

Danish Cartoon Coverage Should Be Guided By SPJ Code of Ethics

For Immediate Release

2/7/2006

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INDIANAPOLIS - The Society of Professional Journalists is troubled by the insensitivity of Danish cartoons that depict the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The Society also denounces the violence that has ensued as a result of protests against the cartoons' publication.

Central to this debate are differing beliefs in free media. Protection of free media should be first and foremost. SPJ, the United States' largest journalism advocacy organization champions and reveres the exchange of views, even the views of one person or group that are repugnant to another. The Society wholeheartedly believes that bad or offensive speech is best countered with more freedom of speech, not less.

At the same time, the Society recognizes that free-speech rights come with responsibilities. SPJ urges journalists to honor their obligation to weigh the news value of all views against the offense those views may cause.

Admittedly, this is a fine line to walk. But the Society believes it can be navigated responsibly by journalists who review SPJ's ethics code. The Society urges journalists to review the code when deciding how or whether to cover the controversy.

The code states, in part, that journalists should:

- Treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.
- Tell the story of the diversity and the magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.

News organizations across the United States have made different decisions about whether to broadcast or publish the Danish cartoons that have stirred violent protests around the world. Some have deemed the images too offensive to present and have said they are able to produce news stories effectively without them. Others have shown the cartoons not to titillate, but to give people greater perspective about the controversy and to invite their more informed opinions. Neither course of action is necessarily inappropriate, according to SPJ's Ethics Code.

The Society of Professional Journalists works to improve and protect journalism. SPJ is dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. Founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi, and based in Indianapolis, SPJ promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed public, works to inspire and educate the next generation of journalists, and protects First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press.