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by Aidan White



Six years after the [Danish cartoons crisis](#) opened up a chasm of controversy and misunderstanding over different approaches to free speech between Christians and Muslims, a team of researchers in Copenhagen have pointed the finger at media which they accuse of reinforcing prejudice and Islamophobia. The research did not make big news in Denmark when it was published earlier this year – in fact, it was barely reported at all by the country's media – but it is [making headlines in the Muslim world](#) .

The [results of the research](#) into the performance of four major national newspapers in reporting Muslim and Islamic affairs indicate that media are falling woefully short of the editorial standards required to provide balanced and inclusive coverage. Not surprisingly, say the researchers, Islam is perceived negatively by most Danes.

Despite the fact that the cartoons crisis provoked a polarising political debate about differences over free expression in the west and the Arab and Muslim world, the media culture that created the firestorm in the first place remains largely unchanged.

That's the verdict of a working group at the Danish National Centre for Social Research which analysed the editorial coverage of four papers, including the liberal center-right *Jyllands-Posten*, the daily that published the original cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed which triggered the crisis.

The research was carried out after a succession of annual reports from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) referred to the press as particularly responsible for growing intolerance over ethnic differences in Denmark.

Interestingly Tina Jensen, one of the researchers says that the team sought the cooperation of the media outlets covered by the study, believing this would enable them to challenge accusations of bias.

This was a constructive offer, she says. By asking the newspapers to help the researchers hoped to ensure that they established an accurate picture of media performance. However, she was disappointed that she received no positive responses.

Given the [results of the research](#) it may not be surprising that some newspapers refused to co-operate, anticipating that the outcome would be challenging, but their lack of honesty in facing up to the shortcomings of reporting on these sensitive issues only confirms a sense that some journalists and editors are complacent, not to say in denial about the bias in reporting of the Muslim community.

The research spanned four major agenda items holding particular importance for Muslims: the Salafi presence in a residential neighborhood in northwestern Copenhagen; the Arab Spring; the emergence of a group in the country applying Islamic rules to divorce cases; and the publication of cartoons by the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* insulting to the Prophet Mohammad.

The working group analysed both print and Internet versions of the papers. Interestingly, the language in Internet versions of the print version was found to be more offensive.

The findings show that 58 percent of the reports were found to be unconstructive, projecting hostility against Muslims and Islam. Only 32 percent of reports were deemed neutral, but even these failed the objectivity test with almost none of even impartial reports seeking to represent the other side of the story. Only 8 percent of the reports were found to be constructive, bearing positive reference to Islam.

The research also found that Muslims are rarely allowed to make their own statements in the press. In 75 percent of the publications, the views of Muslims were not published. In their publications, all four papers reviewed seem to have agreed that Islam is a threat to individual democracy and freedom, including freedom of expression.

Jensen says the findings confirm that media play a crucial role in the formation of public opinion. “Unfortunately, the press has served the polarization of Danish society. The media’s portrayal of Muslims and Islam has nothing to do with the reality,” she told the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*.

She says that efforts to discuss the crisis with the journalists concerned in Denmark have come to nothing. The working group tried to establish a dialogue and sought meetings to discuss the findings with the editors-in-chief of the papers they reviewed. But no appointments were forthcoming.