

Journalism, solidarity and the civil sphere: The case of Charlie Hebdo

European Journal of Communication

2019, Vol. 34(3) 286–299

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0267323119844411

journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc**María Luengo**

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain

Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk

University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

On 7 January 2015, Said and Chérif Kouachi assaulted the offices of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, leaving 12 people dead. The terrorist attack soon became a highly symbolic event, reflecting the core struggle between free speech and religious values that escalated after the ‘cartoon crisis’ in 2005. In this article, we wish to explore media discourses in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in three European countries – Spain, Norway and the United Kingdom. In particular, we investigate if and how journalism performed their role as ‘vital centre’ in the ‘civil sphere’. We find that the patterns of in-group and out-group were carefully constructed to avoid polarization between ‘ordinary’ Muslims and the West in most newspapers. By doing so, most of the newspapers managed to work for the construction of an idealized civil sphere that exists beyond race, nationality or religion.

Keywords

Charlie Hedbo, civil sphere, journalism, solidarity, vital centre

Introduction

On 7 January 2015, Said and Chérif Kouachi assaulted the offices of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, leaving 12 people dead, including the magazine’s editor Stéphane Charbonnier and other well-known French cartoonists. Two days later, and at the end of

Corresponding author:

Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Blindern, P.O. Box 1093, 0317 Oslo, Norway.

Email: k.a.ihlebak@media.uio.no

a dramatic manhunt that turned into a hostage situation, the police killed the Kouachi brothers. At the same time, a third terrorist, Amedy Coulibaly, attacked a Jewish supermarket and killed four people before he too was killed by the police.

The *Charlie Hebdo* attack soon became a highly symbolic event, reflecting the core struggle between free speech and religious values that escalated after the ‘cartoon crisis’ in 2005 (Colbjørnsen, 2017; Jenkins and Tandoc, 2017; Kunelius et al., 2007; Połńska-Kimunguyi and Gillespie, 2016). Public expressions of outrage and large rallies supporting *Charlie Hebdo* followed, showing support to the victims and to free speech as a sacred value (Smyrniaios and Ratinaud, 2017; Sumiala et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2016). The slogan ‘Je Suis Charlie’ became a symbol of French and European unity amid what was considered a national trauma. However, this unifying rallying cry rapidly turned into a complex and, to some extent, exclusionary label. The slogan did not appeal to those who, under the opposite slogan of ‘Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie’ (I am not Charlie), utterly condemned the attack but refused to show their support for what was perceived as the magazine’s provocative editorial line and offensive content (Badouard, 2016; Moran, 2017). Furthermore, the assault also triggered anti-immigrant Muslim sentiments that mobilized millions of marchers led by the Patriotic Europeans Against Islamization of the West movement (Pegida) in the German city of Dresden (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). In France, Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Front, called for a return to the death penalty.

Extremist acts of terror raise crucial questions concerning how to report on such attacks in a context of polarization in European societies. Previous research has pointed to how the media coverage in the aftermath of radical acts of violence often offers a dramaturgical display of civil solidarity (Matthews, 2016; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2016). Matthews argues that media scripts and choreography lose their usual tone of ‘prose of information’, objectivity and impartiality, to become ‘prose of solidarity’ that incorporates ‘we’ and ‘the other’. The way in which journalists make sense of these incidents furthermore reveals the nature and dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2014) and the boundaries of the very nature of Europe’s collective identity (Eyerman, 2008).

In this article, we aim to take a performative approach to journalism and apply it to the notion of the ‘vital centre’ in the context of fragmented civil spheres (Schlesinger, 1949, quoted in Alexander, 2016). By a ‘vital centre’, we mean a form of a network of democratically inclined individuals and institutions that do not share the same ideological or political ideas, but that nevertheless believe in the existence and necessity of civil repair in the aftermath of radical events. As a result, they reject the radical responses by right-wing and left-wing actors and instead seek consensus around some core values. Our argument in this article is that when journalism covers radical activities they can take on the role as an ‘enunciator’ (Austin, 1962) performing actions of solidarity as a form of civil repair. By doing so, journalism *acts as if* a vital centre already exists, even if, and insofar as, its very existence is largely a question that is subject to debate.

Building on Alexander’s (2006) cultural sociological perspective and studies on media performance in the context of conflicts, dissent and extreme events (Cottle, 2004, 2006, 2008; McAdam, 2000), we address the discursive struggle over the inclusion and exclusion of actors and actions in relation to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. We believe the

case is interesting because the attack was interpreted by many as an attack on free speech and journalism itself (Jenkins and Tandoc, 2017). As we will see, this symbolic context manifested itself in the dilemma of whether cartoons of Muhammad should be published after the massacre, an act that was identified by many as provocative after the 2005 cartoon crisis. The moment was a critical turning point that forced journalism organizations to again justify their editorial decisions.

The civil sphere, media performance and radical events

The extreme reactions following the *Charlie Hebdo* attack illustrate the dynamics of a fragmented civil sphere that lie at the heart of Alexander's (2006) *Civil Sphere*. Alexander's theorizing is rooted in the normative desirability and empirical possibility of an overarching civil solidarity. Yet the existence of division within civil societies is integral to the concept of the civil sphere, whose binary discourse allows the presence of profane and anticivil attributes along with the sacred and civil characterization of actors and institutions. While the profane and anticivil elements convey exclusion, the latter aspects allow and require incorporation. But, as Alexander (2016) asks, if the civil sphere is fragmented, how can a wider civil solidarity be possible? As the civil sphere responds to conflicts that stimulate polarization, he answers, influential actors must evoke an inclusive and broad society. To do so, they have to act and speak *as though* such wider solidarity actually did exist. If successful, it will reproduce the idea of a 'vital centre' in which discourses of solidarity are performed and civil repair is possible.

In this article, we suggest that the media functions as a central institution in a 'vital centre' by *performing* it. Journalists do not simply report events but reflectively perform them before an audience. In order to be successful, journalistic performance must be convincing and meaningful to its audiences (Broesman, 2010). Such meanings centre to a large degree on professional principles of journalistic authenticity, truthfulness, accuracy, independence and balance (Breese and Luengo, 2016). These professional codes are intertwined with the civil morals of collective life (Durkheim, 1957). The performative power of the media highlights its capacity to 'enact' the events being reported on, in order, 'to actively shape their constitutive nature – in the course of defining their realities in representational terms' (Allan in Cottle, 2006: ix).

Media performances capture the complex ways in which media organizations are involved in social dissent and contention today. Contemporary acts of civil disobedience, civil rights marches and antiglobalization rallies have been shaped by the media to a great extent (Cottle, 2006, 2008). In contrast to previous eras, Cottle (2006: 854) argues, the public physically present at demonstrations does not have as much significance as the fact that there is a mass audience that is consuming the coverage and sometimes coordinating responses. Performativity might reflect the way in which the media has changed the nature of contemporary conflicts itself, which has shifted its focus from sociopolitical issues towards cultural ground and social practices (Melucci, 1992: 8). The performative perspective of the media opens up a path to developing a conceptualization of the role of the media in the civil sphere. Media performances play a part in activating the symbolic mechanism of shared feelings of solidarity as a resistance to the incursions from noncivil spheres. In its 'performative' role, the media itself turns into civil 'actors' that are able to

'perform' civil 'actions', and vice versa. This conceptual progression can be understood via the merger between many of the civil codes that make up the solidarity sphere and the ethical codes of professional journalism. Accordingly, it could be said that criteria such as journalistic impartiality could be reflected in civic impartiality and democratic balance, and these latter characteristics could be assigned to the profile of a social type that embodies the position of the vital centre in divided civil societies.

The media's performance of a vital centre: The *Charlie Hebdo* attack

In this section, we investigate the media's performance via different European newspapers in the aftermath of the attack using a combination of discourse analysis and hermeneutical interpretation. We aim to empirically illuminate different ways in which the media interacts with radical acts and contributes to 'cycles of action and responses' (Cottle, 2006: 39) by sometimes exacerbating conflictive situations (Waddington, 1992), but also, we argue, by mitigating them. Our approach involved progressive steps of analysis of how the inclusion and exclusion of groups was constructed in the articles through discursive forms such as 'we' and 'they'. We carried out a reading of texts that went from explicit discourse markers for excluding participants or activating actions (and deactivating others) to more implicit symbolic forms of performing actors and actions. Furthermore, categories of critical discourse analysis were applied to look closely at the corpus of newspaper articles. We combined Theo Van Leeuwen's (2008) approach to discourse as representation of social practice and Teun A Van Dijk's (2014) perspective on the socio-cognitive dimensions of discourse. In addition, we drew on Van Dijk's (2014) arguments on the openness of discourse structures to social knowledge, but instead of relating these structures to cognitive notions, we interpreted them as symbolic forms of cultural performance (Alexander, 2004). Discursive categories allowed us to focus on the form and the rhetorical devices of the discourse that conveys the performative power of the news (Luengo, 2012; Broesman, 2010; Schudson, 1995). As Broesman (2010) points out, 'To make their representations of the social world performative journalists have to embed them in the cultural codes of their society' (p. 21). Formal patterns helped us to ascertain the broader narratives within which the media reorders particular events according to accepted professional and civil codes.

Sample

Our study is based on the media coverage produced in Spain, Norway and the United Kingdom in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and covers the period between 7 and 14 January 2015 ($n=475$). The sample includes the two top newspapers¹ from each country: the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* and broadsheet *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom; the dailies *El País* and *El Mundo* in Spain; and Norway's most-read newspaper, the tabloid *VG*; and the Oslo-based broadsheet (with a national coverage) *Aftenposten*.² The newspapers were chosen on the basis of their public reach and once the papers had been identified, we noted that the selection made it possible to take into account various ideological lines in addition to opposing journalistic styles. The newspapers represent a

broad ideological spectrum from the left to the right of politics. Traditionally positioned to the left, and with an editorial line that parallels the ideology of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), *El País* is the leading newspaper among the Spanish press. In recent years, and since the entry in 2015 of new parties such as Ciudadanos and Podemos into the political arena, *El País*' ideology has drifted towards a centre-left position. In contrast, the ideology of *El Mundo* is closely aligned with the right-wing Popular Party (PP), though since 2015 its editorial stance has also evolved towards the centre right. Both *El País* and *El Mundo* have experienced this evolution towards the centre in relation to political information. Historically, these two newspapers have also responded to other structural factors that are common to media organizations in Spain, such as the already mentioned political parallelisms, relative partisan bias and the opinion-focused nature of the Spanish press (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The two most-read Norwegian newspapers, *VG* and *Aftenposten*, coincide in a liberal/conservative ideology. That ideology, however, has to be understood in the context of other factors that affect journalistic culture in Norway. Although the Norwegian press has a relatively high level of commentary journalism, neutrality is highly valued as a professional ideal and the ideological position might therefore be of less concern than it is in relation to Spanish and British newspapers with more partisan biases. Overall, the Norwegian model involves a higher level of professional autonomy (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Finally, the UK-based broadsheet *The Guardian* has a left-wing orientation. In contrast, the British tabloid *The Sun*, which has the highest readership in the United Kingdom, is placed on the right wing of the British press's political spectrum. Both newspapers fit within the context of Britain's long tradition of a free press, a highly commercialized media, a relative degree of partisanship and strong professionalization. That said, the UK press is less institutionalized than its Norwegian counterpart is.

The result of our selecting newspapers with high circulations was that two of them, the Norwegian *VG* and Britain's *The Sun*, corresponded to a tabloid style that is very different to that of the broadsheets *Aftenposten*, *The Guardian*, *El País* and *El Mundo*. As Örnebring (2008) points out, 'tabloids' represent different things in particular cultural contexts. In Europe, 'tabloid' refers to both a kind of format and a form of sensationalist journalism. *The Sun* represents the most populist tabloid newspaper with the most explicit rhetorical tabloid style and elements of campaign journalism. The Norwegian tabloid *VG* is subtler and less confrontational in its style than *The Sun* is, though it is also known to focus on entertainment and human-interest stories.

Analysis

In what follows, we intend to identify the media subject that was behind different newspaper accounts on the events and reactions that were triggered immediately after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. Through exploring the common characteristics of the discourses, we will attempt to clarify an ideal type and seek to delineate other positions that were closer to or more distant from the vital centre. Our understanding is that the psychological-cultural profile of the ideal class of subject/actor corresponds to the characteristics of democracy; a defence of freedom, balance, fairness, reasonableness and inclusiveness, and also an ability to acknowledge difference. Particularly, when media actors cover radical acts, such as those caused by Islamic extremism, they need to be

impartial and balanced, but also distance themselves from antidemocratic acts of violence. At the same time, the establishment of dividing lines in relation to extreme acts should be carefully drawn so as to avoid intolerance and hate. Such care and accuracy help to preserve the civil integrity of Islam as a religion and of Muslim minorities inside European nations, most of whom are not terrorists or radicals. The vital centre allows the inclusion of Muslim migrants but excludes those who practise anticivil forms of radicalism. In addition, as media actors condemn extremism, they can assert that citizens must understand that it is rooted in their own society's repressive and exclusionary practices. Through doing so, it may be possible to create sympathy for and identification with the group but not the extremists who claim to speak in its name. On the other hand, media actors need to achieve a relative independence from partisan ideologies. If they cannot present their descriptions as fair and reasonable – as an 'overlapping consensus', to use John Rawls' (1971) formulation – their performance will fail to represent a vital centre.

The media's performance of freedom as a vital central code

Across all the newspapers included in the study, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack was broadly represented as a terror act which struck European values in general and free speech in particular (see also Jenkins and Tandoc, 2017). The 'we' is constructed around several symbolic categories. The victims working for *Charlie Hebdo* do not simply represent French citizens. They symbolize European-ness, and the satirical magazine became a symbol of freedom, such that the attack struck at the heart of free thought. This emphasis on freedom, and on other core codes of democratic life such as independence or a critical spirit, is associated with the specific performance of democratic journalism in the Western world, and it can be found, for example, in the way the victims are described. They are presented as French/European civilians who were brutally killed, but newspapers also emphasized their status as *journalists* – that is, their professional role is honoured, separated and distinguished. The victims consequently represent all journalists, as is stated clearly in a commentary written by *Aftenposten's* chief editor (10 January 2015): 'In defence of the diversity of opinion, all free media stands together – a community and framework that also is a cornerstone of democracy. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was therefore also an attack on *Aftenposten*'. Editorials joined the declaration from the Europa partnership of newspapers in describing the dead journalists as 'our assassinated colleagues' whose lives inspire 'us', European newspapers, to continue 'to inform, to inquire, to interview, to comment, to publish – and to draw – about every subject that appears to us legitimate, in a spirit of openness, intellectual enrichment and democratic debate' (*The Guardian*, 8 January 2015).

In addition to freedom, other civil codes such as autonomy in the face of power are interwoven in the discourses. Each of the 10 journalists shot dead is individually named and highlighted in news articles, features and editorials. In particular, cartoonist Stéphane Charbonnier, who had been the editor of *Charlie Hebdo* since 2009, became the symbol of bravery. The coverage in all newspapers highlights his defiant, ironic attitude towards terrorist threats. In her profile of Stéphane Charbonnier, a journalist in *El Mundo* (9 January 2015) reported on his character. She writes that for Charb, 'Humour was always a weapon to fight against disinformation, prejudices and taboos. [...] His acid pen did not

discriminate religions or hierarchies, and he laughed at power without any shame'. The bravery of the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* and their resistance to moderating themselves were also widely lauded. These codes of freedom – spirit, independence and criticism – characterize the actions of the murdered journalists in such a way that these attitudes are elevated and taken as a model of professional performance. Therefore, the codes not only characterize the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists but also inspire and guide the journalistic 'us'. Freedom of expression is consequently reaffirmed as a civil value. The reaffirmation of the core nature of democratic freedom even means that a niche newspaper is elevated to a sacred status, and the murdered and wounded journalists are referred to as 'martyrs of freedom' (VG 8 January 2015). The victims, in other words, symbolize what is perceived to really be at stake: the status of freedom of speech in liberal democracies, as a crucial value in the civil sphere.

The symbolic construction of 'them'

Reconstructing and reaffirming freedom as a core value of the civil sphere implies that the media assumes with greater determination its role as guarantors of this freedom, the value around which the attack on 'us' is portrayed. In the coverage, the construction of 'them' is reflected in the discursive mechanisms through which the media defines and delimits out-groups. Overall, our study shows that strategies of differentiation are carefully used to avoid distinctions between 'ordinary' Muslims and the West. *The Guardian's* editorial from 8 January 2015, the day after the attack, tells readers,

In the face of outrage, it is essentially important that the necessary resolution to defend Republican virtues is not allowed to slide into any kind of backlash against France's entire Muslim community, the largest in Europe.

Instead, the distinction represented is drawn between intolerant fanatics (of all kinds) and those defending liberal values (the rest). Accordingly, the acts of the terrorists are contextualized in two different ways. At first, the terrorists are described in exclusionary terms using strong symbolic language, such as representing 'the dark forces' (VG 8 of January) and 'Islamic savages' (*The Sun* 8 of January). Based on witnesses and security analysis, news articles refer to the murderers as acting with 'clinical calm', 'cold bloodedness' (*The Guardian* 8 January 2015) and 'very professional' and 'militant' (*Aftenposten* 8 January 2015). Once the killers were identified, reports highlighted the ties between the perpetrators and their involvement in 'radical Islamic activism' (*The Guardian*, 9 January 2015). Later, the terrorists are interpreted in terms of their French origins and the challenges facing French society. Identifications turn from their involvement in violent jihadism to physical and psychological descriptions, in which 'they' incorporate characteristics closer to a specific kind of French youth that is 'disenfranchised', 'unemployed' and 'marginalized' (*The Guardian*, 9 January 2015; *El País*, 11 January 2015; *Aftenposten* 9 January 2015; VG 9 January 2015). *The Guardian's* foreign correspondent in Paris characterizes the terrorists as 'the lost children of the Republic'; they were 'homegrown killers, born and radicalized [...] on the fringes of [French] society' (*The Guardian*, 13 January 2015). One *El Mundo* editorial (9 January 2015) observed similarly that 'the

perpetrators of the slaughter [...], despite their Tunisian origin, were French, born and educated in Europe, exactly like the [Muslim] police officer they shot dead on the floor'. News coverage points to the situation in the ghettos in France and to the problem with creating parallel communities within the nation, with these issues raised as one way to understand why young people who grew up in France may turn against the nation. This is illustrated by an editorial in *Aftenposten*, 'Terror Tests Leadership Ability' (9 January 2015), where it is argued that French society in general faces a huge responsibility to address issues of ghetto isolation and unemployment that lead to radicalization and violence. Furthermore, the editorial warns against increased polarization in society and points to the growth of right-wing populism in France and elsewhere.

This contextualization of young terrorists in France reveals the media's performance of civil inclusion. Similarly, anticivil exclusionary practices within in-groups must be banned. This position is present in the way in which the public is warned against blaming ordinary Muslims and making them part of the out-group. By explicitly distancing the attackers and all forms of extremism from moderate Muslims and the wider liberal society (us), it is clear that the newspapers in the study see their role as being not only to exclude the uncivil actions of Islamist terrorists but also to warn against further polarization and fragmentation between Muslim communities and the general public in European societies. This is further manifested in the coverage, particularly present in *The Guardian*, of the condemnation of the reactions from right-wing populist parties like that of Le Pen or movements like Pegida. For example, *The Guardian* devoted several articles to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel's reactions. In contrast to the radical far-right Pegida group, she stands for an 'open and tolerant Germany' (*The Guardian*, 13 January 2015). She appears as an agent of inclusion and as an opponent of intolerance and the marginalization of Muslims.

The differentiation and inclusion of Muslim communities

Although Muslim individuals and communities are not especially included as actual news sources in most of the papers, they have a relative presence in opinion articles and editorials. Reporting on Ahmed Merabet, the police officer murdered by the terrorists, newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *El País* in particular present a notable dissociation of French Muslim citizens from the perpetrators. The 'calm' and 'talented' Merabet is represented as the complete opposite to his murderers (*The Guardian*, 12 January 2015). By emphasizing his Algerian origins and life in the 'gritty northern Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis', an article from *The Guardian* inverted connotations of being Muslim and practicing Islam, and the actor became a symbol of 'the diversity of France's forces of law and order' (14 January 2015). However, this portrayal was not common to all newspapers. In contrast to *The Guardian*, for instance, the news reports on the attack published in *El País* did not initially mention Merabet's Muslim origin or the immigrant neighbourhood to the north of Paris where he lived. The newspaper made use of a sensationalist video that showed the brutal shooting of the officer. It was only in one news article that Merabet was presented as a French Muslim, where he is mentioned alongside 'a Muslim saviour of Jews' (*El País*, 11 January 2015), a reference to a Muslim citizen who helped Jewish citizens during the attack on the kosher supermarket that followed the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

As we have indicated, most of the newspapers included in the study were careful and precise in establishing the ‘we’ and the ‘them’ and, by doing so, they adopted a civil and balanced position. However, there are some interesting differences present in the material that need to be addressed. The British tabloid *The Sun* explicitly placed ordinary Muslims in a more excluded position, using a confrontational style in relation to the Muslim community and arguing that it had a responsibility to condemn the attack and to state its support for free speech. In an opinion column (*The Sun*, 8 January 2015) titled ‘To All the Muslims Appalled by Paris ... Time to Show It’, journalist Rod Liddle refers to how ‘Islamic savages’ are still on the run in Paris and how the terror attack was ‘typically brutal, typically ruthless, typically cowardly’. In the commentary, he places the terror attack in the historical frame of other attacks: the attempted murder of ‘our’ Salman Rushdie, the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* and the murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands. The journalist also points to the reactions from Muslim communities that supported or expressed sympathy with these attacks. They are ‘lovely, lovely people’, he writes sarcastically. Furthermore, he criticizes the liberal classes and their apologetic defence of Islam:

Pretty soon you will hear politicians, wringing their hands, telling you that this latest atrocity has nothing to do with Islam. They always trot out that cliché – but it was wrong on 9/11, wrong on 7/7 and it’s wrong now. It’s everything to do with Islam, even if the majority of Muslims might abhor what happened in Paris. Allahu Akbar.

The same sentiment is expressed in two editorials published the next day. In the first, ‘Attack Offended All of Humanity’ (9 January 2015), the statements of seven Muslim leaders in Britain are gathered and published. A common thread in all the statements from Muslim leaders is a vehement condemnation of the attack and the argument that the perpetrators do not represent Islam. In the second editorial published the same day, it is stated that ‘moderate Muslims’ do not need to defend their place in modern Britain – ‘Ordinary, moderate Muslims are not just welcome, they are integral’ – and that it is vital that the far right does not use the atrocity as an excuse for reprisals. At the same time, the editorial also calls for imams not only to condemn the terror in public, but to teach at Friday prayers that violent Islamic extremism is repugnant and intolerable: ‘Too many British Muslims stay silent over fundamentalism, or even support it, despite its horrors’.

The coverage in *The Sun*, which differs from the coverage in the other newspapers in the study, should be interpreted in the context of the particular culture of British tabloids. However, its ideological orientation to the right may also have interfered in the media outlet’s particular response, which, by contrast, was not given by the conservative and populist *VG* or by *El Mundo*. *El Mundo* just reported on the criticisms of the attack made by some politicians from Muslim countries who were present at the protest march that took place in Paris in response to the attack, but it also criticized those figures and the states that they represent. These countries are characterized as ‘dictatorships’, and the individuals are described as ‘Arab mullahs’ who attack free expression in their respective countries (8 January 2015).

Tension at the journalistic 'centre'

As we have shown, the media discourse in the three countries was to a large degree concerned with demarcating both a narrower sense of 'we' (all journalists) and a wider sense of 'we' (everybody who supports liberal, democratic values), as well as with confirming freedom of speech as a central civil value. For many journalists, the only way to restore and reaffirm freedom was to republish the Muhammad cartoons from the magazine. The act symbolically seemed to perform this backing of freedom and resituated it in the vital centre. However, this representation was not common to all the newspapers, and the discursive construction of the journalistic 'we' reveals a tension between two poles: Should solidarity be shown with those who are offended by such images or by criticisms of Islam, or should it be shown with those who represent and defend free speech – sometimes with deadly consequences? This is not, of course, a novel dilemma. It has been a controversial subject in particular since the publication of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* 10 years before (Kunelius et al., 2007). While many newspapers chose to be cautious in 2005 and 2006 and to not provoke the Muslim community, there was, particularly in the two Norwegian newspapers, a strong discourse that the proper way to respond as a form of solidarity with those killed and wounded in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack was to publish the images in question. The Norwegian commentators made a stronger call to publish the cartoons, and described the attack by using war metaphors to underline the importance – for example, that the pen is a 'weapon' and that journalism was at 'the frontline' (*Aftenposten*, 9 January 2015). Representatives of a more moderate position made a professional distinction between publishing cartoons of Muhammad as an uncivil form of revenge and doing so as a way of documenting the events. There were only a few voices in the Norwegian media coverage that cautioned against offending the Muslim community. For its part, *El País* also sided with the hard-line defence of free speech, as did many media organizations around Europe. Other newspapers such as *El Mundo* decided to republish some *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, avoiding the most scandalous one.

In contrast, *The Guardian* (9 January 2015) decided not to republish the images, asserting 'the necessary diversity of press voices'. As other media outlets did, the newspaper explained that it could not see itself represented by *Charlie Hebdo's* tradition of left-wing radicalism and political provocation. *The Guardian's* editors explained their choice to not reprint the images, differentiating their paper, and in general the UK press (which refused to republish the images), from France's libertarian tradition of free speech, whose more extreme strand is represented by *Charlie Hebdo*. They distanced themselves from 'gratuitously insult[ing] a religion', and the other controversial practices of the 'feisty', 'irreverent' publication (12 January 2015). Professional values, which appeared associated with 'society's wider sensibilities' and 'British culture', also legitimated the paper's own position of not reprinting *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons of Prophet Muhammad.

The fact that the other newspapers republished the images did not mean that they rejected the ethical principle of avoiding offence, racism and hatred towards Muslim groups. Rather, these media outlets appealed to the code of journalistic autonomy as an inviolable value. For some, republishing the images even represented a political act of

defiance against radical extremism. On the other hand, the media outlets that withheld the images did not do so to undermine the independence of the news or hide relevant information from readers. Rather, their aim was to avoid prejudice and offence and promote inclusion. All of these codes were behind editorial decisions as to whether or not to republish the cartoons. The performative struggle to prioritize certain codes influenced the decision of each media outlet. The balance between informing the public and protecting the autonomy of the news organization on one hand, and rejecting racism, avoiding offence and promoting inclusion on the other hand, helped to readjust the system of professional codes to the specific context of social fracture in which the attack took place. To achieve a balance, the media had to redefine the boundaries of its system of values and reposition itself in the vital centre.

Conclusion

In addition to the deaths of *Charlie Hebdo* staff members, the traumatic attack involved the killing of a Muslim police officer during it, the targeting of a kosher supermarket shortly afterward that left one policeman and four civilians dead, and a desperate manhunt that ended with the death of the Kouachi brothers just 3 days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Although all these non-journalist victims were reported by the media, most of the news stories depicted the event in terms of the deaths of the *Charlie Hebdo* staff. News stories reported on the attack as an extreme act that had breached European democratic codes, in substance by violating the core value of freedom of speech. Editorial decisions to define the attack as a kind of radical act against the very centre of European core values allowed us to interpret the media discourses as a performative act of bringing back the vital centre in the civil sphere.

By addressing how in-group and out-group mechanisms were used in the context of discourses of solidarity, we looked for signs that journalism, as an influential communicative institution in the civil sphere, performed an inclusive understanding of society. Our starting point was the proposition that the media's performance can play an important role in triggering shared feelings of solidarity and consensus as a form of resistance to noncivil radical actions and polarization in civil societies. Our study shows that the coverage across most of the newspapers (*The Sun* being the exception) was built on a strong sense of solidarity in the aftermath of the attack, mirroring the findings of other studies (Matthews, 2016; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2016). The main discourse was constructed around the wide inclusion of those who believe in freedom and liberal democracy, and the exclusion of those who do not – that is, extremists of all forms (religious as well as far-right extremism). Although strong symbolic language was used to describe the vicious attack carried out by the terrorists, the acts of the terrorists were also contextualized in terms of the problems of marginalization and exclusion facing French society. This contextualization of young homegrown terrorists in France reveals the media's performance of civil inclusion by constructing a wide sense of the core group from which radical outgroups, despite their nationality and ethnic origins, are excluded. At the same time, it reflected the lack of response from within Western civil societies and the need for civil repair. We have furthermore argued that patterns of in-group and out-group mechanisms were carefully employed to avoid further polarization between 'ordinary' Muslims and the West. Editorials

across the newspapers representing different ideological positions specified explicitly that this ‘we’ also includes Muslims and warned against the rise of anti-Muslim and anticivil sentiments from the far right. In the words of Alexander, media representations after the attack *appealed* to a wider and inclusive vital centre. In contrast, however, our study illuminates how the British tabloid *The Sun* represented a somewhat different approach. In its coverage, the Muslim community in the United Kingdom was expected to actively condemn the attack and express its unconditional support for free speech as a way of confirming its commitment to and embracement of civil values. The media performances in *The Sun* stand in contrast to the relatively strong sense of consensus found in the other newspapers in the sample. The approach of *The Sun* could be interpreted both in terms of the right-wing ideological leanings of the newspaper, which manifested themselves here in the form of a tougher stand against Muslim immigration and integration in general, and in the context of the crude and populist tabloid journalism that characterizes the publication.

On a final note, in the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, it was clear that the media through its manifestation of professional journalism positioned itself as a watchdog of free expression. From this critical position, it felt compelled to realign freedom of speech with other professional/civil norms in the face of the dilemma of republishing or withholding the controversial images. It had to deal with the rise of fringe far-right voices, intolerance, Islamophobia and gratuitous offence against targeted groups. To accomplish this, media discourses formulated different responses. They moved forth and back from an ideal middle position, which, we have argued, represents a vital centre within fragmented civil societies. This balanced position makes it possible to theorize about how the solidarity promise of the civil sphere might become empirically manifested in real divided societies. This vital centre brings together ideological stances from the centre left and right, but it also indicates the existence of civil inclusion and solidarity. We have argued that media representations do not just describe this vital centre mimetically; they perform it by symbolically aiming for its very existence. When reporting radical acts, the media is challenged to restage them and to act as if there were a vital centre amid sharper divisions. To strengthen this performative power, news organizations appeal to broader cultural and journalistic codes. Divided positions on whether or not to republish the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons reflected a performative struggle in which media organizations had to reinforce enduring codes of ethics, such as newsworthiness and free expression as well as avoiding offence, expressing solidarity and serving readers.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The analysis is based on the printed versions of the newspapers.
2. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017.

References

- Alexander JC (2004) Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy. *Sociological Theory* 22(4): 527–573.
- Alexander JC (2006) *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander JC (2016) Progress and disillusion: Civil repair and its discontents. In: *ISA sociological theory conference*, Cambridge, 27–29 June.
- Austin J (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Breese EB and Luengo M (2016) News Innovations and Enduring commitments. In Alexander JC, Breese EB and Luengo M (eds) *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered. Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 282–289..
- Badouard R (2016) ‘Je ne suis pas Charlie’ Pluralité des prises de parole sur le web et les réseaux sociaux. In: Lefebvre P and Sécaïl C (eds) *Le défi Charlie. Les médias à l'épreuve des attentats*. Paris: Lemieux Editeur, pp. 187–220.
- Broesman M (2010) Journalism as performative discourse: The importance of form and style in journalism. In: Rupar V (ed.) *Journalism and Meaning-Making: Reading the Newspaper*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, pp. 15–35.
- Castelli Gattinara P (2017) Framing exclusion in the public sphere: Far-right mobilisation and the debate on Charlie Hebdo in Italy. *South European Society and Politics* 22(3): 345–364.
- Colbjørnsen T (2017) Debating freedom of expression in Norwegian media: Critical moments, positions and arguments. In: Midtbøen A, Steen-Johynsen K and Thorbjørnsrud K (eds) *Boundary Struggles: Contestations of Free Speech in the Norwegian Public Sphere*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, pp. 165–195.
- Cottle S (2004) *The Racist Murder of Stephen Lawrence: Media Performance and Public Transformation*. London: Praeger.
- Cottle S (2006) *Mediatized Conflict: Developments in Media and Conflict Studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Cottle S (2008) Reporting demonstration: The changing media politics of dissent. *Media, Culture & Society* 30(6): 853–872.
- Durkheim E (1957) *Professional Ethics and Civil Codes*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Eyerman R (2008) *The Assassination of Theo Van Gogh: From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma*. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press.
- Gerhards J and Schäfer MS (2014) International terrorism, domestic coverage? How terrorist attacks are presented in the news of CNN, Al Jazeera, the BBC, and ARD. *International Communication Gazette* 76(1): 3–26.
- Hallin D and Mancini P (2004) *Comparing Media Systems*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins J and Tandoc E (2017) Journalism under attack: The Charlie Hebdo covers and reconsiderations of journalistic norms. *Journalism*. Epub ahead of print 22 August. DOI: 10.1177/1464884917724597.
- Kunelius R, Eide E, Hahn O and Schroeder R (eds) (2007) *Reading the Mohammed Cartoons Controversy: An International Analysis of Press Discourses on Free Speech and Political Spin*. Bochum; Freiburg: Projekt Verlag.
- Luengo M (2012) Narrating civil society: A new theoretical perspective on journalistic autonomy. *Communication & Society* 25(2): 29–56.
- McAdam D (2000) Movement strategy and dramaturgic framing in democratic states: The case of the American Civil Rights Movement. In: Chambers S and Costain A (eds) *Deliberation, Democracy and the Media*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 117–134.

- Matthews J (2016) Media events in the aftermath of terrorism: Exploring how reporting templates produce social drama. In: Mitu B and Poulakidakos S (eds) *Media Events: A Critical Contemporary Approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13–30.
- Melucci A (1992) *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moran M (2017) Terrorism and the banlieues: The Charlie Hebdo attacks in context. *Modern & Contemporary France* 25(3): 315–332.
- Örnebring H (2008) The consumer as producer – of what? User-generated tabloid content in The Sun (UK) and Aftonbladet (Sweden). *Journalism Studies* 9(5): 771–785.
- Połośńska-Kimunguyi E and Gillespie M (2016) Terrorism discourse on French international broadcasting: France 24 and the case of Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. *European Journal of Communication* 31(5): 568–583.
- Rawls J (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schudson M (1995) *The Power of News*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press.
- Smyrniotis N and Ratinaud P (2017) The Charlie Hebdo attacks on Twitter: A comparative analysis of a political controversy in English and French. *Social Media + Society* 3(1): 2056305117693647.
- Sumiala J, Tikka M, Huhtamäki J, et al. (2016) #JeSuisCharlie: Towards a multi-method study of hybrid media events. *Media and Communication* 4(4): 97–108.
- Thorbjørnsrud K and Figenschou TU (2016) Consensus and dissent after terror: Editorial policies in times of crisis. *Journalism* 19(3): 333–348.
- Van Dijk TA (2014) *Discourse and Knowledge: A Sociocognitive Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Leeuwen T (2008) *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Waddington D (1992) Media representation of public disorder. In: Waddington D (ed.) *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder*. London: Routledge, pp. 160–178.
- Walter N, Demetriades SZ, Kelly R, et al. (2016) Je Suis Charlie? The framing of ingroup transgression and the attribution of responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attack. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 3956–3974.