8 Religious Threats and Institutional Change in Norwegian Mass Media

8.1 Introduction

In the last several decades, Western countries have seen many public debates on the relationship between freedom of speech and religious sensibilities (for an introduction to the topic of religion in the public sphere, see Mendieta, 2011). Different questions have been raised, such as: Should media outlets avoid publishing material that might be offensive to religious believers, or should they disregard such sensibilities? Should this be regulated by law or by informal norms in the media? Does it have any value in itself to publish material that might be offensive to believers, or should it only be done when deemed necessary for other reasons?

This debate became widespread in the West after the publication of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1989. Following the publication of the book, Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa (i.e. a judicial ruling in Islamic theology) in which he ordered Muslims all over the world to kill both Rushdie and others who were involved in the book’s publication. One of the very few actual victims of this fatwa was William Nygaard, the Norwegian publisher of the book, who was shot but survived (for accounts of the events see Austenå, 2011; Isungset, 2010; Malik, 2012). In the years following the 9/11 terror attacks, controversy erupted again. In 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered because of the film *Fitna*, which he made together with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an ex-Muslim activist of Somali descent (for a scholarly account, see Buruma, 2007). In 2007, an issue of almost global concern occurred when the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. The controversy also became significant in Norway when the Christian weekly *Magazinet* printed a facsimile of the cartoons. This subsequently led to riots by Muslims all over the world. The Norwegian and Danish embassies in Syria were torched, and many people lost their lives (Klausen, 2009; Kunelius, Eide, Hahn, & Schroeder, 2007). This turn of events made the normative questions of freedom of expression almost existential in nature. If using the right to freedom of expression could lead to people getting killed, was it then right to exercise the right?

The question resurfaced again in the beginning of 2015 with the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on 7 January and a shooting at a seminar on freedom of expression in Copenhagen on 14 February. In the Paris incident, two attackers armed with automatic rifles made their way into the *Charlie Hebdo*
offices and killed 12 people. *Charlie Hebdo* had consistently published cartoons and caricatures of the prophet Muhammad and was therefore singled out as a target by many jihadists. Even though the two attackers were killed, the Al Qaida-affiliated group Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility for the attack and stated that it was an act of revenge ‘for the honour of the prophet Muhammad’. Some analysts have since claimed that the attackers might have had more strategic goals as well (Cole, 2015). By sowing mistrust between French society and the Muslim population of France, an attack could potentially help Al Qaida gain new recruits in France (and maybe in other European countries as well). Be that as it may, the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* made it necessary for European media outlets to think through their publication policy regarding material that might be considered offensive to religious believers. In Copenhagen, the shooting took place during the Art, Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression seminar at the Krudttønden cultural centre. A man, assumed to be Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein, wounded three police officers and killed one civilian. Among the speakers was Lars Vilks, who became well known after the cartoon crisis as he was one of the artists. Our aim in this article is to discuss these developments in light of the research on how institutions can be affected by critical events and/or external shocks, seeing the Norwegian mass media as a type of institution. In recent years, there have been cases in which young Muslim men have uttered threats against media outlets and journalists in the name of Islam. Our empirical area of focus is how actors in the Norwegian media react to such threats. Do the threats lead to changes in how journalists and editors make use of their freedom of expression? In other words, did events such as the Muhammad cartoons, demonstrations in Oslo and threats against journalists lead to institutional changes regarding what the mass media choose to publish?

The data consists of a survey of people working in media institutions, qualitative interviews in media institutions and field observations of the trial of a young Muslim man convicted in a Norwegian court of threatening journalists and researchers.

### 8.2 Critical Events, Discourse and Institutional Change

Before proceeding, we will explain our theoretical approach and the terms we use throughout the chapter. The first is institutional change, which has often been studied through the lens of how external shocks affect an institution and its practices under the assumption that an institution would be resistant to change unless something changed in the external environment. In recent years, however, a competing perspective has gained ground. Mahoney & Thelen (2009) and others have promoted a perspective looking at how institutions can gradually change as a result of internal factors as well. Mahoney & Thelen define an institution first and foremost as an arrangement of power that distributes resources (ibid.). This definition allows them to
develop a theory in which competition for power and resources can change an institution from within, even in the absence of an external shock.

One problem with this theory, though, is that it relies on a narrow definition of institution. If an institution is mainly an arrangement that distributes resources or power, can the media then be said to be an institution? There is no doubt that the media also distribute power and that many actors and stakeholders have vested interests in what the media does or does not do. However, power distribution is not the formal raison d’être of the media. What, then, is to be understood as an institution?

In accordance with the introduction to this book, we see institutions as coordinating mechanisms, which in some sense are predictable entities that regulate behaviour through formal and informal rules. In other words, an institution is a socially constructed system of norms regulating behaviour, with relatively clear boundaries between them and other systems. Such a definition has in recent years been employed in the influential work of Ostrom & Basurto (2011), for example. Following such a definition, the media can indeed be regarded as an institution.

Functionally, the media has a role in regulating behaviour (Silverblatt, 2004). Indeed, the media can be regarded as one of the key institutions in a deliberative democracy. Deliberative articulation requires the media to bring different voices to the public. Habermas’s ideal of constitutional co-authorship implies that a competent democracy contains parties that are willing, and have the opportunity, to express their views and promote their interests. Furthermore, the media in Norway is a rule-based system: some of the rules are formal and laid down in the Norwegian criminal code, such as freedom of expression. Other rules are non-judicial but upheld by journalists and the media themselves through their own internal ‘court’ (Norwegian Press Complaints Commission, PFU). PFU is the complaint commission of the Norwegian Press Association, which has all large mass media institutions as members. There are also informal or unspoken rules and norms at play among journalists and editors concerning what is acceptable conduct. When we employ the term institutional change in this chapter, what we are interested in is changes in the norms within the mass media.

Our approach to institutional change in this chapter is largely in line with what Vivien Schmidt has called ‘discursive institutionalism’ (Schmidt, 2010). The distinguishing trait of this approach is that discourse and ideas are given an important role in bringing about change. If institutions change, it is often because there are people within them who want these changes to come about (even though many changes may also be unintended). According to theories such as Mahoney & Thelen’s, people want institutional changes to come about because of their (more or less) objective interests – power, economic gain, etc. Under discursive institutionalism, however, it is acknowledged that preferences and ideals may be about more than objective interests.

Even though power and ‘objective’ interests are real and important, they are translated into actual preferences through discourse and interpretation. Electoral studies, for example, show this rather clearly. Contemporary voting still follows
class divides. Belonging to a certain social class makes it much more likely to vote for certain parties. Still, this process is not deterministic. For material interests to be translated into political preferences, life circumstances and life experiences must be interpreted through discourses and ideas (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). Being a manual worker makes it more probable that you will vote for parties on the left or for parties on the far right. Circumstances that are more or less similar may thus lead to different political choices depending on how these circumstances are interpreted through discourse. This means that when we are looking for traces of institutional change in the Norwegian mass media, we are interested in the discourses and ideas that can be found among the practitioners, as they are likely to have an impact on how they act.

In this chapter, we explore how institutional discourses and practices in the Norwegian mass media are shaped by some very specific occurrences. To denote these occurrences, we are using the term **critical event** (Das, 1995; Rogstad & Vestel, 2011; Sökefeld, 2006). The concept is very much in line with Kingdon’s (2003) ‘window of opportunity’, which captures a situation in which rather small events can create a change in the political direction. It is also useful to approach the idea of a critical event in light of Paul Pierson’s *Politics in Time* (2004). Based on two key concepts – ‘path dependence’ and ‘positive feedback’ – Pierson highlights how historical conditions are crucial in order to understand the social dynamics in a political field, with particular attention to the importance of timing (ibid. 54).

A significant question is how events can initiate processes that can be very difficult to change once they have started because they become increasingly self-reinforcing. According to Pierson (ibid., p. 44), there are four essential features, as follows.

1. **Multiple equilibria** – implying that a wide range of outcomes is possible
2. **Contingency** – small events may have significant impact
3. **Timing and sequencing** – when an event takes place might be crucial with regard to the impact
4. **Inertia** – Positive feedback leads to equilibrium, which is resistant to change

One interesting dimension is how events in a given situation or seen from a particular point of view can seem pretty insignificant yet become significant. Accordingly, there is a type of mild constructivism in the sense that it is not the event itself that makes it critical with the potential to create change but the meaning an event is given.

The term ‘critical events’ has been used to describe events that are forceful enough to create new compass points, new perspectives and new temporal divisions, such as between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. The crucial question asked in this chapter is how critical events related to religiously framed threats challenge the media in terms of attitudes and practices regarding religion and religious topics. We explore whether such critical events become a reference point for new and durable patterns of behaviour. In line with the discursive institutionalist approach, our guiding assumption is that the impact of a critical event is dependent on how it is interpreted and given meaning in the surrounding discourse. Given Norway’s recent history, the paradigm-
mamic critical event bar none shows this clearly. This event was not a case of Muslim extremism or religiously framed threats against a secular society. The terror attacks of 22 July 2011 were in some ways the opposite: they were attacks by a member of the extreme right against the Norwegian political elite for their perceived friendliness toward Muslims.

To understand the relationship between critical event and institutional change through discourse, we present some of the literature on the effects that this event had. Even though Norwegian society as a whole, with its peculiar social bonds and networks of mutual trust, is a very different type of institutional complex compared to the mass media, it is still relevant to assess how a critical event such as a terror attack can affect attitudes and/or behaviour. There are two key quantitative works on the impact of 22 July; both ask whether the attacks changed attitudes and/or affected public trust. The first is by Jakobsson & Blom (2014), who studied attitudes to immigrants in particular. The second article is *After Utøya: How a High-Trust Society Reacts to Terror – Trust and Civic Engagement in the Aftermath of July 22* (Wollebæk et al. 2012) and highlights the relationship between public attitudes and trust. The authors advance two hypotheses. They call the first the 'end of innocence hypothesis', according to which terror attacks create a culture of fear and diminish public trust. The competing hypothesis is called the 'remobilization hypothesis'. In this case, acts of terrorism strengthen the sense of cohesion and allegiance to collective values. The analysis is based on studies of the impact of 9/11 (Putnam, 2002; Sander & Putnam, 2010), even though both the attacks and the surrounding societal context were different from what happened in Norway. In the United States, public trust was already waning by 9/11. Norway is characterized by a high level of civic engagement and high levels of public (horizontal) and institutional (vertical) trust.

The empirical analysis indicates an attitudinal change in Norway post 22 July 2011. Levels of trust increased, both at the institutional level and the personal level (Wollebæk et al. 2012, p. 35). Nor were people more anxious about the possibility of new terrorist attacks. When it comes to civil commitment, the results are less consistent. If we look at trust, a slight increase was noted. All the same, Wollebæk et al. agree with Putnam (2002) and his findings in the United States. The attitudinal impact was greater than the behavioural impact. However, this conclusion can be qualified: Members of the research team that studied civil commitment in 2012 made a separate study of changes in electoral participation after 2012 and found what they call an “Utøya effect” among young voters (Bergh & Ødegård, 2014). The effect could be explained by young people’s stronger identification with their Utøya peers but also because people of that age are more impressionable. Whether the Utøya effect will last is an open question. In Sander & Putnam’s (2010) study, the changes were impermanent; within the space of six months, attitudes had largely reverted to their pre-11 September 2001 state. That said, they did note a generational difference. The stronger civic engagement of people who were young in 2001 seemed to be of a permanent nature. The US and Norwegian findings would therefore seem to suggest that a criti-
cal event such as a terror attack can lead to change but that change is more likely to be permanent among the young. Another issue is that the discursive interpretation of the attacks probably had an effect. The discursive response in Norway, epitomized in a speech given by the then prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, was to emphasize ‘more openness, more democracy’. As a response from below, ordinary Norwegians also arranged a ‘rose parade’ in Oslo three days after the attack, in which 200,000 people carried roses to show solidarity and commitment. This discursive interpretation of the event is probably part of the reason why levels of trust in Norway increased after the attacks. Given a different discursive response – for example, an increased public focus on threats or policing – levels of insecurity might have increased and not trust.

The last concept that needs elaboration is religion and religiously framed threats. This is our ‘explanatory variable’, threats that are made in the name of Islam against the mass media. In the article title we have used the term religious threat for the sake of simplicity and brevity. This formulation is not unproblematic, however. It remains open to debate whether these threats are actually grounded in religion. Are they caused or influenced by religious beliefs, either in the individual or in the larger social group that the individual belongs to? Or are these threats caused by other kinds of conflicts – political, social, etc. – and merely expressed in an available religious language? See Pape (2005) and Pape & Feldman (2010) for a discussion of this in relation to suicide terrorism. As we see it, the jury is still out on these questions in the literature on radicalization among Muslims in the West. Throughout the article, we will therefore use the term religiously framed threat. It is important for our purposes that these threats are expressed in a religious language and are often perceived as religiously grounded by the media or the public at large. This means that these threats contribute to a sharpening of the debate on religion and freedom of expression, even though they may reflect other kinds of conflicts. This process is in accordance with the Thomas theorem: ‘If men believe something to be real, it becomes real in its consequences.’

8.3 Data and Study Design

In our empirical approach to institutional change in the mass media as a result of religiously framed threats, we employed several sources of data. One data source was a 2013 survey of people employed in the Norwegian media. It was part of a larger research project on the state of freedom of expression in Norway (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Rasmussen, 2014). The survey covered the Norwegian population in general, but a subsample targeted people employed in the media in particular – editors, cartoonists/illustrators and journalists (members of the trade union for Norwegian journalists, Norsk journalistlag). The participation rate was 21.7 percent or 1,613 members. This survey contained items designed to establish whether jour-
nalists/editors/illustrators had received threats and whether this affected what they wrote or published. The survey also contained questions concerning normative beliefs – whether it should be allowed to scorn religion. In addition, we conducted 12 qualitative interviews with journalists, editors and cartoonists from various Norwegian media outlets. These interviews were conducted between August 2013 and February 2014. We supplemented these interviews with material from other research publications exploring (both quantitatively and qualitatively) how the Norwegian mass media covered Islam and religion in recent years. The last source of data was observation of the trial of Ubaydullah Hussain in the winter of 2014. Hussain is a young Norwegian Muslim man of Pakistani descent who was convicted for threatening the journalist Nina Johnsrud.

This data material has some limitations and does not allow for robust causal inference. The survey is not longitudinal and does not explore developments in attitudes over time. Nor have we conducted a historical exploration of institutional change in the Norwegian media over time. However, we have rich and varied data material from a certain point in time. This allows us to make qualified assumptions and interpretations. What is it reasonable to assume about institutional change in the media following religiously framed threats?

It is important to note that the data for this study were collected prior to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, so our data missed an important critical event, an event that might have affected discourses and practices in the Norwegian mass media. In order to include these later developments, we therefore supplemented our primary sources of data from the ‘first wave’ with observations of how publication policy changed (or did not change) in Norwegian media outlets following the attacks on Charlie Hebdo.

### 8.4 Religiously Framed Threats and Coverage of Religion in Norwegian Media

We begin our analysis by presenting the kind of religiously framed threats made against Norwegian media. The trial of Hussain is a good starting point. His lawyer, Jon Christian Elden, said in court that the trial was a test of society’s ability to deal with a multi-religious societal reality, thus drawing a line between legal free speech and illegal threats. In other words, the Hussain trial might serve as an example of a critical event.

The act in question was an email sent by Hussain to Nina Johnsrud, a journalist at the Norwegian daily Dagsavisen (translated from the Norwegian email printed in Dagbladet 25 October 2012):
The article is received by both known and unknown brothers, and it is NOT well received. It has set minds ablaze that you have pried into people’s privacy, and you must not be surprised if something or someone pops up in your private life too! With words or actions, I don’t know! This is not a threat, just useful information for your own good.

– Ubaydullah Hussain (27)

Hussain here employed a rhetorical trope that has become a staple among Norwegian Muslim radicals: ‘This is not a threat, but...’. The man who coined this phrase was Mohyeldeen Mohammad, a young Norwegian Muslim of Iraqi descent and one of the first to champion radical Muslim causes in the Norwegian media. At a demonstration against the publication of a cartoon on the front page of Dagbladet in 2010, he warned of grave consequences, a possible terror attack on Norwegian soil, and said: ‘This is not a threat, but a warning’ (see Akerhaug, 2013 for an account). The somewhat older Irfan Bhatti, an ex-criminal of Pakistani descent who had for some time been the social glue of the radical fringe of young Norwegian Muslims (ibid.), repeated the phrase at a new demonstration in 2012. Hussain said the same thing in the email to Johnsrud. One way of understanding the use of the rhetorical trope is that it is an attempt to utter a violent threat (which is forbidden by law) without actually uttering the words that would count as a threat in terms of the law.

Did these threats by Ubaydullah Hussain, Mohyeldeen Mohammad and Irfan Bhatti influence the reporting of religion and religious groups in the media? Before turning to the survey and interviews with editors and journalists, it can be illuminating to take a quick glimpse at the actual coverage of Islam, religion and religious groups in the Norwegian media. This may provide background for interpreting the results in the survey and the interviews. As part of his Master’s thesis on the anti-Islamic political right in Norway, Lars Erik Berntzen analysed coverage of Islam and Muslims by Norwegian media (based on these keywords: Islam, muslim, hijab, burka, niqab, moské, Allah, muhammedaner, jihad, hellig krig, snikislamisering, islamiser ing, Eurabia) (Berntzen, 2011). Berntzen found a steady increase in the coverage of Islam until 2011.

A more recent analysis was done by Knut Lundby and Ann-Kristin Gresaker (2015). They analysed the extent to which religion was covered in four major Norwegian newspapers (VG, Aftenposten, Stavanger Aftenblad and Arbeiderbladet/Dagsavisen) in 1988, 1998 and 2008. This analysis did not show any dramatic increase in the coverage of religion: 483 articles in 1988, 643 in 1998 and 614 in 2008. As the authors acknowledge, each individual year might have had more or less coverage than the surrounding years. Still, the relative stability of the numbers implies that Norwegian media do not cover religion to a much larger extent today than before. But even if the general coverage has not seen a dramatic increase, the authors do note a large increase in the coverage of topics related to Islam (with the exception of Stavanger Aftenblad).
These raw numbers, however, do not say much about the nature of the coverage. Was it negative, positive or neutral? Such an analysis concerning the nature of the coverage was performed in a 2007 Master’s thesis in media studies by Sindre Storvoll (Storvoll, 2007). He analysed all the relevant articles that addressed either Islam or Christianity during Christmas 2005 (19 December 2005–4 January 2006), Easter 2006 (10–24 April) and a ‘constructed week’ from the spring of 2006, where he picked a Monday from one week, a Tuesday from the next, etc., in order to avoid biased coverage resulting from a specific event. Based on a total of 550 articles, the conclusion was unequivocal: while Christianity was covered in a manner that was more positive than negative, Islam was covered in a manner that was more negative than positive (ibid.).

Another Master’s thesis, defended by Odd Aksnes in 2011, addressed the coverage of Islam in the Norwegian daily Aftenposten during the course of a year (Aksnes, 2011). Aksnes also interviewed some of the journalists who worked on these issues in Aftenposten. According to Aksnes, questions relating to Islam were seen as newsworthy first and foremost whenever there was the possibility of a clash between the values or behaviour of Muslims and dominant values in Norwegian society. These works point in the same direction: coverage of Islam and Muslims has been increasing over the last 10–15 years and seems on balance to be more negative than positive.

Given that we, for the purposes of this chapter, define an institution as a system of rules and norms, it is also relevant to mention that the formal rules regulating criticism of religion became more lax during these years. In 2009, the Stoltenberg government proposed modifying the ban on blasphemy in the Norwegian penal code, a ban that had for all practical purposes never been applied in Norway, at least not since 1933. The Stoltenberg government proposed that ‘hateful qualified attacks against religions and world views’ should be punishable. The initiative, though, seems not to have come from political groups associated with the rights of Muslims or minorities but from the agrarian Centre Party, which sought to defend traditional Christian values (Brekke, 2009). However, this resulted in a massive public backlash against the government, and the end result was the opposite. The Norwegian parliament decided to remove all bans on blasphemy or attacks against religion or religious groups. The formal rules regulating the Norwegian media system therefore formally changed during these years. Even though the new penal code (including the right to commit blasphemy) was not formally introduced until 2015, it has been clear to all ever since 2009 that religion was not to have any special protection in the law.

A conclusion to be drawn from this is that the Norwegian media, overall, does not seem to refrain from criticizing religion, Islam or Muslim groups. The data actually point to an increase in the problematizing coverage of topics related to Islam during recent years. The religiously framed threats that have been made have not succeeded in suppressing problematic coverage of Islam as such. If there has been any change, it has not been to refrain in general from covering topics related to Islam in a critical manner. However, what might nevertheless have changed is the manner of the coverage – not whether Islam or religion should be reported critically but how it should
be done (see also Steen-Johnsen et al. 2016 for a similar observation). Certain topics might be avoided, and criticism might be couched in one form but not another. The interesting question, then, is whether journalists and editors frame coverage differently because of the threats? In order to answer this question, we need to turn to the survey and the interviews.

8.5 Norms, Values and Perceptions of Threats

The survey contained items on the normative opinions of people working in the media. One item was designed to establish whether the respondents thought expressions of speech that mocked or ridiculed (Norwegian: ‘håner’) religion should be ‘accepted’ in the media. This way of formulating the question – asking whether something should be ‘accepted’ and not whether it should be ‘allowed’ – does not measure people’s formal legal opinions but rather how they feel about something in daily life. It is nevertheless somewhat surprising, at least based on what one might expect from following the public debate on these issues, that a substantial minority of people working in the media actually do not think that mockery of religion should be accepted in the media. Only half the respondents agree that mocking religion should be accepted; 30 percent assert that it should not be accepted, and 20 percent are undecided. However, among the journalists, a larger percentage (60 percent) thinks that mocking religion should be accepted.

As mentioned, we have no data to compare with earlier points in time, as this is the first survey of its kind of journalists and editors. What it shows, however, is that the norms and values related to these matters are not unequivocal among Norwegian journalists and editors. It seems to be a matter of genuine disagreement. Is it a matter of principle to be allowed to mock religions? It must also be noted that the general population is even more critical of mockery of religion than people working in the media (only 17 percent of the general population think mockery of religion in the media should be accepted).

In the qualitative interviews, all the informants adhered to the majority view of the journalists. Freedom of expression was seen as a value that should trump other considerations if there were conflicts of interest. If it was a matter of public interest, it should be published. One journalist stated it like this:

> It is our job to publish, and we should never compromise on that. Then [if we compromise] we will have lost.

If we are to reconcile the results of the qualitative interviews with the results of the survey, it may seem like the ‘correct answer’ or official discourse among journalists and editors is that freedom of expression should always have precedence over other considerations. This is the view of the majority of the respondents in the survey. It
is also the case that, at least to our knowledge, no influential journalists or editors in Norway have stated publicly that other considerations should trump freedom of expression. In the setting of a qualitative interview in which the informant is sitting face to face with a researcher and might feel expected to give an ‘appropriate’ answer for someone of their profession, interviewees are also more likely to respond in what they see as a socially appropriate way. However, the survey reveals a significant minority of people working in the media think otherwise. This, however, seems to be a view or practice that has not been given a stamp of approval in the internal discourse among media practitioners.

What the qualitative interviews also reveal is that alongside the mantra that freedom of expression should trump other considerations, the journalists and editors also acknowledged that the actual decisions as to whether one should publish or not had to be made again and again on a case by case basis. Our interviewees stated that material should be published if it was important to publish it. Our emphasis on ‘if’ in the last sentence is intentional. When one qualifies the importance of publishing something, one opens the possibility that threats might have an effect. A person who is affected by a threat will probably not say ‘I think it is important to publish this, and I am going to do so because of these threats.’ It is more likely that such threats will work through subconscious mechanisms. A story that could lead to negative reactions or threats may be regarded as ‘not really that important after all’ and would not be published. This conforms to the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. When a thought is unpleasant and/or clashes with some other cherished principle, the dissonant thought will often be changed in an unconscious manner (Cooper, 2007). When the cognition ‘I should publish this’ clashes with the cognition ‘publishing this could have adverse consequences for me’, the result might be that one of the cognitions gets changed unconsciously. Instead of thinking “this is important but I don’t dare publish it,” one may end up thinking ‘I could publish this if I wanted to, but I don’t think it’s important enough.’

Marie Simonsen, an influential columnist with the daily Dagbladet, stated how this mechanism could work in an unusually frank manner.
On a bad day I am reluctant to write on a subject that I know could lead to an outburst of negative reactions. I think that “I can’t handle it today”. Even though I’ve become more thick skinned, it can still get under my skin. I do not want to sound whiny, because I have the best job in the world. But living with the realization that there are thousands of people out there who spend a lot of time on hating you is a special kind of feeling and something most people would like to avoid. (Interview in Vårt Land, 5 December 2013)

What Simonsen says here shows that awareness of negative reactions indeed may play a role in decisions to write or publish, even though she did not mention a religiously framed threat but negative reactions in general. On a normative level, it seems like few journalists or editors claim that threats can or should influence their decisions. But the awareness that publishing might entail negative reactions is nevertheless something that clearly exists among media practitioners, and this may impact publication policy in both conscious and unconscious ways.

In order to assess whether threats may play a role or not, we can look at other items in the survey. In another question, the respondents were asked whether threats from religious groups affected their work.

Of the journalists, only 2.1 percent said yes. This amounts to 19 people. This is a small number in relative terms. However, could it still be significant? The survey does not reveal whether these journalists really focused on religion and religious groups. If they did work regularly on stories concerning religion and religious groups, then the number could actually be regarded as high. But if they worked in other areas or answered ‘yes’ out of a general concern about religious threats, for example, then the number should be regarded as small in both relative and absolute terms. However, in the ‘cartoonists/illustrators’ category, the number saying their work was affected by threats is higher – as high as 8 percent. Even though this is also a small minority, it is still significant because almost 1 in 10 cartoonists or illustrators say they are affected by threats in their work.

In several of the qualitative interviews, we could also trace an awareness of the possibility of threats among some informants. Some of them had taken measures to
reduce the likelihood of hypothetical threats. One of them said this, as an evident matter of fact:

I am obviously not friends with my children on Facebook.

The same informant, however, emphasized his duty as a journalist to never give in to threats. Even though he was aware of possible threats, he would probably have answered ‘no’ if he was asked whether these threats influenced his work.

One way of interpreting the findings, then, is that journalists and editors do not receive many threats. Nor do they perceive themselves as being influenced by possible threats. What does seem to be more widespread, however, is a perception of the possibility of threats or violent reactions. In the section on theory, the impact of critical events, we pointed out, is often dependent on discourse and how it is interpreted. This means that a certain event – a religiously framed threat – may have an impact through the discourse to which it gives rise, even though the overwhelming majority of journalists, editors and illustrators had not received threats against themselves personally. The discourse among media practitioners seems to include threats or violent reactions as a possibility, even though it is not a widespread phenomenon in itself. Has this had an impact?

8.6 Traces of Change: (Not) to Publish for the Sake of Publishing

As we outlined in section 4, rather than waning, critical coverage of Islam in the Norwegian media has been on the rise. If there has been a change in publication policy as a result of religiously framed threats, it is not about whether to publish critical stories related to Islam but about how to publish. In principle, it is possible that critical coverage of Islam could have been expressed in other forms – possibly in a more overtly mocking and/or harsh form – without such threats.

Our main source of data in this regard is the qualitative material, in addition to the observation of actual publication policy in the media. According to several informants, some norms and perceptions concerning the publication of offensive material do seem to have changed. Publication of a caricature of the type that Dagbladet published in 2009 would not happen today, according to some of our informants. Apparently, Dagbladet did not have very strong journalistic reasons for publishing the cartoon. A senior editor in one of the papers put it like this:

I believe that was the last time that someone published a caricature just for the sake of showing “hey, we can do it.” Just for making a point. I am reasonably sure that no editors would do something like that today.
This implies a change in norms in recent years. The freedom of expression should not be used just to make a point but should be used prudently. But are there specific types of content that are censored? The qualitative interviews indicate that journalists and editors may censor themselves when it comes to how they publish things (the form) but not when it comes to what they publish (the content). Criticism of religion, even ridiculing of religion, gets published, and articles and news questioning or criticizing religion or religious groups are frequently published. However, cartoons and images seem to be a particularly sensitive area. Some cartoons and images are just not published. One famous cartoonist, Finn Graff, said in the aftermath of the murder of Theo van Gogh how far he would be willing to go in his cartoons:

There is a limit, [and the limit is] when you get to the point that you get your head cut off. (Finn Graff)

The data for this article were collected prior to the Charlie Hebdo attacks, as mentioned in the introduction. After this attack, some called for collective publication of the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo as an act of collective solidarity. But in the Norwegian media, most of the big newspapers chose not to publish the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo in a flaunting or provocative manner following the attacks. Some newspapers published smaller facsimiles of some of the cartoons as illustrations to news stories about the attacks well inside the newspaper. Other papers, like VG, the largest newspaper in Norway, chose not to publish the cartoons at all.

How should this be interpreted? Was it the result of prudence, or was it rather the case that editors did not dare publish the cartoons, even though they might have thought they should have? One of the arguments in favour of caution was that it would not be the best reaction to these attacks to fill the front pages of the media with caricatures of Muhammad. A mass publication of the cartoons could be perceived by Muslims as a collective punishment or revenge instead of a tailored response to the actions of a few extremists. This, for example, was the line taken by the British paper The Independent (January 8), which pointed out that just as Christians had no need to apologize for the terror carried out by Anders Behring Breivik, nor should Muslims be held responsible for the terror in Paris. Collective publications of Muhammad cartoons out of ‘solidarity’ could have had the paradoxical effect of giving the terrorists what they wanted, to antagonize Muslim populations in the West.

This interpretation is in line with the self-understanding of some of the media actors we interviewed for this study, well before the Charlie Hebdo attacks. At that time they expressed that they had learned their lesson and would not publish such cartoons today just for the sake of publishing them. They anchored this assessment in the distinction between what should be allowed to publish and what is wise to publish. Even though most Norwegian newspapers did not publish the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo in a flaunting manner, most media outlets and commentators displayed strong support for Charlie Hebdo in the weeks following the attacks. This support did
not entail complete agreement with all the editorial choices of *Charlie Hebdo*. Rather, it was emphasized that one could not compromise on the right to publish the kind of things *Charlie Hebdo* published. It may seem like the kinds of cartoons *Charlie Hebdo* had published were perceived to be more important after the attacks; they were no longer seen just as provocations but as publications that actually had a mission in themselves. The Norwegian daily *Aftenposten*, for example, stated as follows the day following the attacks:

Satire and the satirical cartoon has a special and valuable role in the open democracies. Nothing can to same degree as good satire disrobe persons in power of their authority, and few are able to pose challenges like a good cartoonist can. (*Aftenposten*, 8 January 15)

But this support for satire and for *Charlie Hebdo* and its cartoons was not accompanied by widespread publication of those cartoons. It is reasonable to assume that it had significant ‘news value’ at the time of the attacks to publish the cartoons that the attacks were all about. If a lone dog-loving madman had attacked *Charlie Hebdo* because they had published a cartoon of a dog that resembled his own dog, it is safe to assume that most newspapers would have published the cartoon of the dog in question (the probability for retaliation from other dog lovers would probably be rather small). But in this case, it did not happen. What seems to be a play here, then, is a decision not to publish that was not based on a consideration of whether the cartoons were newsworthy or relevant to the case in question. A more reasonable interpretation is that the Norwegian media outlets chose not to publish these cartoons because the importance of publication was weighed against other considerations. These other considerations need not have been about their own security, of course. They may have been considerations about the public response, for example, would it lead to antagonism between different social groups? Still, the publication policy in this case seems to have followed a logic in which considerations other than freedom of speech were given priority.

At the same time, developments after *Charlie Hebdo* also followed the pattern we have detailed in the article in another manner. Even though the cartoons of *Charlie Hebdo* were mostly not reprinted, Norwegian media outlets were full of critical coverage of Islam following the attack. For example, the two newspapers that generally cater to Norway’s cultural and academic elite, *Morgenbladet* and *Klassekampen*, both printed long feature articles in the months following the attacks that asked the simple question: ‘Is Islam the problem?’ (*Morgenbladet*, 16 January; *Klassekampen*, 1 April). These articles showed that criticism of Islam and of Muslim groups was by no means censored in Norwegian media but rather the contrary. Cartoons and pictures religious Muslims might deem especially offensive, however, do not seem to get published as often as before.

As this article is being written, it is 10 years since the newspaper *Magazinet* published the Mohammed cartoons and one year since the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attack.
Moreover, during the last year there have been more acts of terror, including the attack at the Bataclan in Paris.

One of the Danish cartoonists, Lars Vilks, is clear in his assessment of developments within the mass media. A year to the day after the *Charlie Hebdo* incident, he criticized the media for having given in to *Charlie Hebdo* terrorists. Freedom of speech is now regulated by fear, Vilks said on the NRK radio program, *Kulturnytt*.

There is fear and dread. When it comes to mass media, especially newspapers, which will publish cases because of the risk-calculation you make, so you accept the terrorists’ demands. And all publications that might be offensive are actually in principle stopped. (Vilks interviewed on Kulturnytt, 7 January 2016)

Eirik Bergesen, who is head of the satire site *Opplysningskontoret*, and Kjersti Løken Stavrum, chair of the Norwegian Press Complaints Commission (PFU), were interviewed on the same program. Both agreed with Vilks and his analysis. The trends in both Norway and Denmark are similar. According to Bergesen, several comedians were ready and waiting to stand up after *Charlie Hebdo*, but the mass media were simply not going to allow that kind of humour:

> It’s not the comedians who are afraid, it’s the media.

Each editor, Stavrum added, is responsible for their employees and families:

> I know editors who do not want to risk exposing their employees unnecessarily.

It is obviously important to ask what ‘unnecessarily’ means in this context, in particular when confronting this practice with the idea that freedom of expression should be exercised. At the same time, it should not come as any surprise that editors sometimes do fear that terror might hit one of their employees, colleagues or friends. Consequently, it might not always appear to be worth the risk of putting someone’s life in danger.

### 8.7 Institutional Change Through Changes in Discourse

The main finding that emerges from the data is that criticism of religion or coverage of religions and religious groups is not affected in a dramatic way by threats. Religion and religious groups are still covered extensively and often in a questioning or critical way. However, certain forms and types of content are avoided, especially pictures or cartoons that are seen to be liable to provoke lots of negative reactions.

How does this relate to the theory of critical events and institutional change? Our interpretation is that critical events such as the much-publicized religiously for-
mulated threats against journalists do seem to influence the informal norms of the Norwegian media system. Given that very few journalists or editors seem to have experienced threats themselves and that very few say they are affected by threats in their work, threats as critical events have probably had an impact through the discourse they give rise to. When a discourse emerges in which threats are a possible (but improbable) consequence of publishing offensive material, it makes an impact. To put it somewhat more provocatively: threats work. While *Dagbladet* published a caricature on their front page in 2009, it would probably not happen today. The internal norms seem to have changed. The principle of freedom of expression is held in high regard, but a more prudent approach to the principle seems to have gained ground.

According to our informants, the right to scorn or mock religion should only be exercised if or when it serves an important purpose and not just for the sake of doing it. Still, the case of *Charlie Hebdo* shows that offensive cartoons often do not get published, even when it would have been ‘newsworthy’ to do so. Should this be regarded as self-censorship or rather as a prudent response? Perhaps the right answer is that it is both.

**References**


