



## ‘But it’s really about ...’: Norwegian Media Coverage of the Qur’an Burnings in Sweden and Norway in April 2022

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### Abstract

This article examines the Norwegian media coverage of and public debate about a series of anti-Muslim demonstrations in which Qur’ans were burned in Sweden and Norway over the Easter of 2022. Conceptualizing Qur’an burnings and the ensuing riots in Sweden and Norway as a *media event*, the article explores how different actors manage, negotiate, and use the mediated attention constituting such an event. The empirical material consists of all articles published by ten selected Norwegian newspapers between 14 and 30 April 2022, as well as interviews with seven journalists from these newspapers. A key point the article makes is that news journalists are mindful of how they cover and frame such an event. They take steps to ensure that their coverage accords with professional journalistic standards. The analysis shows, however, that the media coverage is complex and multi-layered, and that news journalists’ managing strategies only influence a small part of the total coverage and debate. A media event is by its nature discursive, and the article discusses how the event’s ‘real meaning’ is contested as various actors within and outside the media reframe it to fit already established discourses.

Keywords: *Qur’an burning, media and religion, media events, media conflicts*

Over the Easter of 2022 Rasmus Paludan, the leader of the Danish right-wing party Stram Kurs [‘Hard Line’], held a series of anti-Muslim demonstrations in Sweden, during which one of his acts was to burn copies of the Qur’an (Larsson 2022). In the wake of Paludan’s demonstrations, several riots erupted in several Swedish cities in which protestors and police clashed violently. These events were heavily mediated, and both the news coverage and the dissemination of video footage through social media seem to have

contributed to the magnitude of the riots and to the fact that there were also riots in places where Paludan had not held his demonstrations (Larsson 2022, 27). The following week the Norwegian anti-Islamic organization SIAN [an acronym for 'Stop the Islamization of Norway'] announced that they would burn a Qur'an in front of the mosque (and police station) in Stovner, an area of Oslo with a large immigrant population (Einarsdóttir and Mikalsen 2022). The Norwegian police prohibited this demonstration, and SIAN was barred from going there. However, the next day they burned a Qur'an in the small town of Sandefjord, resulting in minor riots (Tjoflot et al. 2022). These events received heavy coverage in the Norwegian news media, resulting in several heated public debates about immigration, freedom of speech, hate crime, and the role of Islam.

In this article I will analyse and discuss the media coverage of these events in ten major Norwegian newspapers between 14 and 30 April 2022. Informed by the theory of *hybrid media events* and *mediatized conflicts*, this article sees the media coverage as part of the event itself, arguing that the news media influences the event by amplifying and directing mediated attention and facilitating a space in which a range of actors can use this attention according to their own agenda as the event's meaning is negotiated. To demonstrate this, the article analyses 294 articles published by selected newspapers and discusses the coverage in light of interviews with journalists in seven of them. A key point of the article is that news journalists take tangible measures to direct and frame the mediated attention according to professional journalistic standards. However, I will argue that these measures only have a limited impact on the totality of media coverage. The article contributes to research on transnational media events by providing a case of how mediated attention travels across borders and plays out within a particular national context.

### Media events

The Qur'an burnings can be conceptualized as a *media event*.<sup>1</sup> Originally coined by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) to describe televised festive and socially cohesive occasions, the term has developed to include a wide range of phenomena in which mediation and media coverage form part of the events themselves (Hepp and Couldry 2010; Frandsen et al. 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter I will treat the wide range of different happenings across two countries and over time as a single media event. This is in accordance with both established theory (see below, cf. Hepp and Couldry 2010) and the empirical material.

Rather than focusing on the term's cohesive (Dayan and Katz 1992) or ritual aspects (cf. Couldry 2003; Cottle 2006a; Hepp and Couldry 2010), this article is informed by work on disruptive and conflictual media events, following what Valaskivi and Sumiala call a 'critical turn' in media event research (2023, 1335). Responding to criticism of the original focus on ceremonial and integrative events, Katz and Liebes (2007) propose the inclusion of *disruptive* events as an important type of media event, perhaps even as a type that has come to upstage integrative and ceremonial media events (p. 159). Sumiala et al. (2018) also focus on conflictual events, calling for media event theory to take the recent changes in the media environment into consideration, introducing what they call *disruptive hybrid media events* (cf. Chadwick 2013).

Several perspectives from research on (disruptive) media events are of interest when analysing and discussing the Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Norway. First, following Uusitalo and Valaskivi, I work from the premise that a (hybrid) media event is constituted by mediated attention and various meaning-making processes (2020, 1347). Although unmediated occurrences happen all the time, it is through mediated attention that they become events that have an impact beyond their immediate context. Mediated attention also confers a sense of importance and centrality on the event due to what Hepp and Couldry call the myth of the mediated centre (2010; see Couldry 2003). By being in the media, the event is commonly perceived to be of special importance and high on the public agenda (cf. McCombs and Shaw 1972). This also means that attention is a sought-after commodity for actors seeking to convey a message to a larger public (Koopmans 2004). Valaskivi and Sumiala (2023) argue that disruptive hybrid media events should be seen in the light of theories of the *attention economy* (cf. Simon 1971; Franck 1999), in which managing attention becomes a key factor of the event. Focusing on the role of news institutions in media events, Uusitalo and Valaskivi (2020) argue that journalistic practices aimed at scaling the attention of the audience can be conceptualized as an *attention apparatus*, and as part of this they define three 'conditions of attention management' (p. 1345): *perceived audience expectations*; *professional conditions of journalism*; and the *societal responsibility of journalism*.

Second, the mediated nature of these events means that their 'meaning' is not fixed but open for interpretation and negotiation. As Fiske recognized as early as 1994, it is difficult to distinguish between 'a "real" event and its mediated representation' (p. 2). He argues that we must always see media events as *discursive* events, in which the discourse is an integrated part of the event. Discourse produces 'the instrumental sense of the real that a society

or social formation uses in its daily life' (p. 4). As reality is only accessible through discourse, a media event is no 'mere representation of what happened' (p. 2), nor is it 'a discourse *about* an event' (p. 2); it is, however, a *media event* where the two merge. A media event is thus also often a site where different discourses in a society come to the surface – what Fiske calls points of 'maximum discursive visibility' – that may prompt discursive struggles which continue past the occurrences themselves (p. 8). This article treats the Qur'an burnings as one such discursive media event.

Third, it is important to recognize that media are never merely neutral transmitters of information. They also influence it at various levels. In his work on what he calls *mediatized conflict* Simon Cottle points out that the media 'are actively "doing something" over and above disseminating ideas, images and information' (2006b, 9). They are best seen as having an active performative and constitutive role within conflicts. For example, Cottle shows how much institutional factors within the news media affect how conflicts are framed, both in the news and in societal debates about it (2006b, 186–87). Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær argue that media have 'become integral to the social processes through which conflicts are defined, recognized and in some cases resolved by social actors and that media are utilized for particular interests during conflicts', and that media 'have a profound impact on conflicts themselves' (2015, 3). They propose a model in which media influence conflicts by inserting three 'dynamics' that may play an important role in the evolution of conflicts themselves – namely, *amplification, framing and performative agency*, and *co-structuring* (pp. 9–10).

Seeing the Qur'an burnings as a media event in which attention, discourse, and media dynamics are important, the article will examine the traditional news media's role in the event.

### **The Qur'an burnings as a media event**

Paludan wants to incite riots. He wants to seek out Muslim neighbourhoods, as close as possible. He wants young people to 'go bananas' and he wants to attract attention around it. I'll avoid labelling, but in a way Thorsen is a 'poor man's' Paludan. The group he travels with is tiny. There are three or four of them. So that begs the obvious question: this is a strange phenomenon – does it deserve any attention at all? (interview *Klassekampen*).

If we follow Hepp and Couldry in defining media events as 'certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are fo-

cused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products, and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants' (2010, 12), The Qur'an burnings qualify as such. The *thematic core* is the burning of the Qur'an, though, as will be discussed later, the media coverage, discourses, and debates are not restricted to the actual act(s) of burning. Both Paludan and SIAN have burned Qur'ans many times over several years (Haugland 2022; Linge and Bangstad 2024; Switzer and Beauduin 2023). Most of these burnings have passed unnoticed. It is when these events receive mediated attention that they assume the characteristics of important events that touch on topics central to wider society (cf. Couldry 2003). As a media event, it is 'co-produced' by the media and the actors involved 'on the ground' (see Katz and Liebes 2007). Receiving mediated attention is paramount for Paludan and SIAN to get their political message about the dangers of Islam and Muslims across to more people than the few attending their demonstrations, and provoking reactions from Muslims in the audience is key to this (Switzer and Beauduin 2023). SIAN writes on its website that it is an oversimplification to say that its members burn the Qur'an merely to provoke. However, 'to burn a book – or show caricatures – to visualize the extreme penchant for violence in certain groups, can be a virtue', and by challenging Muslims in this way 'the Muslim lies fall, the un-integratable shows his Islamic face. He performs the most **basic Islamic act**, he commits Muslim violence, he tries to kill the infidels for Allah's sake' (Thorsen 2020, my emphasis and translation). Burning the Qur'an to expose Muslims' violent nature is thus part of SIAN's intended message. Although Paludan does not go this far in the interviews in my material, he frequently points to the violent nature of Islam and Muslims when he talks about why he burns the Qur'an. The timing and location of the burnings also indicate that the provocation of Muslims is intended, as Paludan's planned burnings were scheduled during Ramadan in suburbs with a large Muslim population. In this context the Qur'an burnings are part of these actors' deliberate attempt to spread their message by gaining media attention. The following quotation from SIAN's leader is illustrative:

But at the end of the day in our world all PR is good PR. No matter how much demonizing, denigration, filth, and shit is dug up and flung out [...], it will in some way have a positive effect because it contributes to placing the focus on the Islamic problem that we are here to solve (Lars Thorsen, quoted in Haugland 2022, 78).

Ideally, provoking violent reactions from Muslims therefore has the dual purpose of gaining mediated attention for their message about the dangers of Islam and simultaneously confirming that message. Once mediated attention is gained and the Qur'an burnings become a media event, however, the meaning of the burnings becomes a matter of contestation.

### **The empirical material**

The article analyses all articles published about the event, both online and in print, from ten national newspapers in Norway between 14 and 30 April 2022. The main criterion was to have a varied sample of newspapers with a national audience. The sample includes the websites of the public service broadcasters NRK and TV2, the Christian newspapers *Vårt Land* and *Dagen*, the left-leaning newspaper *Klassekampen*, the tabloids *Verdens Gang* (VG) and *Dagbladet*, the newspapers *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen* and the purely web-based *Nettavisen*. The sample consists of 294 articles, of which 77 were published in print, and 217 online. Most of the paper-based articles are also found in web format. To map the material, I initially employed the Norwegian media search service Atekst, using the search words 'Paludan', 'SIAN', 'Qur'an' [*Koran*], and 'Qur'an burning(s)' [*Koranbrenning(er)*] within the selected period. As this service mainly covers print-based publications, I used the same search words on the newspapers' websites, as well as cross-referencing all hyperlinking between articles.

In addition to the published material, I interviewed journalists from seven of the news outlets.<sup>2</sup> The aim was to conduct interviews at the 'news chief' [*nyhetssjef*] level. This means journalists responsible for publishing work but with no formal editorial responsibility. Five interviews were at that level (*Dagbladet*, *Klassekampen*, *Nettavisen*, VG, and *Vårt Land*). My *Aftenposten* and NRK informants were editors. All interviews were conducted in January and February 2023. The interviews were semi-structured and included both general questions and questions based on a preliminary analysis of that newspaper's articles about the Qur'an burnings and riots. Data gathering and analysis were therefore a dynamic process in which the interviews were informed by an analysis of the articles, which in turn formed the basis for new rounds of coding and analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> I failed to get interviews with the last three. I could not establish contact with anyone at the right level in two outlets, while the news chief in the third did not wish to be interviewed, as they did not think they had any particular coverage of these events.

### The journalistic view of Qur'an burnings

Of course, there's a criterion that must be present for us to cover something. There's the old 'dog bites man, man bites dog'. [...] Qur'an burnings, if we go far back in time, it was really controversial, [...] but as these burnings happen so often, the news value falls immediately. [...] It's no longer news that SIAN is burning a Qur'an – they've seen to that themselves, [...] and we haven't got the resources to go out to some road bridge where an extremist is burning a Qur'an (interview, *Vårt Land*).

The journalists interviewed about the Qur'an burnings generally agreed on a central point. Although Qur'an burnings have generated much media attention over the years, it is not the burning itself that is newsworthy. Indeed, the frequency of burnings reduces the news value. Although their emphasis and examples vary, all the informants tell of similar evaluations concerning whether Qur'an burnings warrant news coverage. *Klassekampen* reports they are well aware that media coverage is an explicit goal of both Paludan and SIAN. However, neither the act itself nor their message about Islam is reason enough for them actually to cover it. 'Why is he burning the Qur'an?', he asks. 'I don't find that very interesting, really [...]. We already know why.' Likewise, *Vårt Land* says that 'the symbolic power' of SIAN burning a Qur'an is largely spent, and that it is hardly a 'news event' at all. To actually cover this, the journalists need more. In Sweden it is the riots that are really of interest for newspapers. *VG* confirms this: 'It's the reactions and the aftermath that are the actual story.' So, when *VG* sent reporters it was to 'really understand what was going on there'. Several of the other editors emphasized similar points. For a Qur'an burning to be newsworthy, it needs to represent a larger societal issue:

The deciding factor for us is that it represents something more. I mean, is it just a single occurrence there and then, or is the event an expression of a larger conflict? Or larger tensions or societal changes, or something else? Trends is perhaps the wrong word, but tendencies. That's something we care about! (interview, *Aftenposten*).

### The cause of the riots and the role of Islam

It was important for us not to link Islam and the demonstrators. It's not like 'now the Muslims exact revenge'. That's really not what this is about (interview, *Nettavisen*).

As mentioned, both SIAN and Paludan target Islam and Muslims when they burn the Qur'an, and the idea that violent reactions expose Islam's violent nature is part of this. In this narrative the rioters are Muslims, and the riots' cause is Islam. However, this is not necessarily a narrative shared by journalists. Part of this is to be found in a general fear of jumping to conclusions. NRK stresses this throughout the interview, saying: 'You should be careful not to assign blame or motives before you have all the facts.' Similarly, *Aftenposten* expresses concern about being stuck in a single and simple explanation of complex events. 'Religion, in this case, would only be one of several causes, and its possible influence would then need to be discussed further.' There also seems to be a shared view among my material's informants that it would be far too simplistic to present Islam or Muslims as the cause of the riots. 'This thing where you see a religion as one comprehensive thing and judge from that – that's too simplistic for our readers,' *Vårt Land* elaborates. This is also tied to the ideal of practising 'truthful journalism', as VG puts it. Echoing several others, VG emphasizes that journalists know much more about Islam and Muslims now than before. For example, they know that there are extremists within Islam, as in other creeds or ideologies, but he adds: 'However, Islam as a religion, I can't say that is the problem in these issues.' Although the informants differ in their focus on and explanation of the events in Sweden and Norway, they agree that even though Islam can be seen as part of what happened, framing the religion as the riots' primary cause is simply not credible and would be bad journalism.

### Different layers of journalism

**Interviewer:** Does Dagbladet have any particular profile when it comes to these things [Qur'an burnings]?

**Journalist:** No, but at the editorial and commentary level we're very conscious of our history, and that we should fight fiercely for the right to express yourself.

**Interviewer:** Does that affect you? Is there a connection between that and what you do?

**Journalist:** No, not really.

Although the newspapers in my material differ in size, focus, and organizational structure, a common theme in the interviews is that there is a professional division of labour within the news organizations.



**Editor:** At *Aftenposten* we distinguish strongly between opinion journalism and commentary journalism and news journalism.

**Interviewer:** Are there closed walls between them?

**Editor:** Yes, and that's how it should be. That doesn't mean we can't talk to each other, but we do want news journalism and commentary journalism to operate freely, and we should be able to operate independently of each other. We even have examples where commentary journalism criticizes the news journalism published in *Aftenposten*, because we should allow room for a very wide range of opinions.

Most of the informants talk about clear boundaries between news journalism and the journalistic work of commentators and editors. The boundaries are even clearer when it comes to opinion-based articles by non-journalists. Newspapers usually have their own divisions, with their own journalists and editors for the debate pages.

As will be discussed further below, distinguishing between different layers of news coverage based on the distinction between news, commentary, and opinion journalism is meaningful. I will also argue that it is useful to make another distinction within the layer of news journalism, and the interviews confirm this. On a regular day many of the published news articles only contain content picked from other news outlets and news agencies such as the Norwegian News Agency (NTB). Although they are compiled by journalists, these articles mainly follow the perspectives and framings of others. This is perhaps less a result of the journalists' professional standards and more of resources and the push to publish quickly (cf. Uusitalo and Valaskivi 2020). *Vårt Land* speaks of 'the digital economy', where no newspaper can 'give blanket coverage to everything'. A lack of journalists forces newspapers to depend on news agencies. They therefore often start out by using NTB, and assign the story to a journalist only if the situation demands it. Several of the informants told me that as the burnings started at Easter, few journalists were on hand, and NTB was a natural choice. *Aftenposten* also says they often use NTB, while their own journalists investigate the story, allowing continuous publication while journalists prepare more thorough articles.

### **Professional news journalism standards**

The journalists seem to have a shared set of journalistic standards and understandings of 'proper' news reporting (e.g. Schultz 2007). They generally

agree about how to assess the Qur'an burnings' lack of news value and the dangers of using what they see as problematic simplifications when exploring the riots' possible causes. Professional standards also include factors unique to their particular newspaper, such as the editorial profile, available resources, and their target audience's interests, something which all informants emphasize strongly (cf. Harcup and O'Neill 2017, 1482). In addition, all interviews thematize the societal responsibility of news journalism (see Uusitalo and Valaskivi 2020, 4). The informants emphasize that they take special care not to just relay Paludan's and SIAN's message but to present a balance of different opinions and to reveal underlying issues. They are aware that they provide the actors the attention they seek, and they therefore take steps to manage and direct this attention according to their own news journalism principles. This also means that the interpretations and framings of what the Qur'an burnings and riots are 'really about' are not set and vary both between reporters and between newspapers.

### The coverage

The Qur'an burnings were covered extensively in the Norwegian news media. In the ten newspapers examined here 225 unique articles were published over 17 days (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1.** Total number of articles in the period 14–30 April 2022.

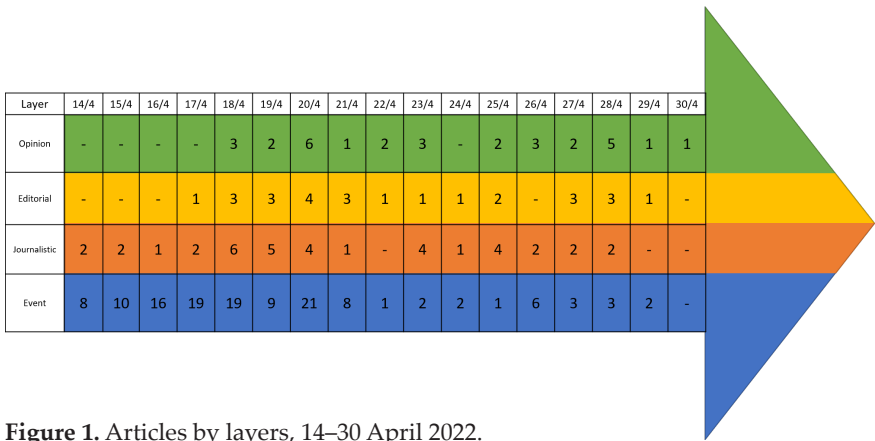
News outlet	Online	Print	Unique
<i>Aftenposten</i>	21	22	25
<i>Dagbladet</i>	23	4	23
<i>Dagen</i>	17	6	18
<i>Dagsavisen</i>	24	7	25
<i>Nettavisen</i>	45	-	45
<i>NRK</i>	6	-	6
<i>Klassekampen</i>	17	17	17
<i>TV2</i>	22	-	22
<i>VG</i>	18	11	19
<i>Vårt Land</i>	24	10	25
<b>Total</b>	217	77	225

<sup>3</sup> Seven of the news outlets published both online and in print. The majority of the articles in the print versions were already published online and are excluded from the analysis to avoid counting them twice.

The majority of these articles were published between 14 and 23 April, when the actual burnings and riots took place. The coverage continued after this, and most of the newspapers kept publishing about them throughout the period. The event thus had a high degree of visibility.

**Multi-layered coverage**

Based on the analysis of the material, I distinguish between four interconnected *layers of coverage* which are structured differently in how they approach and frame the event. These layers are a) *the event layer*, descriptive articles relying on news agencies and other news outlets, b) *the journalistic layer*, news articles and features in which the journalists frame the matter based on their own material and sources, c) *the editorial layer*, 'journalistic' opinion articles such as editorials and commentary, and d) *the opinion layer*, opinion-based pieces such as columns, op-eds and debate pieces. The following figure shows how the articles were published, sorted by layer.



**Figure 1.** Articles by layers, 14–30 April 2022.

**The event layer**

Danish right-wing extremist creates chaos in Swedish cities (Kagge 2022).

The event layer comprises most of the articles about the Qur’an burnings. With 130 articles, the event layer contains more than half the total number of articles. The articles in the event layer tend to be descriptive and stay close to what happened, citing several different sources. Based on the analysis of this layer, two findings stand out in the material.

The first is that the coverage is strikingly uniform across all ten newspapers. There is very little variety in how the event is described or even explained. Although various newspapers published some unique content in the event layer, the overall impression is that of a common narrative, with a uniform progression. Most of the newspapers composed their event-layer articles drawing on the same sources and even using identical formulations. The perhaps most striking example of this can be found in how Rasmus Paludan was described to contextualize what happened in Sweden. NTB published the following text on Thursday 14 April:

Paludan's party 'Hard Line' was created in 2017 and aims to forbid Islam and deport all Muslims. In 2020, Paludan was sentenced to three months in jail for defamation and racist remarks towards Muslims during a demonstration in Denmark. The same year, he was denied entry to Sweden for two years. This happened after violent riots in Malmö related to an event where he was due to burn a Qur'an wrapped in bacon, as he has done several times in Denmark.

This text<sup>4</sup> appeared in 17 of the 22 articles published on Thursday and Friday. All the newspapers except one used it at least once during the first four days. Many other such texts appeared across the newspapers throughout the period. The primary source of common formulations was NTB. Several other sources, however, were also picked up and used uniformly. Perhaps even more striking is how entire identical articles by NTB are published directly. For example, on Monday 18 April five of the ten newspapers published exactly the same article from NTB about the riots in Rosengård, where a school had been set on fire.

The second finding is that although Paludan and SIAN are given a lot of media attention, there is very little resonance concerning their message that Islam is dangerous, and that the rioters are Muslims. There is next to no focus on the rioters. They are mainly described as 'demonstrators', 'counter-demonstrators', and 'rioters', and on Monday 18 April, after the Swedish police said that they belonged to criminal gangs targeting the police, most of the newspapers picked this up. Also regarding Sandefjord, there was little focus on those mainly described as 'counter-demonstrators'. Only in a single article are the Swedish rioters described as 'Muslims and so-called anti-racists' (Kagge 2022), while a few articles indicate indirectly that they

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<sup>4</sup> Some articles only used part of the text, but the whole text was published in most cases.

are Muslims (e.g. Lied 2022). The articles in the event layer generally identify Paludan as the cause of the riots, and he is described as a right-wing extremist with an anti-Islamic agenda. Likewise, in Norway SIAN is identified as anti-Muslim provocateurs causing minor riots. There are next to no pictures of Paludan actually burning the Qur'an in Sweden or of SIAN burning the Qur'an in Sandefjord, and there are no quotations from what was said at these demonstrations. Paludan and SIAN are only quoted in a few articles, and then mainly about whether they are allowed to burn the Qur'an. The aftermath of the Qur'an burnings is given considerable media attention in the event layer. The uniform narrative across the newspapers is one that does not resonate with Paludan's or SIAN's message about violent Muslims.

### **The journalistic layer**

It is psychological violence. What happens with the identity of the children and their trust in Norwegian society when books are burned outside their houses of God, and they are surrounded by constant hostility? (Brandvold 2022).

Compared with the event layer, the journalistic layer consists of only 38 articles. The journalistic layer is far more varied than the event layer. The articles in this layer are written by journalists who in different ways have gathered unique material from their own sources, and the articles vary in both the journalists' interests and the particular newspapers' focus. The most obvious distinction is between the newspapers that sent journalists to Sweden and those who did not. The three newspapers with reporters on location were also the newspapers that published the most articles in this layer. Eleven articles, by *Nettavisen* (3), TV2 (4), and *VG* (4), were written by journalists on site in Sweden. Only one (Sandnes, Jåma, and Sfrintzeris 2022) actually reported live from a Qur'an burning. The rest were mainly built around interviews with people in Swedish suburbs (e.g. Sandnes and Jåma 2022), Paludan (e.g. Tønnessen and Braaten 2022), or the local authorities in Sweden (e.g. Ogre and Braaten 2022). The remaining articles in this layer vary in focus and framing. Some focus on SIAN's planned burnings in Stovner and the minor riots in Sandefjord (e.g. Danielsen 2022). Some focus on how Muslims in Norway are afraid because of the Qur'an burnings (e.g. Brandvold 2022). Several articles address questions of freedom of expression and the possibility to limit it when expressions become hateful. And

there are also several articles about social and economic factors in Norway and Sweden, which according to some may account for the Swedish riots.

Although there is little resonance with Paludan's and SIAN's message about Islam and Muslims in the journalistic layer, their message is reported and picked up in several articles. *VG*, *Nettavisen*, and TV2 interviewed Paludan, and the interviews were given space in five articles. The leader of SIAN, Lars Thorsen, is also quoted in a few articles. The rioters, both in Sweden and Norway, are in some cases at least indirectly identified as Muslims. Three articles report how rioters shouted 'Allahu Akbar', both in Malmö and in Sandefjord, and politicians from the Norwegian right-wing Progress party identify the rioters as Muslims in several articles (e.g. Lopperød 2022a). In most of the journalistic articles, however, these views are balanced by opposing views, and other explanations are generally given for the riots than the rioters' religious convictions. The media event's discursive nature is clearly evidenced by the majority of articles in this layer framing the Qur'an burnings and riots as part of issues of direct relevance to Norway, even when reporting on events in Sweden. Such audience-orientation is well established in research on news journalism (Schulz 2007), and in three of my interviews the informants say their audiences' interests strongly influence what they report.

### **The editorial layer**

The point is that provocations provoke (Stavrum 2022).

Twenty-six articles are categorized as belonging to the editorial layer. Of these, ten are editorials, and 16 are commentary articles. Most articles in the editorial layer revolve around one of two already well-established discourses: a) the Qur'an burnings are really about underlying socioeconomic differences (3 editorials / 7 commentaries); or b) they are really about the conditions for freedom of expression in Norway (7 editorials / 5 commentaries). The discursive nature of the Qur'an burning media event and the audience-orientation of the news media are thus even more explicit in this layer, while the range of different perspectives and voices is significantly narrower. This can of course be seen as part of the genre, as both commentaries and editorials are supposed to reflect the authors' and newspapers' opinions on more overarching questions.

In many cases the reframing of what the event is really about is quite explicit. For example, in *Vårt Land*, where a commentator writes under

the headline 'It is not about religion' that 'if you instead choose to focus on Muslims' views on the Qur'an or an academic debate about freedom of expression, you risk missing the core of the problem' (Erstad 2022). Similarly, in *Dagsavisen*, where the Qur'an burning is downplayed, and it is said that 'there is no getting around the fact that the core of what's going on is immigration to Sweden' (Bredeveien 2022). All the articles agree that Paludan's and SIAN's actions are deplorable, and that violent responses to them are unacceptable. The real differences in opinion concern who and what are to blame for the riots, and whether freedom of expression should be absolute or limited for reasons of safety, or because the expressions fall under different definitions of hate speech. Paludan's and SIAN's message about the violent nature of Muslims generally finds little resonance in the editorial layer. Islam as the possible cause of the riots, however, is the subject of slightly more debate in this layer, with some commentators and editors giving Islam and Muslim a role in causing the riots (Selbekk 2022a; 2022b; Stephansen 2022), and others denying or downplaying it (Erstad 2022; Bredeveien 2022).

### Opinion layer

The **real problem** is that Muslims accept no criticism of their religion and will react violently to all such 'provocations and hate utterances' (Froyn 2022, my emphasis).

Thirty-one articles have been categorized as belonging to the opinion layer in the form of op-eds (19) and columns (12). These represent the authors' opinion, and several are written in response to other articles. Perhaps even more than in the previous layer the Qur'an burnings and riots are used as examples of larger societal trends, reframed into already existing discourses, and the actual occurrences in Sweden and Norway play very little role in most articles. In different ways almost all the opinion-based articles thematize the question about the limits of the right to freedom of expression (28 articles). They can be divided into a) those that advocate against limiting freedom of expression (14), b) those that see Qur'an burnings as legal expressions that should be ignored or fought through other expressions (8), and c) those that define Qur'an burnings as hate speech and/or disturbances of social order which can be limited by law (6).

The most striking difference compared to the other layers is the number of articles that discuss the role of Islam and Muslims regarding the burn-

ings and riots. Fourteen articles blame Islam and Muslims in different ways for the riots; 11 argue that Paludan's and SIAN's actions are expressions of Islamophobia and racism. While no one actually supports Paludan or SIAN, their message about the violent nature of Islam and Muslims is at the heart of the debate in the opinion layer. Several articles (7) state that aspects related to Islam make Muslims prone to violence,<sup>5</sup> and examples of Islamist violence like the attacks on Salman Rushdie, Charlie Hebdo, and Samuel Paty are cited in support of this view (e.g. Holstad 2022; Fahramand 2022a). Several of these articles see the riots as examples of a coordinated attack on democracy and liberal Western values, orchestrated by extremist, religious, and totalitarian forces (Bandeby 2022; Bai 2022a; Zakaria 2022).

Although these articles represent the authors' opinions, the analysis shows that the debate centred on criticism of Islam was to a very large degree facilitated by the newspapers themselves. Op-eds are often published for their controversy value (Bangstad 2013), and the topic of Islam and violence is highly contested in Norway (Lundby 2018). Debates about Islam have long been part of public debate. In this case, however, the hand of the newspapers is even more visible, as most of the explicit criticism of Islam comes from regular columnists. Nine out of 14 articles that criticize Islam in different ways are written by regular columnists. *Nettavisen* stands out as the newspaper that published most of these articles. Although we did not discuss this explicitly in the interview, the *Nettavisen* respondent told me that having *secular Muslims* as regular columnists was part of a conscious editorial choice, and three of them are quite visible in the material (Bandeby 2022; Fahramand 2022a; 2022b; Bai 2022a; 2022b). Many of the critical voices in this layer are therefore hired by the newspapers for their opinions.

### Attention management

Mediated attention is a scarce and coveted resource for actors trying to disseminate messages to a broad audience (Citton 2017; Koopmans 2004). Paludan was clearly successful in gaining the attention of the news media. When such attention is gained, however, it also becomes an 'exploitable' resource for other actors. SIAN's demonstration in Sandefjord is a good example of how existing attention can be used and at the same time contribute to sustaining it, and generate more attention. Most of SIAN's demonstrations gain little attention from the news media. With the heavy mediated attention

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<sup>5</sup> Most of these articles do not generalize this to all Muslims but point to the problematic aspects that may be at play.



on the riots in Sweden, however, their planned burning in Stovner on Friday 22 April and their demonstration in Sandefjord were covered extensively. It is likely that this attention also contributed to the greater number of counter demonstrators in Sandefjord than at most of SIAN's demonstrations. In the aftermath SIAN also took centre stage in the subsequent media debate about freedom of expression in Norway (cf. Linge and Bangstad 2024).

Uusitalo and Valaskivi (2020) point to the central role that established journalistic media organizations play in such an attention economy. Although these media can also be said to use the attention to compete for audiences, they enjoy a privileged role in managing and directing it. The interviews show that, much as in Uusitalo's and Valaskivi's (2020) study, journalists are conscious of their societal responsibility in generating and directing attention, and they take steps to manage that attention. They justify coverage of Qur'an burnings through their mandate to cover issues of societal importance, they take care not to uncritically relay the messages of Paludan and SIAN, and they are conscious of the need to 'scale the event' responsibly, as *Aftenposten* puts it. This is reflected in the articles analysed in the journalistic layer, where the Qur'an burnings and riots are generally framed as representing a range of larger issues and formatted according to professional journalistic standards of balanced coverage.

Analysed as a whole, however, the journalistic layer is just a small part of the total coverage, and the other layers are structured according to different standards. The massive mediated attention is mainly generated and maintained at the event layer, at least from the beginning. The majority of articles can be categorized as belonging to this layer, and the high visibility and perceived importance of the event thus primarily result from articles originating outside the particular newspapers. Although these all draw on sources the newspapers trust, the articles are compiled quickly and with little or no particular framing from the newspapers in question, and they also seem to bypass the attention management mechanisms that regulate the scale of the coverage. The journalistic attention management strategies pertaining to amplitude and framing are thus mainly relevant for a small share of the total coverage, even when only considering the news articles. When including the editorial and event layers, this impression is even stronger.

The fact that news journalists' management strategies only account for a small part of the overall coverage once mediated attention is established does not mean that the news media has no structuring influence on the media event. Rather, it means that such an influence should not be reduced to considering a single set of professional standards but rather be seen as

complex and multi-layered. The newspapers not only amplify and direct attention; they also facilitate the space where this attention can be used by different actors. Conceptualizing attention as a usable resource, or commodity (Citton 2017, 5–8), helps account for the highly discursive nature of the media event. The massive, mediated attention paid to the Qur'an burnings gave ample space for several actors using the attention generated to further their views within already established discourses of which they were part. To do this, the event needed to be reframed to align with the actors' agenda. The media event thus represents a *discursive opportunity* (see Koopmans 2004) for those in a position to take part in the negotiation of what this *is really about*. And this meaning may be quite different from the actions and intentions of those involved in the actual occurrences 'on the ground'.

For the Norwegian audience the Qur'an burnings and riots in Sweden and Norway were a media event, primarily constituted by the mediated attention and the various meaning-making processes involved. It should thus also be seen as a mediatized conflict. The three media dynamics proposed by Hjarvard, Mortensen and Eskjær (2013) are clearly relevant in the examined case. The news media strongly influence the conflict by amplification, framing and performative agency, and co-structuring the power relations involved. However, the analysis and discussion show that these dynamics should be seen as complex and multi-layered, with several aspects lying outside the conscious attention management of the journalists involved.

## Conclusion

Qur'an burnings have received considerable media attention in Scandinavia recently. As a means of gaining public visibility for actors critical of aspects of Islam, it must be said to be highly effective. It is not the burning of the Qur'an in itself but the reactions to it that attract the media's attention, though. Achieving public visibility does not mean the media picks up and disseminates the actors' messages uncritically. As we have seen, newspapers are conscious of their role in reporting the events. Although Paludan's and SIAN's messages cannot be seen to gain legitimacy in the analysed material, they did succeed in placing it on the public agenda, creating discursive opportunities for themselves and other actors able to use the attention in various ways. Furthermore, their message resonated in several articles in the editorial and opinion layers, partly facilitated by the newspapers themselves through the selection of op-eds and perhaps more importantly in this particular case through regular columnists.

Conceptualizing conflicts surrounding the Qur'an burnings as media events does not imply that they are less 'real'. Indeed, the fact that they are played out in local, national, and international media amplifies the conflicts, giving them larger audiences and potentially resulting in a wide range of consequences such as changes to law and policy, heated public debates, or new instances of violence. As media events, however, the meaning of what is happening is constantly negotiated, and different actors can use the mediated attention in several ways. When this article was written in 2023, the Scandinavian Qur'an burnings had taken a new turn. Several countries with majority Muslim populations have condemned Sweden for allowing Qur'an burnings, resulting in changed diplomatic relations, debates about the legality of the burnings, and even threats of terrorist attacks (Strand 2023). New actors thus emerge, and the meaning of Qur'an burnings is constantly contended.

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