



Rasmus Paludan, Burning of the Qur'an and Swedish Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the public debate in Sweden that followed the heated riots that took place when Rasmus Paludan burned the Qur'an in the spring of 2022. The Easter holiday in 2022, which coincided with Ramadan, served as the backdrop for the Danish-Swedish provocateur Rasmus Paludan. Our study is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 60 public opinion pieces published between 24 and 30 April 2022, one week after the so-called Easter riots. The Swedish media at this time featured many different responses to the burning of the Qur'an, as well as strong public opinions about how the riots were dealt with, and why the riots erupted in the first place. We argue that the discussion that followed Paludan's public rallies in Sweden unfolds a dilemma between freedom of speech on the one hand and freedom of religion on the other. By deploying critical discourse analysis, this study helps us observe the discursive orders that regulated the debate and identify recurring topics and tropes in public media. The overall results indicate that the riots are mainly viewed as the result of a failed multicultural policy in which Islam is discussed as an obstacle to liberal democracy and thus freedom of speech. Material reasons – poverty, unemployment, and racism – are largely omitted from the debate.

Keywords: Rasmus Paludan, Qur'an burning, Sweden, freedom of speech, Islamophobia, critical discourse analysis

The Swedish-Danish provocateur and politician Rasmus Paludan (b. 1982) has been able to expose a weakness in the Swedish democratic system, or rather how this system can be perceived and discussed in public media de-

bates. Since 2020 Paludan has held many public meetings in Sweden at which he has protested against Islam and burned the Qur'an. On most occasions he has been able to hold his meetings without any or very little confrontation or violence, but between 14 and 17 April 2022 his demonstrations – and even the announcement that the Qur'an would be burned – led to riots in the cities and towns of Jönköping, Linköping, Norrköping, Rinkeby, Örebro, Landskrona, Malmö, Skäggetorp, and Navestad. The riots saw uncontrolled outbreaks of violence, leaving approximately three hundred police officers injured, and many counter-protesters were arrested. The violent riots in 2022 that coincided with the month of Ramadan became known as the Easter Riots, as they occurred during the Easter holidays (Larsson 2022; Sandén 2023).

In 2023 other actors were inspired by Paludan, and more burnings of the Qur'an were arranged, but in this article we focus only on how the burning of the Qur'an by Rasmus Paludan was debated and addressed in public opinion pieces published in Swedish newspapers after the Easter riots. Our study is based on a critical discourse analysis of 60 public opinion pieces published between 24 and 30 April 2022, one week after the riots. We chose this week because Swedish media at this point featured many different responses to the burning of the Qur'an and strong public opinions about how society, especially the Swedish police, had dealt with social unrest, and why the riots had erupted in the first place. We argue that the discussion that followed Paludan's public rallies in Sweden unfolds a dilemma between freedom of speech on the one hand and freedom of religion on the other. Our research questions are:

1. What themes and topics recurred in Swedish opinion media concerning the burning of the Qur'an at the time of the Easter riots?
2. How can the clash between freedom of speech and Paludan's criticism of Islam be discursively understood and interpreted?

Our focus is primarily on the debate about Paludan, freedom of speech, and the burning of the Qur'an, but we will also make some comparisons with Mattsson's (2020) earlier study of how a large neo-Nazi rally in Sweden was addressed in public opinion pieces (Mattsson 2020). This comparison has the potential to shed light on freedom of speech at a more general level. The comparison is also justified by the fact that as early as June 1996 Sweden's Supreme Court had found a teenager guilty of breaking the law by displaying Nazi symbols in public, making the Hitler salute, and expressing both clearly antisemitic ideas and extreme racism (Government Bill 2001/02:59, 2001). This verdict has since served as a precedent for situations associated with white supremacy milieus. Paludan's activities are

not therefore in themselves new to Swedish society or the public debate on freedom of speech. The form is new, however, and the multitude of riots that followed Paludan's rallies are thus far unique. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, another dimension comes into play, namely religious freedom and the right to criticize religion especially. So the intersection Paludan has created has three intellectual dimensions: freedom of speech; religious freedom; and hate speech.

Mapping the field

The dilemma between freedom of speech and the limitation of hate speech that is this article's focus is not a new phenomenon in Sweden (cf. Mattsson 2020). For example, in the interwar period and during the Second World War it was frequently debated whether hate speech should be banned in Sweden. The matter was investigated and debated on several occasions, all with the same conclusion: freedom of speech should not be restricted (Sandén 2020). After the war, however, Sweden developed into an international hub for the distribution of propaganda denying the Holocaust and for antisemitic opinions (Löow 2004). This prompted another round of public debate and investigation, and in 1948 a new law was passed, the penal code on 'agitation against an ethnic or national group'. This law constitutes a limitation on freedom of speech and has been revised several times since 1948 in step with the development of racist practices in contemporary Swedish society. Yet 'the law does not prohibit racist organizations, only expressions of racism, such as hate speech' (Mattsson 2020, 94), and new arenas have developed for expressing racist opinions and practices, not least with the development of social media. 'Old' communication strategies like posters, stickers, flyers, clothing, salutes, and speeches at rallies continue to be used, however.

Like the debate about racism – that is, what should be counted as racism, and whose perspective should be the starting point – the definition of Islamophobia has also been heavily debated (Larsson and Sander 2015). Nonetheless, Islamophobia is included today as one of the hate crime categories in Swedish law and is defined according to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) as:

Crimes committed out of fear of, hostility, or hatred towards Islam and Muslims, which activate a reaction against Islam, Muslim property, its institutions, or those who are or are perceived to be Muslims or representatives of Muslims or Islam (Forselius & Westerberg 2019, 63. Our translation).

Although Sweden has had an intense discussion since the 1990s concerning how to interpret the law on agitation against an ethnic or national group expressing racist or neo-Nazi opinions, there has been much less discussion about anti-Muslim or Islamophobic expressions, even though such opinions are also prevalent in Sweden (Otterbeck and Bevelander 2006; Larsson and Stjernholm 2016; Weibull 2019; Olseryd et al. 2021). Important exceptions are the debates that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, the publication of the so-called Muhammad Cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 (later republished in several Swedish newspapers; see Larsson and Lindekilde 2009, for example), and the drawing of the so-called roundabout dog by the artist Lars Vilks in 2007 (Högfeldt et al. 2008).

There are several earlier studies on the intersection between freedom of speech, anti-Muslim sentiments, and the secular. Talal Asad stresses that the debate that followed the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 was 'discussed largely in the context of the problem of integrating Muslim immigrants into European society and how it related to the "global menace" of Islamists' (Asad 2009, 20). This analysis and conclusion are not unique to Asad. Curtis F.J. Doebbler makes a similar argument, stressing that the *Jylland-Posten* cartoons and similar controversies are often discussed and framed as a conflict between Western and Islamic values (for the *Jylland-Posten* controversy see Klausen 2009 and Lindekilde 2008). Within public debates following controversies, freedom of religion is often depicted as conflicting with freedom of expression (Doebbler 2009) or inherent secular values that are closely associated with the West (i.e. Asad 2009). While it is difficult to find a neutral position (Bangstad 2014) – you are either for or against freedom of expression – critics see publications like the Muhammad cartoons as another assault by the western press on Muslims (Doebbler 2009). According to this logic the Rushdie affair, the Muhammad cartoons, Vilks's roundabout dogs, and Paludan's actions and opinions cannot be seen as isolated cases but as part of a larger critique of Islam and Muslims on the one hand and of multicultural society and Islamophobia on the other. A negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims is also mirrored in media reporting on Islam and Muslims (Said 1981; Knott et al. 2013; and Axner 2015 for Sweden), coverage in movies and in popular culture (Shaheen 2003; and Berg 1998 for Sweden), and in several survey studies that demonstrate that Islam and Muslims are often associated with negative attitudes (see Weibull 2019 for Sweden).

Method and methodology

In this study we use critical discourse analysis (CDA), both as the theoretical premise and as the methodological engine. Contrary to linguistic discourse analysis, which pays attention to grammar and syntax, our focus is on the 'level of meaning in text and talk' (Hjelm 2014b, 143). Although we are inspired by Fairclough (1992; 2010) and Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), it is also important to stress that a CDA approach has also been applied by scholars of religion like Titus Hjelm (2014a; 2014b) and von Stockrad (2003). Whatever the disciplinary background, it is commonly understood that CDA is rooted in critical realism, which views reality at three different levels. The first is the textual level, which includes all forms of semiotic expressions, both verbal and nonverbal. The second is discursive practice, which relates to how texts are structured by influential ideologies, or discursive orders (Fairclough 2010). Finally, CDA points to social practice, which is the third level, representing the routine of the everyday exchange of linguistic expressions constituted by discursive practice.

According to scholars who apply a CDA approach matters are expressed meaningfully in relation to a particular discursive practice that is regulated by a discursive order. Conducting a CDA study is therefore to 'pay attention to the argumentative and persuasive aspects of the text', how 'a story unfolds', and how truth claims are constructed (Hjelm 2014a, 863). Yet the discursive practice is also constituted by a larger social practice, changes within semiotic practices, that may alter the discursive practice. Within CDA this is called either interdiscursivity or recontextualization and refers to how different discursive orders may alter how we discuss and label phenomena within social practices leading to changes within discursive practice. The recontextualization alters the preconditions for the discursive order and thus also constitutes a new premise for social practice and creates new hegemonic orders (Fairclough 1992; 2010; Fairclough and Fairclough 2012).

The article's empirical material was generated by typing the keyword 'Rasmus Paludan' into the Swedish 'Retriever' media database, searching for articles published between April and May 2022, and finally focusing on the period between 24 and 30 April, as this was the period when the articles of interest to this study were most evident. The 60 articles that we chose for our analysis were editorials and op-eds published in the culture section or public opinion pieces (i.e. texts that had been submitted by the public for publication in a newspaper; in Swedish *fria ord*), and all were published during the week following the Easter riots. It can be argued that there is a difference between articles written by professional editors and

public opinion pieces. As all the texts are generated from printed and edited newspapers, however, we argue that they represent the public debate as it played out in the edited media included in the Swedish 'Retriever' database.

When making references or providing quotations from the texts included in our dataset (N=60), we have chosen not to give any information about the authors, the political opinion of the newspapers, or in which newspaper sections the text was published (i.e. in the political or cultural section, etc.) because we are mainly interested in the argumentation and wordings chosen in the articles, not the author or the newspaper that published the text. We therefore only provide information about the newspaper and the date of the text's publication. These references are not therefore included in the list of references. We have translated all the newspaper quotations from Swedish to English.

Before we proceed with presenting our findings it is necessary to make some clarifications. First, we must emphasize that this is not a study of legal procedures or legal frames, but a critical discourse analysis of public debates as they unfold in the Swedish media. To place our study in its national context, it is important to stress that freedom of expression and freedom of religion have been part of the constitutional law (in Swedish *Grundlagen*; see Enkvist 2013; Åström and Eklund Wimelius 2020) since 1951. The Swedish legal system does not contain an explicit definition of religion, but several legal paragraphs and specific laws state that individuals or groups are protected in expressing their religious beliefs and gathering for religious services. It is also forbidden to discriminate against a person or group based on religion or religious belonging. Equally, the Swedish state recognizes that individuals or groups can suffer from hate crimes if they express a religious belief or are associated with a specific religious tradition (Forselius & Westerberg 2019). Sweden has had no law against blasphemy that prevents any explicit criticism of religions since 1970 (Sandén 2023).

Like the rest of Western Europe, Sweden has had a heated discussion about how to define Islamophobia and how to draw the line between negative attitudes towards religions and illegal hate speech. Although the number of hate crimes reported as 'Islamophobic' has been stable since the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet, BRÅ) started reporting these statistics, many have argued that the number of anti-Muslim or even Islamophobic hate crimes is much higher than the official statistics suggest (Larsson and Stjernholm 2016). This is probably true, but the definition of Islamophobia also affects how common anti-Muslim attitudes are in Sweden. We know from other statistical surveys

that Islam is the least appreciated religion by Swedes (Weibull 2019), and Muslims are often portrayed in a negative light (Otterbeck 2005; Axner 2015). Without developing the critical discussion that is associated with how to define and measure Islamophobia (for a discussion see Larsson and Sander 2015), Islamophobia is associated in this article with two aspects: essentialist understandings of Islam and Muslims as something different from 'us', the non-Muslims (i.e. the majority Swedes); and as something threatening (i.e. the enemy, something that should be combated and ejected from the country). Our operationalization of Islamophobia is thus wider than the definition used by the BRÅ. It should be noted that we are not attempting to test whether or argue that some of the published texts should be labelled hate crimes. Our analytical use of Islamophobia is closer to how Islamophobia is defined and operationalized in the influential Runnymede Trust report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us all*, which was published in 1997. It should also be stressed that it is not automatically a hate crime to hold stereotypical or essentialist understandings of a religion, but it is still a stereotypical and simplistic understanding of a religious tradition and its followers.

Presenting the results

In accordance with CDA we commence by investigating the manifest textuality in the 60 articles that we selected for our analysis. We follow this with an analysis of the discursive practices.

Manifest textuality

In the first step of the analysis, we scrutinized the articles to learn about the manifest textual content. We both read all the articles separately, seeking recurring themes, patterns, and arguments. Between 24 and 30 April 2022 we found 71 texts that matched the keyword 'Rasmus Paludan' in the Swedish 'Retriever' media database. Of the 71 texts, seven were excluded because they mainly discussed various claimed police shortcomings, and four because they consisted of factual errors concerning time and place. Sixty texts were included in our analysis.

After our separate reading we compared our respective outcomes and were able to organize the articles in our dataset in three different main themes:

- a) General reflections on freedom of speech (37 articles);
- b) Concerns related to the Swedish multicultural society (15 articles);
- c) Islamophobic reflections (8 articles).

Having established the main themes, we jointly read the articles again to distinguish the manifest textual content in each theme: what the standpoint in each article was; and how this constituted the subcategories in each. Theme a) unfolded in three different subcategories. The first, 'Defence of the principle of freedom of speech', included 28 articles. Within this category the articles addressed Paludan's burning of the Qur'an as an undesirable event, but as insignificant in relation to the importance of the freedom of speech: the high police costs could not be an argument for limiting the freedom of speech. The second subcategory, 'Practical limitations for freedom of speech', included eight articles that recognized that there must be a reasonable limitation to how much public spending was acceptable for the upholding of the freedom of speech. There were therefore arguments for what, when, and how agitation against Islam (and other underlying matters that might cause riots) could be performed. The theme's last subcategory, 'Racism', included four articles that actively refrained from addressing Paludan's burning of the Qur'an as an issue of freedom of speech. Instead, the event was understood and discussed in relation to racist structures in society in general and Islamophobia in particular.

The second main theme b) unfolded in two subcategories. One was critical of the multicultural society, seeing the lack of integration as the principal explanation for the riots that followed Paludan's burning of the Qur'an – in total seven articles. The other subcategory included five articles that argued for coexistence and cohesion in a multicultural society.

Finally, the third main theme, Islamophobia, also unfolded in two subcategories. The first, four articles, portrayed Islam and Muslims as more or less homogenic categories that distinguished themselves from other religions and cultures in relation to freedom of speech. The second subcategory portrayed Islam and Muslims as less capable of fitting into a Western democratic society – in total four articles.

Discursive practices

Having established the manifest textual content, we started to analyse the articles to scrutinize the discursive practice, the second level in CDA, and the discursive orders that shaped the language and logics within each theme and subcategory.

Defence of the principle of freedom of speech

The public debate about Rasmus Paludan's demonstrations and the burning of the Qur'an was clearly framed in relation to the question of freedom of speech and this legal domain's relationship with questions like freedom of religion and multiculturalism. The 28 articles included in the 'Defence of the principle of freedom of speech' subcategory often argued that Paludan's actions were offensive and provocative, but he was entitled to his opinions, and it must be allowed to burn any book in an open democratic society. For example, one Expressen article (28/4) argued that although we might disagree with Paludan, his right to burn the Qur'an must be defended, as this was a matter of principle.

If we start to adapt and limit free speech or other expressions depending on how racists, Nazis, Taliban or Maoists react, democracy and openness will soon be over (Expressen 28/4).

Several articles expressed the opinion that violence should never be a successful tool in a democratic society (i.e. Kristianstadsbladet, Norra Skåne 26/4; Enköpings-Posten 27/4). It is thus argued that it is a dangerous road for a society and especially the police to accept violence as a way of hindering unpleasant, controversial, or provocative demonstrations, and that it is important to support Paludan in his right to burn the Qur'an, even if we disagree with his opinions and actions. This thought is expressed in Bohuslänningen, for example.

Don't get me wrong, I think Paludan, and his actions are downright stupid to be honest, but as far as I know it's not illegal to be stupid. And as much as I dislike his actions, it is allowed to hold a public meeting and express one's opinions in Sweden (Bohuslänningen 28/4).

Several articles also express the opinion that the defence of the freedom of expression is tied to the notion of being a citizen in Sweden. For example, in Bohuslänningen (28/4) and Expressen (28/4) we find voices arguing that Sweden is a secular state, and everyone who lives in Sweden must therefore accept the rule of law, and that there is no room for parallel legal systems. Consequently, Ystads Allehanda (30/4) argues that it is not a viable solution to prohibit Paludan's demonstrations in specific immigrant-dense suburbs, a suggestion made by some politicians, as well as public spokespersons. To go down that road would only be to support a kind of no-go-zone argu-

ment and to give in to voices arguing that some groups in society should be treated differently (Ystads Allehanda 30/4). Bohusläningen (28/4) contains an article that argues that the conflicts that erupted following the burning of the Qur'an had very little to do with the freedom of expression or religion, it is rather a 'contempt for Swedish legislation' or even 'Swedish values'.

What we have witnessed in recent weeks in the form of riots and attacks on police and blue light personnel is anything but an expression of freedom of expression and freedom of religion. It is an expression of contempt for Swedish society. A contempt for Swedish legislation. A contempt for Swedish values. And I can never tolerate that. We will not tolerate it! (Bohusläningen 28/4).

In our sample it is regularly brought up that all citizens who live in Sweden must accept the secular state and embrace a broad understanding of freedom of expression. If they do not, it is even argued that 'they' should consider moving to another country (Borås Tidning 26/4). For example, Borås Tidning (26/4) contains an article that argues that if we prohibit Paludan from burning the Qur'an, there is a risk that Sweden will no longer be the Sweden that we have come to know. It is therefore not the time to reintroduce blasphemy laws protecting religious sentiments, even when some individuals are hurt or offended (Borås Tidning 26/4). These ways of expressing the argument illustrate the tension between freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

Practical limitations of freedom of speech

Concerning the political turbulence and enormous costs and risks that followed the publication of the Muhammad cartoons (Klausen 2009), it was brought up in our sample that there might be good reasons to prohibit Paludan from burning the Qur'an. Magazin 24 (29/4) argues that it would be to 'tempt fate' to give him this opportunity to desecrate the Qur'an. If this demonstration of contempt for the Qur'an is allowed, there is a risk that it will be costly for society and broader Swedish interests. Yet another line of reasoning is found in an article in Norra Skåne (29/4), which stresses that the actions conducted by Paludan should be associated with freedom of belief (*trofrihet* in Swedish).

Freedom to speak, write, and form works of art about everything is self-evident in Western democracy. But is freedom of speech also freedom in the eyes of everyone to burn or destroy things that religious practitioners hold sacred? (Norra Skåne 29/4).

It is also argued that the 2022 riots were too costly for society at large and for the individual police officers who had to defend freedom of speech (Norra Skåne 29/4). According to an article in Vestmanlands Läns Tidning (27/4) it should be remembered that Paludan's aim is to create 'chaos', not to express his political views. It is thus argued that it might be justified to prevent Paludan burning the Qur'an.

The risk that Paludan will only humiliate the already downtrodden parts of society – migrants struggling to become part of Sweden – is also expressed. As humiliation is a driver of political extremism and even violence, the demonstrations should have been prevented, argues a writer in Dala-Demokraten (30/4).

As citizens we should offer much stronger resistance when mockery and hatred fill our public places. I understand the Swedish Muslims who are fighting for their place in society and who feel both hurt and vulnerable in Sweden today – above all, when they are met in the debate by a loud idea that violation of religion and sacred values is a matter of course to chew on (Dala-Demokraten 30/4).

Yet the same writer in Dala-Demokraten (30/4) also stresses that even though it is easy to understand the feeling of being hurt, this does not defend the use of violence.

It is also argued that a sharp distinction between theoretical principles and practical or 'real' outcomes must be drawn. This opinion is voiced in Östgöta Correnspondenten (30/4).

Paludan is not Voltaire. His political act is based on a mad hatred of Muslims. Of course, a good liberal can consider that they have the right to express their opinion, purely in principle. But the good liberal must also realize that reality is not a political science seminar. Actions have consequences (Östgöta Correnspondenten, 30/4).

According to an article in Östgöta Correnspondenten (30/4) the debate is not neutral, and freedom of expression is always situated in a political context. In an open and democratic society it is therefore important to understand that 'not all opinions are desirable', and it is naive to think that a Nazi and a rabbi will meet each other with a respectful tone and listen to the best arguments (Östgöta Correnspondenten, 30/4). An opinion voiced in Östgöta Correnspondenten (30/4) is that the best way to respond to Paludan is therefore not

a prohibition but to shame Paludan's negative and stereotypical opinions socially. An article in *Norra Skåne* (29/4) takes a stand against opinions, attitudes, and behaviour that are socially unacceptable by the majority, and in this text the readers are reminded that the persecution and annihilation of Jews during the Second World War began with the burning of books in Nazi Germany (i.e. Confino 2012).

Racism

It is very unlikely that most of those who participated in the riots and attacked the police were practising Muslims, at least according to opinions expressed in *Göteborgs-Posten* (25/4) (cf. Larsson 2022). It is argued that the discussion that unfolded after the Easter riots is steeped in racism and prejudice against Islam, Muslims, and migrants in general (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 25/4). Because of negative attitudes, suspicion, and a social distancing from Muslim organizations and Muslim civil society since the terror attacks in 2001 (i.e. Mythen et al. 2009), it is easy to understand why Paludan's actions are provocative for many migrants and Muslims in particular. According to opinions expressed in *Göteborgs-Posten* (25/4) the majority society's defence of his right to burn the Qur'an is therefore yet another example of racism and anti-Muslim attitudes. *Göteborgs-Posten* (25/4) argues that the best way to protect the large number of individuals with a Muslim cultural background living in Sweden would be to make the burning of the Qur'an a hate crime. This way of putting the argument illustrates that the debate about the burning of the Qur'an that followed the Easter riots was also related to public discussions about Islamophobia.

This is expressed even more explicitly in *Blekinge Läns Tidning*:

This dangerous prank show, cynically hiding behind democracy to damage it, should not have taken place at all (*Blekinge Läns Tidning*, 25/4).

In both *Blekinge Läns Tidning* (25/4) and *Göteborgs-Posten* (25/4) we find voices arguing Paluden only exploits freedom of expression, and he has no aim other than to scorn, harass, and anger Muslims in Sweden.

In fact, there is plenty of support in our laws to prevent such evil pariah-provocateurs like Paludan, a rightist and sociopath who advocates ethnic cleansing, who is banned elsewhere in Europe, and who is frowned upon

by the Danes themselves. Both the Public Order Act and the Criminal Code offer legal (democratically decided) obstacles. But Sweden receives and protects the attack with a literal interpretation of the constitution, and with that the police become representatives of evil (Blekinge Läns Tidning, 25/4).

Tidningen Syre (25/4) also contains an article that highlights the importance of anti-Muslim hatred in Swedish society. The political discussion has become increasingly saturated with bluntly racist opinion, and Muslims are one of the favourite target groups. Tidningen Syre (25/4) cynically states that:

I had to take a closer look into what incitement against an ethnic group really means. I guess that it is no longer incitement if it is against Muslims. It is ok to hate Muslims these days. If you [incite people] you are not a racist any longer, you're just expressing criticism, this is how the racist of today reasons (Tidningen Syre, 25/4).

Following this line of reasoning, Tidningen Syre (25/4) argues that anti-Muslim opinions are part and parcel of the new racism. It is therefore argued that it is now high time to analyse our legal system and ensure that the laws are not violated or misused (Tidningen Syre, 25/4):

I'm afraid that to protect democracy, freedom of speech, and other rights, we are also paving the way for their total abolition (Tidningen Syre, 25/4).

In line with this reasoning, it is argued in Aftonbladet (25/4) that even though it can be difficult to make a sharp distinction between freedom of expression and hate speech, it is the context and the intention that matters. Burning a book should be allowed, but if the person doing the burning repeatedly argues that Muslims are the 'real' problem, and that 'non-Western persons' should leave the Western world, we have a problem that is not related to the freedom of speech but to hate and prejudice. Tidningen Syre (30/4) argues similarly, stating both Paludan and those who defend his right to burn the Qur'an in the name of freedom of speech are only using the debate and the chaos that followed the riots for their own political goals. This section illustrates that the debate about the burning of the Qur'an is not only related to freedom of speech but also to freedom of religion and the defence against hate, prejudices, and defamation.

Concerns related to Sweden as a multicultural society

When analysing the content of the articles included in our sample, it is clear that the multicultural society is talked about as the riots' context, and that this context is sometimes more important to debate than freedom of speech itself. For example, an article in *Kungälvsposten* (26/4) claims:

Thirty years of naive integration politics has allowed new arrivals to settle where they please. And where do you think that a new arrival, without a penny in the pocket, would like to live? With their countrymen in downtown concrete boxes. ... This segregation has paved the way for organized crime to soak up the most marginalized youngsters. Anyone who has opened a door into a sociology class will understand the correlation – except those who are blinded by their ideology (*Kungälvsposten* 26/4).

Several articles in our sample repeat that Sweden has been naive, but it is never clarified what this naivete entails. In the criticism of a multicultural society that has gone wrong a distinction is made between politicians and people in general. For example, in *Dagens Nyheter* (28/4) we read:

Were those who warned about the multicultural society right? I would really like to say: definitely not. ... We who are defending multiculturalism must ask ourselves how we have gone from being a model to becoming a warning. And what is the way forward for a country which, when we were asked to open our hearts and did so, were only rewarded with deadly gun violence and riots? ... The responsible [politicians] who have denied and closed their eyes to a development have torn the country apart – that is the worst of it all (*Dagens-Nyheter* 28/4).

This text implies there is a democratic gap between what should be understood as the ordinary people who have defended the multicultural society in good faith and the elite. The phrase 'open our hearts' in the quotation above is a reference to a well-known speech given by the former prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (2006–2014) that called for solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees following the troubles in the Middle East after 2014. Contrary to Reinfeldt's hope, it is argued that the multicultural society is primarily identified as an elite project that has been imposed on citizens, and the Easter riots are evidence that multiculturalism does not work (*Dagens-Nyheter*, 28/4). Multiculturalism is also understood as the opposite of secularism, and religion in general and Islam in particular are thus held accountable for the riots. In an article in *TTELA* (30/4) we read:

The people who are prepared to choose the Qur'an over their country, that is, above our laws and the society we have created, those people will never accept the freedom of speech and religious freedom we have in Sweden. And this is what Paludan wants to demonstrate with his demonstrations. Exactly this!

In the above quotation the conflict is portrayed as a conflict between religious people and a claimed secular norm of Swedish society. This way of putting the argument can be interpreted as saying that religious people will never be able to fully accept freedom of speech, and that Paludan wanted to prove this.

In defence of multiculturalism

In our sample there are also voices that defend the multicultural society and strive to cast a critical gaze at the debate itself rather than at the riots. *Tidningen Syre* (26/4) argues that Muslims should not be understood as a group that bears collective responsibility for the riots:

I could write something here about all the Muslims who in different ways tried to stop the violence, clean up afterwards, and in different ways do good. But I don't want to. Not that I don't want people in general to get a different picture of Muslims than the one the Qur'an burner Paludan wants you to see. But because it is also to perpetuate the image of Muslims as more violent than others, and therefore as those who need to prove their innocence far more than ordinary Swedes do (*Tidningen Syre* 26/4).

The rationale here is to refrain from any perspective suggesting that Muslims should be held accountable – something the *Tidningen Syre* writer claims is being done when positive examples are offered (cf. Larsson 2022). Reporting when Muslims clean up after the riots rather than people living in the neighbourhoods of the riots as a positive example underlines a particular Muslim responsibility for the riots as such. An article in *Borås Tidning* (25/4) argues:

He [Paludan], like other far-right extremists, wants to provoke immigrants in general and Muslims in particular to fuel social conflict, create social unrest, and thus increase support for authoritarian and racist policies. All the talk about freedom of expression is just a smokescreen. It should be remembered

that those who now claim that Qur'an burnings are about defending freedom of expression are largely the same forces that otherwise want to ban, for example, Muslim calls to prayer, the pride flag, and flag burning and stop what they call 'challenging contemporary art' (Borås Tidning 25/4).

In the quotation above the multicultural society is not seen as the root cause of the riots, and those who claim it to be so are instead individuals and groups who oppose freedom of speech when it concerns content they find controversial.

Islamophobic reflections

Essentialist descriptions

Several articles in our sample present an explicit or implicit division between the non-Muslim majority society ('us') and the Muslims ('them') as an explanation for different responses to Paludan's demonstrations. In an article in Uppsala Nya Tidning (28/4) we read:

Our Swedish values have developed in our country over the last 1,000 years – influenced by Christian ethics and Western humanism. We should never give up on democracy and human rights (Uppsala Nya Tidning, 28/4).

In line with the above quotation the majority of Swedes have a Swedish spirit (*'folksjäl'*) that is rooted in Christian heritage, but the quotation also seems to imply that all Muslims are different from 'Swedes' if they are either born and raised in undemocratic societies or governed by corrupt leaders or Islamists. Islam is thus portrayed as a religion that is different, or at least treated as different from other religions. An article in Smålandsposten (27/4) even argues that it is impossible to expose Islam or Muslims to criticism.

Is there not an repressed fear and compliance towards Islam in Sweden, I ask myself (Smålandsposten, 27/4).

This seems to indicate that it is impossible to express any criticism of Islam and Muslims because to do so is politically sensitive. The argument is repeated in an article in Världen idag (29/4) (concerning this newspaper, see Steiner 2010), which argues that Islam has a special position in Sweden, and it is not allowed to criticize or mock Islam and Muslims in the way that is possible for all other religions. It is also questioned if suburbs dominated

by Muslims should be treated differently from other areas in society only because they are governed by 'a mob of Islamic fanatics'. This lenient attitude, it is argued, has already been imposed since the police stopped some of Paludan's demonstrations. Similarly, an article in *Ledarsidorna* (29/4) argues that Islam and Muslims are seen as a special case that is above the law.

Openly hostile

While there are several different ways of arguing for or against Paludan and his burning of the Qur'an, some articles in our sample show an open hostility towards Islam and Muslims. These texts not only provide essentialist or us-and-them portrayals of Islam and Muslims but can also be interpreted as a manifest and deep fear of or anger against Islam as a religion or Muslims as a religious category. For example, an article in *Bulletin* (29/4) maintains that the Qur'an is only a book of plagiarism that is based on earlier religious texts.

If the Prophet Mohammed were alive today, he would have been put in prison for life for *copyright infringement*. The sentence above could land me in jail in many Muslim countries. And according to Islamists and many Muslims, I *should* be thrown in jail for this sentence (*Bulletin* 29/4, italics in original).

Furthermore, *Bulletin* (29/4) suggests that the Qur'an is not only a 'badly written book' but also a text that does not move its readers like 'good' books by famous novelists. *Bulletin* (29/4) states that the Qur'an is filled with 'frightening' content, and preventing protesters from burning the Qur'an is the first step in the acceptance of Sharia law in Sweden. That this is a serious topic to which readers should pay attention is also related to questions of power and hegemony, and in this case the writer in *Bulletin* attempts to arrive at a conclusion and a 'point when all alternative constructions are suppressed in favor of one dominating view' (Hjelm 2014b, 141)

A similar argument is presented in an article in *Göteborgs-Posten* (26/4), which says it is time to put a stop to Islamists who want to prevent the right to criticize Islam. The argument is also related to the general discussion about integration and the multicultural society.

They have come here and enjoy our hospitality, our welfare, and our protection. Why should we, as migration fanatics, try to hide such problems, so that they can continue to bring large numbers of people here who ignore

democracy, who have their own rules, and who react with great violence if their rules are broken in our country (Göteborgs-Posten, 26/4).

The above quotation from Göteborgs-Posten can also be read as a depiction of us and them. The text argues that this is 'our' country and 'they' (i.e. non-Swedes and Muslims) must conform with the majority society. An article in Kristianstadsbladet (25/4) also explicitly expresses this opinion, arguing that those who oppose the burning of the Qur'an should either accept our democracy or leave.

The completely natural conclusion is that those who cannot adapt to Swedish democracy and freedom of speech must quickly find a new country to live in. Sweden is simply not your country and never will be. Settle in Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq and other countries where religion (often combined with an ingrained culture of honour) rules life (Kristianstadsbladet, 25/4).

In the quotation a typical 'Muslim country' is a country governed by Islamic law, and the countries listed above should therefore be happy lands for all Islamists who protest against the burning of the Qur'an, or who argue that Sweden and Swedes are Islamophobes – though they are not, according to the opinions expressed in Kristianstadsbladet (25/4). As Hjelm (2014a, 861) points out, 'contrasting word choices' are a powerful tool for creating a division between us and them, and in several articles in our sample there is a dichotomy between 'Swedes' and 'Muslims'.

Both Kristianstadsbladet (25/4) and Svensk Tidskrift (29/4) contain articles that argue that the protests against Paludan should be seen as part of a larger foreign attack on Sweden.

To understand the riots in connection with Rasmus Paludan's demonstration and promised Qur'an burning, a true picture must be conveyed that it was not angry young men but an extremist campaign with Islamist overtones aimed not only at the police but at Swedish society (Svensk Tidskrift (29/4).

Resembling the criticism that was voiced against the Swedish Social service (Socialtjänsten) on social media in 2021 (see Ranstorp and Ahlerup 2023), it is argued that the attack on Paludan and the police who protected the freedom of speech was probably orchestrated by foreign forces (i.e. Islamists in countries outside Sweden), and that the violence that followed Paludan's

demonstrations should be analysed as part of a larger problem (see the introduction to this special issue).

Interdiscursivity

Based on the analysis above, we can observe at least three different discursive practices with largely different premises. While some opinions focus on limitations of freedom of speech, others focus on the riots' perceived root causes, independently of freedom of speech. Yet others express clear root causes for the riots, seeing them as imbedded in Islam or the multicultural society. In line with how CDA is used as a theory and method within the social sciences, we argue that three different discursive orders are at work in the rationales within the various discursive practices: how the 'problem' is discussed; what positions are taken in the debate; and how systems of knowledge and beliefs are constructed (cf. Hjelm 2014b).

The first discursive order could be labelled *liberal freedom of speech*. Within this it is important to articulate that the material consequences of any sort of exercise of freedom of speech may infringe on any speech. No extremist of any kind should be given grounds for future cancellations of freedom of speech by causing riots today – even if the freedom of speech is exercised by an extremist.

The second discursive order concerns *multiculturalism*. Whether the writers seek the root causes of the riots within the *multicultural society*, or if they defend multiculturalism as an idea, they are both fighting over the future roll of multiculturalism. One side propagates assimilation to avoid such situations in the future; the other seeks to find multicultural caution and views to avoid such provocations.

The third discursive order could be labelled *Muslims' cultural shortcomings*. The overarching idea is that trust is built over a very long time, and that it is rooted not only in personal lived experiences but also in a Christian and Western culture. This way of expressing the argument is also built on the notion that there is a gap between 'us' (i.e. Swedes, those who are secular) and 'them' (i.e. non-Swedes, Muslims, those who are religious).

In all three discursive orders material conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and neighbourhood criminality as possible causes of the riots are completely omitted from the analysis. One can therefore argue that what is being debated is a struggle of ideas: ideas guiding the liberal and secular society are seen either as superior ideas to which all must sign up to or as subversive ideas that can be attributed to religious/Muslim ideas.

We argue that this idealistic way of arguing contributes to the emergence of a new, interdiscursively discursive, order. We call this discursive order *Cultivating Muslims*.

All our sample's articles also agree that freedom of speech is a self-evident and overarching goal that must be kept intact. No one attempts to find an angle that this has little to do with freedom of speech, despite the fact that Rasmus Paludan is not known as a freedom of speech advocate in any other area. Surprisingly, freedom of religion is rarely discussed, even when it is said that this norm safeguards secular norms that are the benchmark for freedom of speech and implicitly religious convictions. Religious freedom is thus understood as the fruit of secularism, and Islam and/or the multicultural society is therefore seen as a constant potential threat to freedom of speech.

Furthermore, in our sample a clear distinction is seldom (if ever) made between Islam as a religion and Muslims as individuals with different ways of approaching Islam and cultural norms. This exemplifies how 'the discourse "irons out" the variety of beliefs, practices and ways of thinking in the group' (Hjelm 2014a, 860). Similarly, Muslims are instead portrayed as a function of Islam, and as such they need to be *recultivated* or even controlled to fit into the liberal and secular West (Sunier 2012).

Conclusions

With the aid of a CDA approach we analysed how the public debate that followed the Easter Riots was expressed in 60 public opinion pieces published between 24 and 30 April 2022. The empirical material was generated by typing 'Rasmus Paludan' as a keyword into the Swedish 'Retriever' media database. In line with CDA's use as both a theory and method in the social sciences, we started by identifying the manifest textual level/s that were present in our dataset. This generated three major themes: 'general reflections on freedom of speech' (37 articles); 'concerns related to the Swedish multicultural society' (15 articles); and 'Islamophobic reactions' (8 articles). The three major themes were then divided into further subcategories.

In answering the two research questions we asked at the beginning of the article, we found that the burning of the Qur'an ignited, strengthened, and provided fuel for several different positions and attitudes towards freedom of speech and freedom of religion on the one hand but also attitudes towards the multicultural society and present challenges Swedish society faces on the other. The overall results indicate that the riots are mainly viewed as a result of a failed multicultural policy in which Islam is talked

of as an obstacle to liberal democracy and thus freedom of speech. For example, material reasons, poverty, unemployment, and racism are largely absent from the debate. Yet although several articles stated that freedom of speech was the most important aspect, there were also voices that argued that the conflicts and riots that followed Paludan's demonstrations were an indication of problems in Swedish multicultural society, and that some of these problems were connected with 'Islam'. But there were also other opinions that stated that the burning of the Qur'an should be seen as a hate crime, and that Paludan's actions are illustrations of racism and intolerance towards Islam and Muslims.

According to our findings it is also possible to identify three different discursive orders that play out differently in the articles in our dataset. They are: 'liberal freedom of speech'; 'multiculturalism': and 'Muslim cultural shortcomings'. In line with how we understand and make use of CDA, the discursive order will affect how we discuss, perceive, and act on a problem or question. In CDA research this is labelled as recontextualization or interdiscursivity. To put it differently, the 'discourse is *constitutive* – that is, it constructs social reality and relationship', and the three identified discursive orders are tied to various social practices that will contribute to both 'the reproduction of society and to social change' (Hjelm 2014b, 135). The three discursive orders help us identify 'social positions', how various arguments and speakers relate to each other (social relationships), how systems of knowledge and beliefs are constructed regarding the 'problem', and how it 'should be solved'.

Leaving aside the CDA approach, it is apparent that what happens at a local level will be related to global developments. However, this was not something that was picked up in the news material we analysed for this article. In April 2022 the debate was primarily about Sweden, and how the problem should be handled at a local level, but as indicated in the introduction to the special issue of *Temenos* of which this article is part, the war in Ukraine, Sweden's application to become a NATO member, and the rise of protests from Muslim leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) led to the burning of the Qur'an in Sweden becoming global news and an event with major consequences for the whole of Swedish society.

In future studies it will be important to investigate if, how, when, and why the 'talk about the burning of the Qur'an' had an influence at both a societal level and on how various individuals of a Muslim cultural background understood and responded to the public debate and the responses

from the non-Muslim majority society. Like most CDA studies, however, we have only focused on the textual level, not 'the actual process of production and consumption' of texts (Hjelm 2014a, 865; cf. Hjelm 2014b, 145). This is a limitation, but to study how media coverage and debates are consumed, why various 'readers' understand and position themselves in relation to texts, and how media influences the social reality would require both textual analysis and a mixed method approach built on surveys, ethnography, and interviews. This is beyond the scope of this article.

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