The Porous Public and the Transnational Dialectic

The Muhammed Cartoons Conflict

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abstract: This article uses the twin concepts of the porous public and the transnational dialectic to analyse the recent Muhammed cartoons conflict. The porous public concept points to the way national public spheres are increasingly penetrated by inbound and outbound influences. The transnational dialectic concept suggests that globalization is a learning process in which globalization is simultaneously outcome and cause of social and political activities. During the cartoons conflict, the porosity of the Danish public was evident in (1) the transnational activities of national media, in (2) the role played by transnational news channels, in (3) the transnational activities of Muslims living in Denmark, and in (4) the role played by 9/11 as a transnationally shared event. Based on these findings, the concept of the transnational dialectic is employed to show how the Muhammed cartoons conflict constituted a learning process for Danish society, a process which has resulted in an increased level of global consciousness and an altered self-conception of Denmark’s place and role in the world. Following the analysis of the Muhammed cartoons, the article discusses how the concept of the porous public relates to that of the transnational public sphere.

keywords: global consciousness • media • Muhammed cartoons • porous public • public sphere • transnational dialectic

Introduction

When people in Denmark speak about the Muhammed cartoons conflict, they often use the adjective ‘hit’: Denmark was hit by a massive consumer boycott, by Muslim anger, by international criticism, and so on. This way of phrasing the event reflects the shocked surprise that most Danes felt in the hectic period in late January/early February 2006. In a display of anger and frustration normally reserved for mightier nations, Danish flags were trampled on, the Prime Minister was burned in effigy, and official representations were attacked and set on fire – all because of 12 satirical cartoons of the prophet Muhammed published months earlier, on 30 September, in Jyllands-Posten, a large Danish liberal–right newspaper. Danes feeling hit and under siege was therefore probably understandable. But the ‘folk wisdom’ of the metaphor is misleading. It depicts the conflict, to use another metaphor, as a swarm of meteors crashing through the greenhouse of the Danish public sphere from outer space. What this account misses is the dialectic of the conflict. It paints a portrait of simple and unidirectional causality in which the conflict is seen as a direct and instant reaction to the cartoons. Regrettably, this folk wisdom also surfaces in many scholarly and journalistic accounts. It is more accurate, in my view, to analyse the conflict as a dynamic interaction between the local/national level of
Denmark and the world around it. To capture this situation, I employ the twin concepts of the porous public and the transnational dialectic.

In simple form, the theoretical argument I offer is this: public spheres undergo important transformations in the process of globalization, but this should not lead us to conclude that they cease to be national. What should interest us, instead, are two things: how national public spheres are penetrated by issues and information from areas outside it, and how issues and information in national public spheres ‘migrate’ or are ‘lifted out’ in a way that ends up affecting politics in other national contexts. This openness in both directions is the defining characteristic of the porous public. Clearly, the two statements are logically connected. We could not have one without the other. It is an observation that actively breaks down the outside–inside dichotomy that permeates much of the current debate on globalization. The problem has two interrelated dimensions. First, globalization tends to be viewed as a condition where events in one locale affect events in other locales and vice versa. This definition is on the right track, but stops, so to speak, when the fun begins. What it fails to acknowledge is how local or national events do not simply wield influence across space in a unidirectional manner, but how distant events in fact produce each other dialectically.1 Second, many studies work with a problematic conception of causality in which globalization is seen as an almost extra-social force that causes things to happen at the local and national level. In contrast, I propose that we see globalization as both cause and outcome of social and political phenomena. These two points place the interaction between the local, national and transnational level at the heart of analysis. The twin concepts of the porous public and the transnational dialectic consequently advocate a definition of globalization which does not privilege the national or transnational level of analysis, but rather sees them as mutually constitutive.

The argument is relevant for most of today’s societies. Yet it seems reasonable to suggest, in the light of the Muhammed cartoons crisis, that it may be especially pertinent for researchers, journalists, politicians in Denmark and other Nordic countries. Let me explain why. Denmark and the other Nordic countries have a somewhat ambiguous relationship with globalization. On the one hand, they have a long history of internationalism, perhaps most clearly evidenced in their strong involvement, both politically (through an emphasis on human rights and democracy) and economically (through substantial donor aid) with the so-called Third World. The foreign policy self-identity of the Nordic countries is thus as carriers of a relatively internationalist norm set in which issues of political and economical justice and equality play a central part. On the other hand, they have maintained a rather isolated existence. At first glance this argument sits uneasily with the one about the internationalist self-identity. However, the two are paradoxically connected. Precisely because of the internationalist role, the Nordic countries have rarely been the target of serious criticism from activists dealing with issues of global justice or from groups and politicians in the Third World. Stated banally, people in the Nordic countries have become used to being the good guys. The contentious and often violent reactions routinely generated by the actions of more powerful states such as the USA, Great Britain and France are simply not part of how we conceive of our role and place in the world.

This may have changed, at least partly, with the Muhammed cartoons conflict. There is now a heightened awareness that what we do and say can potentially become the target of transnational criticism and political contention. To use the theoretical concepts introduced above, the cartoons conflict has made it evident that we live in porous publics intimately connected with the world around us. For some, this is a welcome reminder of how we are part of a shared and global fate community, for others it is proof that cross-cultural dialogue is not really possible or desirable. The jury is still out as to how the Muhammed cartoons conflict will shape the development of Danish society and politics. It is beyond doubt, however, that the event has served as a significant learning process on globalization for Danish society. It is also more
than likely that the cartoons conflict was not just a freak accident. Next time the exact form and trajectory may be different and the intensity less pronounced, but it is a pattern that we will undoubtedly see again. Through its discussion of the changing nature of the public sphere, the article offers a first step towards a sociological theorizing of the conditions that enable this type of event. It is the hope that such an exercise can contribute in two ways: first, by shedding new theoretical light on what actually happened and how, and, second, by providing a framework for the coming discussions of how we, in Denmark, and in the Nordic countries more generally, should conceive of our own role in an increasingly interconnected and sometimes conflictive world.

The article has three main parts: in the first part, I theoretically develop the concepts of the porous public and the transnational dialectic; in the second, I try to illustrate the utility of these concepts through an analysis of the Muhammed cartoons conflict; and, in the third part, I discuss the relationship between the porous public concept and that of the transnational public sphere.

Porosity and dialectic

To elaborate on the arguments briefly presented in the introduction, I proceed through three theoretical steps. First, I elucidate in what way it still makes sense to think of the public sphere as national. I then discuss how this ‘nationality’ is increasingly shot through with inbound and outbound influences. I conclude with the argument that these opposite influences dialectically constitute each other to produce globalization.

I

Although public spheres rest on the same set of values (at the most basic level, freedom of speech and critique of authority), these values are interpreted and practised differently from one national context to the next. The differences are the result of distinct historical experiences closely linked to the formation of nation-states. In fact, the development of the public sphere cannot be separated from the nation-state. This is because the public sphere presupposes, first, a shared language, and, second, a constitutional status in which a state guarantees the autonomy of the public sphere. Both of these preconditions still apply. Even in our supposedly globalized age, public spheres continue to reflect a shared cultural and language community and to be constitutionally guaranteed by a state. This is perhaps most evident if we look at the media. The essence of the public sphere is debate and communication (Habermas, 1962/1989). In the imagined community of the modern public sphere, it is the media that create what we might call its communicative infrastructure (Anderson, 1983; Taylor, 1992). Even a cursory glance at the world’s media landscape reveals that the large majority of media are still tied to a specific national and language context. In a similar vein, Koopmans and Erbe’s (2004) analysis of the Europeanization of the German public sphere and media point to the discrepancy between the advanced state of political interaction at the European level and the absence of genuinely European media of some importance.

II

But this national public sphere is increasingly porous. I prefer the adjective ‘porous’ because I find it theoretically sterile to debate whether the public sphere today is mainly national or transnationalized. The dichotomy is artificial. Historically, the national public sphere has always been subject to external influences. We need only think about the way the European revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century became the subject of debate in every public sphere around Europe. The porosity metaphor avoids this dichotomy. Rather than saying that the public sphere is either mainly national or transnational, it suggests that it is both. It is more precise,
then, to speak about *degrees of porosity*. This way of thinking about the public sphere enables us to make important distinctions without falling into the dichotomous trap. First, it makes it possible to examine historically how public spheres have generally become increasingly porous over time, and, second, to conceive of contemporary public spheres as porous in varying degrees (for example, the Danish public sphere is more porous than the Iranian ditto). The degree of porosity can be measured along two interconnected parameters: media and people.

**Media.** The media, as noted earlier, constitute the communicative infrastructure of the public sphere. In their analysis of the Europeanization of the German public sphere, Koopmans and Erbe (2004) focus on the presence of European elements in selected German newspapers. Varying across issues, they find a considerable influence of European issues. Importantly, this indicates that national newspapers and news channels today have more transnational orientations and routines than previously. They are increasingly interconnected transnationally through inter-media monitoring (facilitated by online versions), cooperative arrangements, and the use of the same sources (press agencies and major transnational news channels) (Holm, 2006). This development evidently reflects the process of globalization in which events outside the local and national context come to have an ever greater effect on these contexts and therefore attain increasing news value.

While it is true, as I said above, that the majority of media are still directed towards a specific national audience, there has also been a noteworthy growth in recent decades of what we might term *transnational media*. Well-known empirical examples are news channels such as CNN and BBC World. Even though their headquarters are nationally located, their intended audience is transnational. This transnationality is reflected in the issues they take up (and in the commercials they show!). CNN and BBC World strive to present a global outlook, but their use of English language and their anchoring in a Western context restricts the potential audience significantly. However, since the mid-1990s, Western dominance in the area of transnational broadcasting has been challenged by the emergence of Arab-language transnational media such as *Al-Jazeera*, which caters for a broad transnational Arab and Muslim audience (Lynch, 2003; Seib, 2005).

The national and transnational newspaper and news-channel media described above are normally placed under the rubric of mass media. Here, I refer to them jointly as *macromedia*. Macromedia are macro in the sense that their news production is aimed at a broad and relatively abstract public audience. One of the major media developments in recent years is the increasing importance and accessibility of what I call *micromedia*. Micromedia, as the term suggests, are different from macromedia in that they are more private and direct. They may include a variety of media, such as telephone, telefax, letters, email, listservs, weblogs, websites, and so on. Micromedia, obviously, are not of a kind. Inspired by Diani’s (2001) distinction between public and private communication, I single out three types: telephone, telefax and letters are mainly used in what we might term private one-to-one communication; email and SMS can be used in this way, but may also be involved in semi-private communication between a sender and an audience connected to that sender through an already established inter-personal network (in some cases the audience is so large that the communication blurs the boundary between public and private; hence the term ‘semi-private’); listservs, weblogs and websites, in contrast, are more genuinely public forms of communication in that they are accessible to all. However, since they are often used by individuals or groups who work with different news criteria (and budgets!) than macromedia, they are categorized as micromedia. Importantly, micromedia often blur the distinction between national and transnational, which is more easily made in relation to the macromedia. We might even say that they often dissolve the very distinction: a weblog written in English by an Egyptian may be categorized as ‘Egyptian’, but its audience will typically be transnational; and a Thai human
rights group may maintain a website in both Thai and English and thus communicate simultaneously with national and transnational audiences (Figure 1).

All these ‘types’ of media increase the porosity of national public spheres. The distinction allows us to discuss how porosity can differ over time and space. For example, public spheres in the mid-nineteenth century may have had elements of box A, but not B and C. Similarly, some contemporary states regulate news flows by restricting the accessibility of the media in boxes B and C. To repeat what was said above, porosity, then, is not a fixed state of affairs. It makes more sense to speak about degrees of porosity and consequently of variations across historical time and between countries.

**People.** The porous public is not just about media, macro or micro. The multicultural societies that have emerged in Europe in the past 50 years or so also provide a more physical dimension. As a result of increased immigration, most Western European countries (including the Nordic countries, but most notably Sweden and Denmark) have become ‘tied’ to other countries via personal networks. As demonstrated in the sociological and anthropological literature (see, for example, Sheffer, 2003) on diaspora networks, immigrants and refugees usually maintain a degree of contact with friends and family in their country of origin and consequently come to serve as brokers between this country and their ‘new’ country. They will have a sense of what goes on in the public sphere of each country and will distribute this information in both directions. This exchange takes place when they travel ‘home’ or when they receive visitors from the ‘old’ country. Primarily, however, it happens via the micromedia that I have already described (the distinction I am making between media and people is thus partly artificial). SMS, mobile telephony, cheap long-distance telephone cards and email make it possible to maintain a stable flow of communication across space.

There is another and more cognitive aspect of the people factor that cannot be reduced to multiculturalism. What I am getting at here is the rather abstract notion of a global consciousness identified by various, usually sociologically inclined, authors as a central element in globalization processes (e.g. Robertson, 1992; Rosenau, 1997; Shaw, 2000). Rosenau (1997) has couched this discussion in terms of a skill revolution taking place in the decades since World War II. What he suggests is that people today are increasingly capable of analysing apparently singular, local and national issues and events in an abstract and transnational context. This development is greatly dependent on media technologies. As demonstrated by Dayan and Katz (1992), the media, especially satellite television, facilitate the creation of shared transnational experiences that become part of people’s cognitive reservoirs. This situation radically increases the degree of a public sphere’s porosity, because people in other settings will be inclined to interpret events within it as relevant in relation to their own social and political realities.

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**Figure 1 Media and porosity**
III
The discussions earlier have concentrated on identifying conditions that facilitate porosity and have not touched directly on the types of social and political phenomena that these conditions can actually set in motion. In the Introduction, I argued that porosity can only be understood in relation to the concept of the transnational dialectic. The core idea of the porosity concept is precisely to emphasize the simultaneous presence of inbound and outbound influences in the public sphere. These influences constitute each other in a dialectical spiral process whose end result is typically ‘more’ globalization. Rather than outbound and inbound arrows, these are consequently better understood as part of the same ‘movement’. A theoretical example: something happens in country A involving a citizen from country B. The issue then becomes a theme in the public sphere in country B. This debate, in turn, is closely followed in country A, affecting the public understanding and decisions regarding the problem in this country, and so on. Obviously, the country A and B example is the simplest possible. In most cases, numerous public spheres are simultaneously involved and the complexity correspondingly higher (I demonstrate this dynamic in relation to the Muhammad cartoons conflict in Figure 2).

The Muhammed Cartoons Conflict

The debate about the Muhammed cartoons was a national Danish issue long before it became a contested issue transnationally. The infamous cartoons were published on 30 September 2005, but it was not until January and February 2006 that it erupted on a transnational scale. It is not my ambition here to reconstruct how and why this escalation occurred, although some causal claims will be made in the analysis. The aim is rather to describe elements from the case that empirically illustrate the theoretical arguments in the preceding section. In other words, I am not claiming that the elements discussed in the following are what caused the conflict to escalate. Porosity, in other words, does not mean that every issue more or less automatically transcends national borders. In fact, due to the continuing national character of public spheres pointed out in the theoretical section, most issues never cross national boundaries. The conditions described below therefore only facilitate what Tarrow (2005) calls the externalization of domestic issues.

In the following, I argue that the porosity of the Danish public sphere during the cartoons conflict was visible in the role played by (1) transnational news channels, (2) Danish media acting transnationally, (3) non-Danish media acting transnationally, (4) Danes or people living in Denmark with Muslim background, and (5) transnationally shared events. I conclude the section by discussing these elements in relation to the concept of the transnational dialectic.

Methodology

The data for the analysis below are drawn from a data set developed in Olesen (2006). The set is based on a coding of news items in the Danish centre–left newspaper, Politiken. To collect the news items, I used the electronic newspaper archive, Infomedia. I cast a wide net by extracting all items containing the search words ‘Muhammed’ and ‘tegninger’ (cartoons). The search period ran from 30 September 2005, when the cartoons were published, to 31 March 2006, when the conflict was on the wane. The search turned up a total of 923 news items. A number of these were not relevant. Removing them reduced the data set to 716. The remaining news items were read and coded to yield information on these questions (inspired by Koopmans, 2002): 1) Who is making a claim? 2) To whom is the claim addressed? 3) What is the purpose and content of the claim? 4) How and through what channels is the claim expressed? These questions enable identification of the central actors and their claims in the conflict and let us draw a precise ‘map’ of the debate surrounding the cartoons. With such a map in hand it is 300
possible to extract a number of empirical observations that allow us to reflect analytically on porosity and dialectic in the Muhammed cartoons conflict.4

The choice of source needs some explaining. First, it might be objected that using only one newspaper, Politiken, creates a biased view of the issue. The point is valid, but because of its salience, drama and novelty the cartoons conflict received extensive coverage in all Danish newspapers. It is a reasonable assumption, therefore, that any Danish newspaper provides a broad and representative view of public debate on the issue. However, Politiken was chosen because it had a critical stance towards Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government in its coverage. This, combined with the fact that it is considered a serious newspaper with a large and diverse readership, has resulted in a broad coverage that has given voice to numerous different actors. This broadness is important when we want to use a newspaper to draw a public map of debate on an issue. Second, it may seem odd to base the analysis on one national newspaper and it obviously creates a somewhat national bias in the data selection. Two things justify this choice. First, the analysis is primarily concerned with an analysis of the porosity of the Danish public sphere. Second, since Denmark was at the eye of the storm during the conflict, Danish newspapers are where the most extensive coverage is found.

The porous public

1. As mentioned in the theoretical section, the past decade has seen a surge in transnational satellite television channels catering mainly for Muslim audiences. In the Muhammed cartoons conflict, the satellite television channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya played a pivotal role in diffusion of the conflict. Their ability to reach a large audience and create awareness about the Muhammed cartoons intensified the porosity of the Danish public sphere. What was essentially a national event was exposed on a transnational level. On 1 February, as the conflict was gathering full force, Naser Khader, a Lebanon born Danish MP and co-founder of the association Demokratiske Muslimer (Democratic Muslims), thus remarked that the conflict had escalated when Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya started giving the issue attention on 26 January (Nielsen and Flensburg, 2006). The day after, he said, the cartoons were a major theme in Friday prayers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Khader’s observation (though not necessarily his causal inference!) is supported by a search in Al-Jazeera’s (2006) archive, which reveals that the issue was reported only twice prior to 26 January on the channel’s website. In the following two weeks it was reported 36 times. Outside the Muslim world, news channels also contributed to porosity. A search on CNN’s website reveals that the issue only started attracting attention on 2 February, that is, a little later than what was found with Al-Jazeera. Of the 51 times the issue is mentioned, 45 date from the period between 2 and 19 February (CNN, 2006). A similar picture materializes when searching the BBC website, the main difference being that the BBC seemed to be earlier in directing attention to the conflict (most likely because of the conflict’s European angle). Here, the issue was mentioned four times prior to 26 January. In the following two weeks the number rose to 67 (BBC, 2006).

2. The cartoons conflict began with the publication of 12 satirical cartoons of the prophet Muhammed in Jyllands-Posten, a liberal daily with a large circulation. When the conflict escalated in January/February 2006, the newspaper found itself under heavy cross-fire. Muslims expressed anger at what they saw as blasphemous publications and non-Muslim politicians, media and organizations criticized it for wilfully insulting Muslim religious sentiments. In terms of porosity it was rather a case, then, of actors outside Denmark (including the transnational news channels discussed under point 1) creating porosity by referring to the actions of a Danish newspaper. However, during the conflict, Jyllands-Posten went from being a passive object of criticism to an active player in the debate. On 30 January, the newspaper issued a statement through the Jordanian news agency in which it apologized for having hurt Muslim sentiments (Ritzau, 2006). This statement was also published on the newspaper’s
website in English and Arabic. The use of websites by national newspapers to communicate with audiences outside their national context is a novel development which leads to increasing porosity. The possibilities, of course, are still limited, because, as I noted in the theoretical section, national newspapers still cater for national language audiences. Porosity via online versions thus requires that texts are translated or that the newspaper’s main language has significant global distribution. The upshot of this observation is that some publics are less porous than others as a result of language barriers. For example, online versions of US newspapers will be more widely ‘visible’ to non-national audiences than, say, Russian online newspapers.

3. National newspapers and news channels outside Denmark also contributed to porosity. These can be grouped roughly in two categories: (1) those with a negative position towards Jyllands-Posten and the cartoons and (2) those with a supportive position. Critical articles, op-eds and commentary were present in national newspapers and news channels all over the world (but concentrated in Europe and the Muslim world). There is as yet no hard evidence to provide a clear picture of the pattern of this critical coverage (its geographical distribution and concentration, its main claims, its distribution according to newspapers’ and news channels’ political positions, and so on). In relation to supportive coverage, there are, however, some preliminary data that also give us an idea of the general extension of coverage outside Denmark. Numerous newspapers in Europe, and to a lesser extent the USA and the Muslim world, provided varying degrees of support for the right of Jyllands-Posten to publish the cartoons. According to a survey conducted by the Danish School of Journalism, all or some of Jyllands-Posten’s cartoons were published in at least 143 newspapers in 56 different countries (ejour 2006; the survey was concluded on 27 February). The majority of these reprints were aimed at supporting the publication, placing the defence of freedom of expression at the heart of the argument. Perhaps the most visible involvement on the part of European newspapers came through a continent-wide and apparently coordinated display of solidarity in late January and early February, which included the publication of the cartoons in a number of European newspapers (Munck, 2006). In a telling illustration of the transnational dialectic discussed in the theoretical section, this solidarity display itself became a topic for debate and conflict in the involved public spheres and, later, in Denmark. The cartoons were also published in a number of Arab and Muslim countries (see ejour, 2006). In many of these cases the responsible editors and journalists were fired and sued for defamation (see, for example, Al-Khalidi, 2006).

4. Porosity, as argued in the theoretical section, not only has a mediated dimension, it also has a more physical aspect resulting from the multiculturalism of many of today’s societies. Denmark has a Muslim population of about 200,000 (approximately 3.8 per cent of the total population). This sector of Danish society obviously took a special interest in the cartoons and in many cases came to serve as brokers between Denmark and their countries of origin, relaying information about debates in the Danish public sphere to recipients in other public spheres. This took place on a personal level and through micromedia. Precisely for this reason we do not have any hard data on the extent of such communication and its importance. The role of Muslims living in Denmark in creating porosity is clearer in some of the more organized and publicly visible attempts to generate awareness. In Denmark, early protests against the cartoons were mainly voiced by Det Islamiske Trossamfund (the Islamic Faith Community), an umbrella organization for Muslims in Denmark. In December 2005, the organization toured parts of the Arab world, bringing with it material to document what they considered a generally hostile climate for Muslims in Denmark (see Politiken, 2006, for this material). On their tour, the delegation met with Egyptian government and Arab League representatives (Exner, 2005). During January, and especially as the conflict escalated, the delegation became the target of harsh criticism in Denmark, accused of contributing to the transnationalization
of the conflict (Sørensen, 2006). The spokesmen of *Det Islamiske Trossamfund* became visible public figures in as well as outside Denmark, and were often used in a brokerage function by non-Danish media, especially those from Arabic countries, to comment on the situation.

5. The transnationalization of media and people described under points 1–4 reflects a growing global consciousness. There is a dialectical causality at play here. Media become more transnational because of increasing global consciousness (people need and demand more transnational news), but in that very process they also produce more of it, so to speak. This dialectic is important in understanding what I referred to in the theoretical section as the cognitive aspects of porosity. In this light, I identify 9/11 as a transnationally shared event that has increased the porosity of national public spheres. In another article on the cartoons conflict (Olesen, 2007), I argue that the transnational resonance of the cartoons was partly due to the new world political climate created after 9/11. In terms of porosity, this means that local and national events with a conflictive Muslim aspect are more likely to be ‘lifted out’ of that context. 9/11 has thus politicized religion, and especially Islam, and provides claims makers, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, with new opportunities for framing and legitimizing claims. In my 2006 article, I consequently suggest that media, politicians, institutions and corporations were more inclined to politicize the cartoons than they would have been under different conditions; some because they emphasized the need for cross-cultural understanding in a post-9/11 world, and others because they were eager to draw a clear line between Western and Muslim conceptions of society and democracy.

**The transnational dialectic**

The concept of porosity is important because it enables a more precise formulation of what I have referred to throughout the article as the transnational dialectic. Many, if not most, events and issues emerge at the local and national level and stay there. But once an event, perhaps facilitated by some of the factors discussed above, migrates out of its local or national context to create a shift in scale it sets in motion a dialectical dynamic that is difficult to control and predict. Stated in a rather unscientific manner, it acquires a life of its own, and when it has run its course leaves behind social, cultural and political experiences that come to shape future events. Viewed in this way the transnational dialectic is very much an active learning process.

It is probably safe to say that no one predicted the mobilization of the cartoons conflict that occurred during January and February. For a long time, through October, November, December and most of January, this meant that the Danish government and media were expecting the smoldering conflict to quietly die out. Apparently unaware of the potentially explosive character of the cartoons, both the Danish government and *Jyllands-Posten* adopted a fairly unconditional stance towards the first rounds of criticism from actors in and outside Denmark (these early criticisms came primarily from *Det Islamiske Trossamfund* and from the ambassadors to Denmark of a number of Muslim countries; see Letter from Ambassadors, 2005). For many Muslims, and for non-Muslims concerned with inter-religious and inter-cultural respect (including representatives of international institutions and Western governments), this represented a display of arrogance that fuelled further contention. As anger and frustration began to build up, the Danish government and *Jyllands-Posten* felt forced to change tactics towards at least partial concessions. In late January and early February, statements were issued that expressed regret (but not outright apology) over the effect of the cartoons (conciliatory statements directed at the Muslim world were also issued by Danish corporations such as Arla, who were beginning to feel the effects of consumer boycotts). While this dampened some groups, others were infuriated by the lack of an unconditional apology. The change of tactics also motivated a heated debate in Denmark on democracy, freedom of speech and the appropriate response by the government and *Jyllands-Posten* to the conflict. Domestic politicians, media, corporations and the public were deeply divided on the issue, some calling for an
unconditional defence of the freedom of expression and others for greater cross-cultural understanding. The conflict, in other words, was coming home to roost and has left a lasting mark on Danish politics and society. It seems reasonable to say that the result of the conflict has been an increased global consciousness across the spectrum in Danish society, an awareness, to put it banally, that we are not alone in the world. This experience, as briefly discussed in the Introduction, may have come rather late to Denmark. Even if Denmark in many respects is a highly globalized society, we have rarely experienced national events taking on such a highly politicized and transnational dimension as in the cartoons conflict. Figure 2 illustrates the transnational dialectic of the conflict.5

A Transnational Public Sphere?
The porous public is still a national public, although, as I have sought to demonstrate, one increasingly penetrated by inbound and outbound influences. Even if one accepts this argument, it begs the following question: Does the plurality of national porous publics mean
that we cannot also speak of a transnational public sphere in the singular? I cannot give this
question sufficient attention here, but I find it important at least to sketch the theoretical differ-
ences between the two concepts.

The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, but rather closely interconnected in the sense
that the transnational public sphere, in my view, is a function of porous national public spheres. Because porosity enables a situation in which different publics debate the same issues
at the same time. When this happens we can meaningfully speak of a transnational public
sphere. Certainly, it is something that happens relatively rarely on a genuinely transnational
scale. The Muhammed cartoons conflict is perhaps the most recent example of a full-blown
transnational public sphere (another example might be the debate and protests surrounding
the impending war in Iraq in early 2003). In these situations, the transnational flow of infor-
mation is significantly concentrated. It does not necessarily mean that there is more information
in circulation, but that a large number of people are aware of and interested in the same issue.
In line with what has been said earlier, this flow of information is still to a considerable degree
‘carried’ by national media. Importantly, this also indicates that a transnational public sphere
cannot usefully be conceptualized simply as a national public sphere writ large. The concept
of the transnational public sphere does not, in other words, necessarily suggest a situation
where the world’s people speak directly to each other across geographical and cultural differ-
ences or use the same media as sources of information. Of course, there is genuinely cross-
national debate, and, as discussed earlier, the world is witnessing a growth in transnational
news channels, but these forms of information flow and exchange continue to be dwarfed by
those that occur in national media and public spheres. To repeat, if it makes sense to speak of
a transnational public sphere, it is as a social space created when individuals, organizations,
media, politicians, and officials at local and national levels around the world, aware of ‘voices’
in other places, debate the same questions at the same time with reference to the same events,
statements and actions. The term ‘social space’ is a key point in the definition of a transnational
public sphere. It suggests that it is a space with no permanence or concrete form, or, to use
Scholte’s (2000) term, a supraterritorial phenomenon. The transnational public sphere is not
something constantly ‘out there’, it comes and goes because it always emerges on the back of
specific issues that for one reason or the other acquires transnational resonance.

There are many reasons for believing that we will see more examples of an activated trans-
national public sphere in the future. The conditions that increase the porosity of national public
spheres are likely to progress, and since the transnational public sphere, as I said above, is
largely a result of national porosity, this phenomenon will tend to become more common. The
point is strengthened if we view such developments as active learning processes. Every time
the transnational public sphere is activated it leaves behind a set of experiences that can be
drawn on in subsequent episodes. In other words, there is a continual build-up of cognitive,
technological and organizational infrastructures that can facilitate future mobilizations.6

Conclusions

In this article, I have used the twin concepts of the porous public and the transnational dialectic
to analyse the Muhammed cartoons conflict – the porous public concept to point to the way
national public spheres are increasingly penetrated by inbound and outbound influences, the
transnational dialectic concept to suggest that globalization is a learning process in which
globalization is simultaneously cause and outcome of social activities at local and national
levels. Using these twin concepts is an attempt to avoid a privileging of local, national or trans-
national levels of analysis, while seeking to demonstrate how these levels constitute each other.

The Muhammed cartoons conflict exemplified two main components in the porous public
concept. First, it was evident how the conflict was facilitated by the transnational character of

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the media: this media transnationality was evident in the role played by transnational news channels and in the transnational activities of national media. Second, the conflict was facilitated by the multicultural character of Danish society, which includes a relatively large Muslim population. Muslim individuals served as information brokers between Denmark and their original countries and Muslim organizations in Denmark travelled to Arab countries to relay information and generate awareness. Based on these findings, the concept of the transnational dialectic was employed to show how the Muhammed cartoons conflict constituted a learning process for Danish society which has resulted in an increased level of global consciousness that will affect political and cultural debate for years to come. Following the analysis of the Muhammed cartoons, it was discussed how the concept of the porous public relates to that of the transnational public sphere. It was argued that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive and in fact closely interconnected. The porosity of national public spheres facilitates the emergence of a transnational public sphere, which was defined as a temporary phenomenon characterized by worldwide debate of the same issue at the same time. This debate refers to the same statements, actions and symbols, but it still takes place mainly within national public spheres.

If it is accepted, as I have argued throughout the article, that the Muhammed cartoons conflict has been a learning process for Danish society, it remains to be seen what consequences it will have for the future development of political, social and cultural identities. At least two opposing scenarios come to mind. On the one hand, the cartoons conflict can ‘convince’ people that the distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is simply too wide, that it is naïve to believe that genuine dialogue and co-existence is possible. The logical reaction to this type of conclusion is forms of withdrawal and shielding of our national historical values. On the other hand, the cartoons conflict may also be seen as a chance and reminder of the need to ‘listen’ to voices from other social, political and cultural backgrounds. In a positive reading of the conflict, it could thus be argued that the conflict has helped introduce both light and shade into debates across social, political and cultural differences. Because so many voices were suddenly heard in the debate, it became clear to both Muslims and Westerners that the other side is not a homogenous unit. There may be extremists on both sides, but the reality is that the large majority are interested in co-existence based on mutual respect rather than confrontation.

It is of course too early still to say where the wind blows. On a personal note I hope that it is the latter interpretation that will carry the day. Whether we like it or not, we are becoming part of an ever more complex network of social and political relations that stretch way beyond our local and national realities. If we stop listening and talking to each other those networks will only become circuits of more conflict and violence.

Notes

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2. That people have a global consciousness does not necessarily mean that they are also political cosmopolitans. As discussed by Tarrow (2005: ch. 4), most people still overwhelmingly self-identify with their country.

3. This section adopts some phrases and arguments from Olesen (2007).

4. I stress that, although this method is clearly inspired by the so-called political claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Koopmans, 2002), it does not, as political claims analyses typically do,
provide quantitative measures of the coding results. The coding of the questions has mainly been used to draw a map of the development and chronology of the cartoons conflict.

5. Readers familiar with the work of Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink (see especially Risse and Sikkink, 1999) will recognize that the model draws inspiration from the spiral model developed by these authors to conceptualize the interaction between transnational human rights activists and human rights violating states.

6. This argument in many ways echoes that made by social movement scholars studying the importance of mobilizing structures (e.g. McAdam, 1982; McCarthy, 1996). Authors in this tradition contend that pre-existing organizing experiences are important to the success of subsequent rounds of mobilization.

References


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