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Charlie Hebdo: A Symbol that Lends Itself to Misconceptions and Polarization

The families of the 12 people murdered in Paris on 7 January 2015 could hardly grasp what had befallen them but already the media had framed the atrocity. The "Berliner Zeitung" wrote, for example: "The massacre in Paris was revenge for caricatures that the perpetrators considered as denigrations of their Prophet".

Just how do the editors know that? From what the killers are said to have shouted during the attack? Can't anyone yell such a thing? Or is it because, despite his professionalism, one suspect supposedly left his ID in a getaway car? The card features an Arabic name. Does that explain everything?

If the murderers really were fanatical Islamists, why do almost no politicians and media representatives who are commenting this case assume that Muslims aren't shocked and disgusted like everyone else? Doesn't anyone notice that these hasty interpretations and claims, like the conclusions being made about the crime, consider that Muslims do not belong to society?

One combs in vain through the coverage in search of other important clues and issues: Given the previous attacks, why didn't the editorial board of the satirical magazine get police protection for the whole building, instead of having a police officer assigned only to the editor? How did the attackers know that the weekly editorial conference, attended by many employees, would be taking place at that very moment? What does it mean that the deed was clearly planned well in advance?

Whoever the terrorists were and whatever their precise motives, insinuations and fear-mongering have already caused division and polarization. Further radicalization and escalation can be expected on all sides. Those who just yesterday were shouting about the "lying media" are already toasting their "freedom of expression and the press" – in contrast to what is supposedly lacking in Islam, and for Muslims.

Europe portrays itself as a haven of freedom, as if freedom of the press isn't being defended all over the world. Reporters without Borders reports that many journalists died on the job last year. We should mourn every single one of those deaths.

For this reason it is all the more important that, as the fourth estate, our media do not hastily pass judgement and use stereotypes instead of insisting on consistent application of the rule of law. Both the criminals of Paris and those who aim hate

speech at Muslims must be prosecuted. Only seriously protesting abuses of freedom of expression – which for historical reasons does not include slander and incitement – will prevent further polarization and radicalization on all sides. In this case, anyone who equivocates is serving the wrong forces.

As a left-wing satirical weekly, Charlie Hebdo has always polemicized – and consistently – against everything and everybody. That is to be defended. Charlie Hebdo cannot be equated with the biased Jyllands Posten of Denmark. The fact that in this difficult moment everyone will take to publishing caricatures of religion can be seen as an act of desperation. But because that act could obscure geopolitical and other, perhaps more relevant, issues, this practice will need review. Regaining scope and justice calls for level-headed analyses, not apologies.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Sabine Schiffer
Head of the Institute

The Institute for Media Responsibility is directed at both representatives and consumers of media. It addresses mechanisms of representation, media content and education – in theories, publications and seminars.