), and may regulate journalistic practice, i.e. if the press crosses a line a council may be consulted and can issue a warrant for the particular medium to publish a retraction. Whereas the journalistic profession needs to strike that balance, the forms and actors of social network media and citizen journalism do not. Given that these journalistic modes are multiplying rapidly, the question of journalistic ethics is becoming an issue also for citizens, and always-potential citizen journalists.

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<sup>3</sup> In November 2010 the latest addition to the tightening of migration policies was added to Danish Law. This was the 18<sup>th</sup> regulation on the issue since 2001 when the current government took seat (Politiken 17.11.2010, <http://politiken.dk/politik/ECE111646/vko-aendrer-udlaendingeloven-for-18-gang/> accessed 21.11.2010).

<sup>4</sup> Jyllands-Posten’s text which accompanied the cartoons stated this reason for the commission and publication of the cartoons, Jyllands-Posten 30.08.2005

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.geertwilders.nl/> accessed 21/11/10, see for instance transcript of speech given by Mr Wilders at Columbia University 21.10.09.



This tension is manifest in the examples. *Jyllands-Posten* has ethical guidelines to follow, stating that although freedom of the press is tightly connected to the press' ability to collect and distribute information to the public, it should do so while being obliged to recognise the citizens' rights to respect for personal integrity.<sup>6</sup> Wilders' work answers to the general laws of freedom of expression and liability; the legal contract of citizenship focused on his right to speak. Yet, if we look at Wilders' *Fitna* as a product of citizen journalism, as visual political blogging, we may be able to debate the film and the subsequent online YouTube discussions in terms of mediated cultural citizenship and the obligations of hospitality.

### **Multi-Media-Citizens**

We are then, yet again, confronted with the *multiplicity of the media*. The concept of citizen journalism is a burgeoning field of interest for many new media scholars. But questions remain as to whether it is really 'journalism' at all (Goode 2009, Lasica 2008). As a consequence of these ambivalences, and because of the double agency and cultural embeddedness of *citizenship* and *journalism* described above, disentangling the story from the journalist and the media in stories like the Danish cartoon controversy and *Fitna* represents a challenge. As van Zoonen et al make clear (2010), much of the news generated in the days leading up to the broadcasting of *Fitna* on Liveleak.com was about the maker of the film rather than about the political issues he sought to raise. Wilders' film was scheduled for national television but was cancelled after a heated discussion in the national media on Wilders's freedom of expression. It was released on liveleak.com<sup>7</sup>, then retracted, then posted on YouTube subtitled in different languages.

The controversy surrounding the platform for release centred on Wilders' right as a citizen, his "right to shout" (de Vries 2010). Most of the videos responding to the broadcasting of *Fitna* were in fact user-replicated (van Zoonen et al 2010); mix 'n' match productions of a visual and political character that made a political point and allowed the persons who posted the videos to engage in the political debate that followed by producing statements and contentions. Citizen journalism by definition poses the question as to what degree citizens (journalists) are responsible in terms of educating and informing the public and of producing fair reports? And, who among the citizenry are they educating and informing? The question can then be asked of the profession of journalism: are the journalists not citizens too, embedded in the social and the technological simultaneously?

In the case of the Danish cartoon controversy, the discussion *could have* been about the treatment of minority groups or integration in the Danish public sphere but was framed by the media as being about journalistic practice and freedom of the press. It was

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<sup>6</sup> In order to make a formal complaint to the Press Council in Denmark you need to be personally involved in the claim and you have to complain within four weeks have passed. There was no complaint made to the Danish Press Council in the case of the cartoon controversy.

<sup>7</sup> Liveleak.com is a social media/citizen journalism website with the catch phrase; "redefining the media". Liveleak.com as well as wikileaks.com and other such websites that proclaim to ensure the truth be heard are a topic for investigating in themselves, but such an analysis goes beyond the scope of this article.

arguably never about either but rather about “Danes’ prejudice against religion”<sup>8</sup> (Holm 2010). The very fact that the cartoon controversy was initiated by a newspaper allowed it to be framed as being about freedom of speech and about freedom of the press. The press, although an independent democratic organ, provides for debates of public import and for the citizenry to make informed decisions. Therefore, freedom of speech in relation to the press calls for responsibility of the press (Silverstone 2007), or fairness (Ritter and Leibowitz 1974, reprinted 2009). Yet this freedom became a defining ‘national value’ used to exclude.

### **The Cartoons, *Fitna* and Viral Culture**

The Danish cartoon controversy was stoked within a very local political debate on ‘integration’. The twelve cartoons were commissioned by the cultural editor, Flemming Rose, ostensibly in order to create a debate about perceived self-censorship, but ultimately to contribute to a national debate that depended on a specific cultural frame of reference congruent with national boundaries and language barriers. The editor counted on a one-to-many media communication (Couldry 2009), yet this proved to be a miscalculation. The readers and public for *Jyllands-Posten* varied in terms of cultural belonging and citizenship within the various social networks within Denmark. Allied with this networked reality is the speed with which the boundaries of national or regional stories are transformed through a multiplicity of media. Importantly, the readership were no longer simply receivers, but simultaneously potential journalists themselves, potential *citizen journalists*. They reacted politically and took part in the initial journalistic presentation by discussing the issues involved online and by uploading the cartoons onto the Internet when they were no longer being re-printed by the national newspapers and media institutions. This enabled the ‘story’ to unfold through its transnational travels in a dense system of many-to-many media communication (Couldry 2009). The visual nature of the cartoons - rather than written text - allowed the message to travel easily across linguistic borders. This meant that the translation necessary for the message to spread was fairly uncomplicated. The cartoons were readily applied to different cultures and provoked an immediate response because the text and the cartoons were detached. Moreover, during the controversy, attention quickly turned to one specific cartoon, namely the one drawn by Westergaard and which depicted Muhammed wearing a turban that turned into a bomb. Although most of the 12 cartoons were implicitly if not explicitly critical towards Islam the connection between Islam and terrorism was not overtly made by most of them.

The cartoons did not start out viral in the sense of the term described above. Technologically, they spread through mass media, one-to-many, and through cultural exchanges. However, they were quickly seen as unnecessarily provocative by many international mass media and featured instead online, many-to-many. Once online they spread rhizomatically, generated and developed by politically and culturally interested people. Today they pop up readily in a google search. In this way the changed cultural

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in Denmark religion is seen as something which “we” don’t practice. Wendy Brown (2008) in *Regulating Aversion* argues that liberal democracy is based on the assumption that it is built on law, whereas illiberal governance is built on culture and religion. The cartoon controversy made the cultural and religion (secular or not) basis of liberal democracy apparent.

framework enabled a vaster debate, engaging more geographical and virtual ground than expected. This debate encompassed voices for or against the publication of the cartoons (Modood, Hansen, Bleich, O’Leary, Carens 2006; See also Jerichow and Rode 2006).

In contrast to the cartoon controversy, the broadcasting of *Fitna* began online and virally because of its controversial nature and because of allowing the debate to appear before the actual publication – not the other way around as in the case of the Danish cartoon controversy. By releasing the film and then retracting it, Wilders managed to stir up (online and other mediated) interest and allow a window of opportunity for interested people to download the film and distribute it virally. It turned up in all sorts of translations, subtitled, shortly after its release and retraction. Today, it can be watched readily on YouTube. The film is an explicit display of pornographic representation and functions as such a “trivialized catalogue of contemporary horrors” (Braidotti unpublished). Also the video responses to *Fitna* that van Zoonen et al are discussing in their extended project on *Fitna* are a part of the YouTube ‘archive’ on the film. Wilders could generate a discussion without a product to discuss because he counted on the already-present transnational community of critical voices against Islam, already present thanks to cases like the Danish cartoon controversy. Wilders built his case on a many-to-many mediated community online.

### **Re-establishing “Them and “Us”**

In terms of cultural imaginings, the technological advances, such as the Internet, challenge the myth of the traditional one-to-many and centralised media structure. In the case of the cartoons they initially disrupted the intended message, whereas *Fitna* drew on the many-to-many structure. However, in terms of content and analysis of these two cases, neither the centrally structured media produced debate nor the viral, online by-products left much room for multiplicity or diversity in society. Both cases quickly developed into a dichotomous debate that turned on “freedom of speech” or “Muslim regret and anger towards the publication of the cartoons/*Fitna*”. It was the case in the mass media as well as online that the debate underlined a discussion on Denmark or the Netherlands and Islam marked by representations of homogenous cultures, incompatible with each other (Blaagaard 2009, van Zoonen et al 2010). Van Zoonen et al, moreover, recognise the lack of debate in the YouTube videos they analyse. They identify three different kinds of video debate presentations: cut ‘n’ mix, testimonials, and tagging and jamming. Cut ‘n’ mix are short films constructed by editing content to produce an argument for or against *Fitna*. Testimonials are videos of a person telling his or her personal opinion or experience; and tagging and jamming is a way of burying *Fitna*, obstructing access to the film and thereby making it difficult to watch it and to spread its content and argument virally. It is clear that none of these styles of presentation invite the viewer to debate. In Silverstone’s terminology, none of them are built on obligations and sustaining communication, but are expressions of opinions based on the right to speak. Although it is possible to upload a response to a video, the videos are made to demonstrate rather than discuss individuals’ testimonies and opinions (van Zoonen et al 2010).

The same could be said about *Fitna* itself. The production, launch and expression is simply speaking a cut ‘n’ mixed opinion broadcast online, like any other YouTube video, although perhaps more expensive and politically potent due to the person behind the video – in effect a YouTube video with effective PR backing. This is emphasised by the use of the Kurt Westergaard cartoon depicting a man with a turban in the shape of an ignited bomb. *Fitna* tailgates the Danish cartoon controversy by opening the video with this image. It is a response video condoning the cartoons and the controversy it caused.

This *battle* continues on the social network site, Facebook, where the administrators of a page called “Ingen Unskyldninger, til Mohammed”<sup>9</sup> end their eight points of conduct for members of the site by saying “If you are not able to express your self in the most simple English we will erase your posts - but then again, you would never understand why! :- (“ And continues to make the point clear, in capital letters: === PLEASE WRITE IN ENGLISH OR DANISH (THIS IS A DANISH BASED GROUP). ===  
=== MESSAGES IN TURKISH, ARABIC OR WHATEVER ELSE LANGUAGE WILL BE DELETED!!! ===”<sup>10</sup> The Facebook group is dedicated to counter-act what it sees as concessions to people who want the cartoons censored or apologised for<sup>11</sup>.

Although based online within a social network spanning large parts of the industrialised world, the group makes a regional claim by emphasising the national Danish base and the English language as fundamental to any discussion the site may host. The English language is opposed to “Turkish, Arabic or whatever else language”. The dichotomous ‘them’ and ‘us’ discourse is thereby upheld, and the conservatism of the many-to-many receivers and producers of news are thereby challenging the technological advances and potentials.<sup>12</sup>

### **Journalism Defending “Our” Culture**

It is not only cultural citizenship and online social networks that reproduce the national in the transnational context. In 2008 three men were arrested, suspected of planning to carry out a deadly attack on the cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard. As a response, the major national Danish newspapers reprinted the infamous cartoon. Referring to freedom of expression the Danish newspapers covered the alleged murder plans, and as part of their coverage they unanimously decided to reprint the cartoon. Recently, one of these national Danish newspapers, *Politiken*, settled a lawsuit out of court with a number of descendants of Mohammed. Following this, the newspaper published a statement in which it apologised for the hurt caused by the reprinting. The settlement was met with stern reactions, not only from media experts, Islam critics and the like, but also from politicians who all condemned the settlement. Thus, Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen was disappointed that the newspapers did not “close ranks” on this issue<sup>13</sup>. The political leader of Dansk Folkeparti, Pia Kærsgaard, found it likewise “embarrassing that Tøger

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<sup>9</sup> Trans: No apologies/concessions for Mohammed

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/group.php?gid=8832907735&ref=search&sid=702549271.1041449131..1>, the group has got 12,107 members and was founded in 2008.

<sup>11</sup> It is also a response to another Facebook website called “Nej til genoptryk af Mohammed tegningerne/no more Mohammed cartoons” which only has 15 members.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that there are also Facebook sites urging to “Stop Wilders” having 750 fans.

<sup>13</sup> Jyllands-Posten 26.02.2010: *Statsministeren bekymret over forlig* <http://jp.dk/indland/article1993328.ece>

Seidenfaden [the editor in chief of *Politiken*] sold out Danish and Western values such as freedom of expression”.<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking the politicians’ comments denounced the settlement agreement as producing a weak link in the struggle against non-Danish or non-Western culture. In these debates, journalism is called back to stand not –as Schechter (2008) would have it – for fourth estate visions or watch-dog functions, but in defence of what is perceived as ‘our culture’. The national newspapers are called upon to stand shoulder-to-shoulder to defend the freedom of speech<sup>15</sup>, defined and cemented through the controversial debate following the cartoons and claimed as a national value. Politically as well as culturally and journalistically, journalism was expected to defend a cultural citizenship based on the national context and within the national and ethno-religious boundaries.

## Conclusion

In the case of the cartoon controversy the technological advances broke boundaries and produced a response to the publication of the cartoons unprecedented and unexpected by the Danish national imaginary. It became clear that the nation is not homogenous and the spell of national media was broken. The controversy developed into a story focused on the technological advances, the potential and the rights of the media, and spread virally across the industrial world, but not much was said about the obligations of the media or the responsibilities of hearing more voices than “theirs” and “ours”. *Fitna* was part of that story as one man’s very influential opinion. However, in the end both the centralised and the viral media structure sustained a national idea of cultural belonging and citizenship. Indeed, that idea was supported by the latest development in the cartoon controversy reiterated above. Instead of developing a trans-national ethics or cosmopolitan sense of belonging supported by a new conception of citizenship, divided from the imagined nation, the centralised and mainstream media as well as the viral media reinforced the imagined community confined within national or ethnically/culturally defined boundaries. The debate returned to a constructed homogenous imaginary, despite the initial disruption and the technological and social potential of circumscribing the mainstream media.

One consequence of the imbrication of the social and the technological, and the strong ties that seems to continuously bind journalistic practice in all its forms to the nation, is that it becomes increasingly difficult to blame *the media* for imperialising culture. The two – media and culture – are inseparable and intertwined with citizen journalism and social networking sites to a degree that we – the users of the media – need to take responsibility for the cultural and political products created by “the media”, if “the media” has a future as a concept at all (Couldry 2009). We need to develop reflexivity and reflexive journalistic genres (Chouliaraki 2006). Viral culture is just one aspect that is challenging the *the* in ‘*the media*’ by dispersing editorial power, production, and cultural signification and identification. The technological advances, the internet and social media, are potentially cosmopolitan exactly because of their social, human, and

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<sup>14</sup> Politiken 26.02.2010: *Politiken indgår forlig i Mohammed-sag*  
<http://politiken.dk/indland/article910878.ece>

<sup>15</sup> Politiken 26.02.2010: *Politiken indgår forlig i Mohammed-sag*  
<http://politiken.dk/indland/article910878.ece>

personal, foundation and ethical relations. We are all potential citizen journalists reiterating and reinforcing “our” cultural citizenship and as such it is more important than ever to focus on the multiple persons behind the many technological devices, keyboards and computer screens, and all of our political and cultural commitments.

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