Beyond the Cartoon Controversy: Q & A with Flemming Rose

Fifteen months after he enraged the Muslim world, Danish editor Flemming Rose's conscience is clear.

It’s been fifteen months since the publication by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten of a series of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad, and the resulting furor in the Muslim world over what was considered a blasphemous violation of a central tenet of Sunni Islam—the prohibition of visual representations of the prophet. Though the riots have stopped
and the flames coming from Danish flags and embassies have been extinguished, the controversy over where to draw the line between free speech and criticism of Islam persists. In September, Pope Benedict XVI quoted from a fourteenth-century text that referred to some of Mohammad’s teachings as “evil and inhuman,” touching off more riots. Later that same month, the Deutsche Opera postponed a performance of Mozart’s “Idomeneo” because of a scene that depicts the severed heads of Mohammad, Jesus, Buddha, and Neptune. Flemming Rose, the culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, claimed he solicited the cartoons to assert freedom of speech and to resist the self-censorship crippling the West when it came to “accommodating Muslim sensitivities.” In January, CJR’s Alia Malek interviewed Rose by telephone about the cartoons and their consequences.

**How has this changed your view of journalism?**

[Laughs] I have far more understanding for those complaining about the media every day that we are inaccurate and biased. It’s one thing to have a sense of this; it’s another to be the object of this kind of journalism yourself.

**Has it improved or changed your own journalism?**

I have become more conscious about what kind of authority you give to experts—so-called experts—in a news story. You give your readers the impression that someone speaks objectively about something because he has special knowledge. In this case, especially experts on Islam or religion, their opinions and statements are informed by political standpoints. So you should explain from where this person is speaking, if it’s an institution or university with a certain tradition or whatever.
Since these cartoons appeared, are the Danish media specifically, and the European media generally, in a better place regarding what you call “self-censorship” when it comes to Islam?

Over all, I would say there is more restraint. But you have the case of the canceled opera in Germany. Because there was uproar about it, the decision was reversed. Our cartoons did not create a new reality. They revealed a reality that was already there. We’ve had some strong reactions and discussions; now it’s time for reflection. So it remains to be seen what will happen.

**How will you engage what you think needs to be scrutinized in Danish Muslim communities?**

One of the positive outcomes of the publication of the cartoons has been that the more multifaceted face of the Muslim population has appeared. When we want a comment now, we will not go to the radical imams that used to speak in the name of all Muslims. We are very careful that we get different points of view from the Muslim community, because it is now recognized that the Muslim community is not one, and there are many different voices and the majority is moderate.

**Were you surprised to find that?**

I was not. But in some quarters of Danish society, Islam is the “Other” and there is a tendency to stereotype. Before the international story broke, but when it was big in Denmark, we ran three full pages with short interviews with forty-seven Muslims in Denmark with photos, and the headline was: “We say no to the imams.”

**One of your stated goals was to challenge moderate Muslims to speak out. Do you think the cartoons strengthened or hurt that effort?**

Definitely strengthened. Because of this the leader of the Danish People’s Party, an anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic party, wrote an internal e-mail to party members saying, “until now we have spoken about them as one. From now on I want you to differentiate between radical and moderate Muslims.” The same
day the embassies were burning in Beirut and Damascus, Democratic Muslims, which has become a very important voice in public debate, was founded in Copenhagen.

**Do you have any Muslim writers on staff?**

I don’t know, because I don’t ask people.

**Any children of immigrants working at the paper?**

Not many. If I should ask people it’s contradictory to everything the Enlightenment is standing for. Should I also ask people about their political views when I hire them to secure balanced and fair reporting?

**Could they help with access to certain communities, to get better coverage?**

No story comes to my mind in the Danish press as a whole in which the ethnic background of a reporter has been crucial to the coverage. If you speak the language, that’s another thing. If language ability gives you access, that is an important factor when you interview people.

**Does anyone on your staff speak Arabic? Urdu?**

Yes.

**Has there been an ongoing dialogue between the Danish Muslim communities and your paper?**

I don’t believe in journalism as community builder. The duty of a news organization is to report the facts. We should not act as some kind of mediator.

**How have the cartoons affected integration efforts in Denmark?**

The cartoons have made the debate about integration more reality-based. The debate between free speech and religious feelings indicates a clash of values. It has made it clear that there are issues on which we differ, and we have to deal with them, to discuss it. In May 2006, my paper commissioned an opinion poll
of Muslims in Denmark, the first of its kind. We asked them: “Do you think that free speech always should have priority compared to considerations for people’s religious feelings, traditions, and rules?” Fifty-one percent answered “never,” implying that religious feelings always should have priority compared to free speech.

Do you really think it’s about religious feeling? What if the question were phrased as freedom of speech versus “racial incitement” instead of “religious feeling?”

That goes right to the heart of this issue: this has nothing to do with racial issues because the difference between ethnicity and religion is you are free to choose your religion whereas you can’t choose the color of your skin.

But when you draw a religious figure in a way that suggests which ethnic and racial groups you are talking about, couldn’t this blur your lines?

It is important to make that distinction between ethnicity and religion.

Is it always a clear line?

The cartoon with Mohammad with a bomb in his turban has been taken out of context. I agree if you had twelve cartoons like that, you could make the point of stereotyping or demonizing, but if you look at the whole page—two cartoons made fun of me and my paper, one of the illustrator doing this for a p.r. stunt, one of the leader of the anti-immigrant party in Denmark—

I just don’t accept the point that the cartoons are demonizing or stereotyping or racist. Many people said, “When you printed this one [bomb in turban] you’re saying every Muslim is a terrorist.” That’s a kind of illiteracy to see the cartoon that way. It makes the point that some people in the name of the Prophet are committing terrorist acts and that is a fact of life.

Are immigrants in Denmark equally, or at least similarly situated to engage in public dialogue as other Danes? Are they frequently and complexly represented in news, pop-culture, politics?
You have several rappers in Denmark with an immigrant background. I accept your point. Before the cartoon case, you had fewer Danes with an immigrant background in public appearances, but why only talk about Muslims, the biggest minority? What about Vietnamese, Chinese, Russians? Everyone is focusing on the Muslims because they are the most vocal and it’s a hot issue. There are many minorities out there that would not get as fair a hearing as the Muslims.

So if they don’t all have equal access to the media, is it really fair to satirize them? Do the media have different obligations vis-à-vis their coverage of minorities and/or immigrants?

It’s humiliating and discriminating to treat any minority as a kind of odd, special group. It’s very important to treat everybody equally. The cartoonists were just doing what they are doing every day with all kinds of figures, issues, institutions. It is an act of love and inclusion to satirize people. There is some kind of recognition in that, to know you can laugh and make fun of one another.

Regarding the cartoons and their fallout, is there anything you would do differently?

I made a mistake on CNN, making public an internal discussion of the paper about Holocaust cartoons.

Did you publish those cartoons?

Yes. We ran some anti-Semitic cartoons in February 2006, as documentation not endorsement. Which was the same of the cartoons of Mohammad.

Though you commissioned the Mohammad cartoons.

Yes, that’s true. But what I wrote commissioning them was not, “Draw cartoons making fun of the prophet,” but “Draw Mohammad as you see him,” which is very neutral.

What do you make of the decision by most U.S. media to not publish the cartoons?
I discussed this with an editor at a top American paper because [his paper] made the point that “we can describe in words what the cartoons did.” He told me privately that, “we have correspondents in that part of the world and we don’t want to expose them more than necessary.” Fine, but you should say so publicly. I can also understand if someone disagrees with these cartoons, or thinks it was wrong to do it. But by January 30 [2006], these cartoons were newsworthy. And it says at the top of *The New York Times*: all the news fit to print.

Alia Malek is an assistant editor at CJR.