

## Charlie Hebdo cartoons: to republish or not to republish?

Sarah Glatte explores the question which divided the world's media.



Following Free Speech Debate's '[1-click-away policy](#)', this article contains a number of links to images which some may find offensive - but no one has to view them if they do not wish to.

In the wake of the tragic events at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015 which claimed the lives of [17 victims](#), news editors around the world were faced with a difficult choice: [whether or not to republish](#) the satirical magazine's cartoons. The Paris massacre has been unequivocally regarded as an attack on freedom of expression, triggering an outpouring of solidarity on social media and European streets, most notably under the slogan of 'Je suis Charlie'. Timothy Garton Ash, director of Free Speech Debate, was among those who [called upon](#) newspapers and broadcasters across Europe to take part in a "co-ordinated publication" of selected Charlie Hebdo cartoons. "[The assassin's veto](#)", he argued, should not be allowed to prevail.

Yet only a few of the major European and English-language news publications followed such

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appeals in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Among them were [La Tribune](#) in France, [Berliner Zeitung](#) and [Der Tagesspiegel](#) in Germany, [De Standaard](#) in Belgium, [Politiken](#) and [Berlingske](#) in Denmark, [Corriere della Sera](#) in Italy, as well as [BuzzFeed](#), [Slate](#) and [The Intercept](#) in North America (For further coverage of who exactly did and did not republish Charlie Hebdo cartoons, see for example [here](#) and [here](#)). The front cover of Charlie Hebdo's first print edition after the attack showing a crying Muhammad with the caption 'All is Forgiven', was [more widely reproduced](#).

One of the strongest arguments in favour of republication was that there was a public interest in knowing what had provoked the murders in the eyes of the assassins. How could the public understand the extent to which the events constituted an attack on the fundamental freedom of expression without knowing why Charlie Hebdo had been singled out? As Lisbeth Knudsen, editor-in-chief of [Berlingske](#) [put it](#), republishing the Charlie Hebdo cartoons documented "what kind of a magazine it was that has been hit by this terrible event".

In addition, many of those who chose to use the controversial images in the following days, such as the Polish [Gazeta Wyborcza](#), stressed the importance of showing solidarity with the journalists who had lost their lives for the actions of their pens. The [Berliner Zeitung](#) reasoned that featuring cartoons from the magazine symbolised the defence of the very principles of freedom of the press, freedom of opinion and freedom of art and religion in Europe. It was also seen as an act to undermine the incentives for potential future assassins, sending out a strong message that fear and terrorisation would not triumph in Europe.

Yet a number of notable newspapers and magazines, such as the [Guardian](#) and [The New York Times](#), decided not to follow suit. Most notably perhaps, the Danish [Jyllands-Posten](#), which had caused worldwide controversy over its publication of Muhammad cartoons in 2005, similarly refrained from featuring any images from Charlie Hebdo in their reporting of the Paris events.

Undoubtedly, for many editors like those of the [Jyllands-Posten](#) the principle argument in favour of non-publication or [self-censorship](#) as some have also called it, was fear of violent retaliation. On January 11 2015, [an arson attack on the German newspaper Hamburger Morgenpost](#), which had featured Charlie Hebdo cartoons in their print and online editions just days before, proved that those fears were not unwarranted. Robert Shrimmsley of the Financial Times spoke for many when he [wrote](#) that, "companies have a duty of care to their staff and people have a duty of care to themselves and their families".

However, not all journalists and newspapers accepted that concerns over safety were the overriding reason for non-publication. Several outlets stated that they would not publish depictions of Muhammad in line with their editorial guidelines because they did not wish to cause offence. "Defending the messenger" Tony Burman, former head of Al Jazeera English, [argued](#) "is not to defend the message", thus echoing one of our own [Free Speech Debate principles](#). In Burman's eyes, the act of not republishing what he described as "offensive and adolescent cartoons" by mainstream newspapers and broadcasters was more courageous than the act of doing so in the

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name of solidarity. Likewise, Roy Greenslade of the Guardian [reasoned](#) that “freedom (...) should always be tempered by responsibility” and that tolerance, reflected in the rejections of calls to republish Charlie Hebdo cartoons, was the best response to the attacks.

Support for this stance also came from many parts of the Muslim population in Europe, who were arguably the most immediately affected (as most Muslims regard any [depictions of the Prophet Muhammad](#) as forbidden). In a joint [open letter released by the Muslim Council of Britain](#), 50 British imams argued that “freedom of speech should not be translated in to a duty to offend” and that “most Muslims [would] inevitably be hurt, offended and upset by the republication of the cartoons”. It is important to bear in mind in this context that Muslims are a minority in Europe who often face [prejudice and discrimination](#). Satire [some noted](#) in the aftermath of Charlie Hebdo, should be “[the weapon of the powerless against the powerful](#)”, and not be directed against those already marginalised in society. From this point of view, it is understandable that many European editors made the deliberate decision not to republish the Muhammad cartoons - even though they would have had fewer qualms about showing images mocking Christianity.

[Adam Wagner](#) argues that the danger underlying such a fear of causing offence is that it also has a “chilling effect on speech” more generally. Where to draw the line between satire and offence, criticism and discrimination, will remain the subject of an ongoing debate. Where do you stand on this issue? Share your comments with us below.

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