

Dear colleagues,

When we last met for an ONO conference in this magnificent city of Cape Town in 2015 I had the pleasure of being on a panel with a member of the South African muslim community in the Western Cape region. I was on a difficult task: trying to explain why one of the newspapers of my company, JP/Politikens Hus, normally publishing without any global appeal whatsoever had suddenly caused an outcry in the muslim world - or rather, one of the newspapers, Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten, had drawn a lot of attention, to say the least, by publishing 12 cartoons, I believe it was, depicting the prophet Mohammad. I explained that in my view as well as in the view of my newspaper, Politiken, printing the cartoons had been a childish, silly stunt.

Obviously you should be absolutely free to draw the prophet and to criticize Islam or any other religion for that matter, but on the other hand the purpose of journalism could never be just to criticize other people's most precious symbols or to make a mockery of them. You are not compelled to make use of your freedom of speech - you can choose to refrain from it, thereby at the same time avoid being an idiot.

Freedom of speech is essential, but that doesn't give you carte blanche to be insensible towards other members of humanity. In my view, it is as easy as that.

The purpose of drawing Mohammad in the first place had been to prove the theory that nobody dared to illustrate a children's book about the prophet. An editor of Jyllands-Posten had been told by an author of a children's book that it was totally impossible to have anybody draw the prophet, so the editor appealed to a number of

cartoonists to contribute, which indeed they did: he ended up with having many drawings to put in his paper, so it wasn't true that nobody dared draw the prophet. Nevertheless, the drawings went into the paper.

And then - nothing happened.

Until a few months later: a few Danish muslims alerted some of their friends in Egypt and Pakistan, and very soon hell broke loose. Within a few weeks in many countries in the muslim world they were burning the Danish flag - if they didn't decide to go all the way and burn down the local Danish embassy.

At Politiken's headquarters in on the town hall square in the middle of Copenhagen our colleagues from Jyllands-Posten have their offices in the bulding as well, and as the threats from the muslim world were at their loudest, a funny guy in the newsroom posted a sign in Arabic at the entrance saying 'Jyllands-Posten: second floor'.

It was soon taken down, but ever since that time we have been in a state of emergency, lasting to this very day and into an infinite future. We have police and intelligence people surrounding our premises and have got accustomed to living behind closed doors.

Some years later, though, it seemed as if things were finally dying down a little bit. The security situation was still tense, but the police stopped arresting people armed with machine guns on their way to Copenhagen to cause mayhem in the newsroom. It started to look peaceful, and we relaxed a bit.

The Mohammad cartoons were no longer setting the world ablaze, and it seemed as if we could return to some kind of normal situation.

Little did we know that a law student in Copenhagen would be a centre of the next controversy and that he would prove beyond any doubt that Denmark may be a small and fairly insignificant country hidden away in northern Europe, but when it comes to annoying the muslim world, we are a superpower.

In 2007 the Danish law student had started running a home page by the name of kriminelle.dk - meaning criminals.dk. There he published pictures of people riding bikes where it is prohibited or crossing the street before the light turns green. There were also people who rode a bike without holding on to the handle bar - thus being in breach of the Danish traffic regulations.

At my newspaper, Politiken, we made an interview with the man behind the silly home page, Rasmus Paludan. Little did we know that he would be the reason for yet another huge clash with the muslim world.

A couple of years ago Rasmus Paludan apparently became tired of taking pictures of the inhabitants of the Danish capital riding their bikes the wrong way down a one way street, and he found out that another stunt would have a tremendous impact: Being a true xenophobic, he started burning qurans while shouting all kinds of abuse against the slowly growing muslim population of Denmark - most of whom were living peacefully while contributing to a prosperous society, but naturally feeling sad to see their religion being ridiculed for no obvious reason.

And so the somewhat ridiculous Rasmus Paludan was once again being interviewed in Politiken - this time because he had become a real threat to security and eventually had Danish politicians revise legislation in order to prevent terrorist attacks.

Last summer, less than a year ago, the burning of the muslim holy book stirred outrage in Muslim-majority countries, and the Danish parliament soon found it necessary to pass legislation making it illegal to carry out 'inappropriate treatment of writings with significant importance for a recognized religious community'. Burning, tearing or defiling religious texts had been legal, but suddenly doing so would land you in serious trouble.

And finally to the point, given that the topic of this talk is the fact that media shouldn't do harm: What was the role of the media in all this?

Did we contribute to things going absolutely wrong and legislation being passed that limited freedom of expression or at least made criticizing religion much more difficult? In my view, we definitely did.

However, how could we possibly have done anything else?

The main objective of the media is to describe reality, and at one point the reality was that Rasmus Paludan and a bunch of other idiots had set fire to some 500 Qurans over a period of five months - while shouting the most terrible words of abuse at peaceful fellow citizens who happened to be muslims.

At the same time, expenses for police protecting Rasmus Paludan and consorts' freedom of speech rose rapidly, and soon passed 100 million Danish kroner.

Some politicians said that it was the price of freedom of expression - others argued, that Rasmus Paludan had made his point and that nobody could be in doubt about his appalling views on muslims. He had made his disgusting point.

Alle the way along, we in the media covered the situation, and obviously one cannot look away from the fact that we were being used. Had we not covered the Quran burnings, things would probably not have escalated, and we could maybe even have avoided the tightening of the criminal code, making it illegal to burn holy scriptures. Not an offence that normal people are tempted to commit, but nevertheless, the legislation constitutes a limitation of the freedom of expression.

Hundreds of Danish artists, journalists and public figures protested against the law, but after a few amendments it went smoothly through parliament. A parliament for which Rasmus Paludan has also run, by the way, thankfully without getting elected.

In Sweden as well, Rasmus Paludan had started burning Qurans, until the Swedish authorities banned him from entering the country because he constituted a menace to public safety. Then Rasmus Paludan found out that due to the fact that his father was Swedish, he was also a Swedish citizen.

So suddenly the Swedes also had the pleasure of his stunts.

It is impossible to assess the role of the media in this story, but I would claim that we have played a major role in the rise and still not totally fall of Rasmus Paludan.

Speaking of idiots: As you all probably remember, in 2011 on the Norwegian island of Utøya, a madman by the name of Anders Behring Breivik killed 69 young people. Ever since, readers have appealed to me, saying that he doesn't deserve to have his name mentioned, and a while ago, when he had sued the Norwegian authorities for violating his human rights while he is serving his sentence the readers were very angry, that we even covered the case.

When occasionally we publish his photo, there is always an outcry.

The task of the media basically is to describe what happens - or is it?

Should we be more considerate and strategic?

Please give me your opinion!