



The 'Qur'an Crisis' in the Swedish Press: Negotiating Freedom of Speech in a Mediatized and Religiously Diverse Society

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Abstract

During the summer of 2023 news and debates about public burnings of the Qur'an dominated the Swedish and international media. In the aftermath of the flames and the debate this article aims to present and discuss the representation of the event as a 'crisis' in the Swedish daily press between 1 April and 1 October 2023. The article uses a quantitative analysis of the main topics in a selection of Swedish and Nordic daily newspapers, and a combination of co-occurrence and qualitative frame analysis of how the event came to be debated in a sample of Swedish opinion articles. Theories of mediatized conflicts as dynamic and complex processes revealing the state of democracy in a society are used to analyse the findings. The results are discussed in light of previous research on Qur'an burnings in Sweden and on debates about previous events involving clashes between freedom of speech and freedom of religion in the Nordic countries. The article concludes by arguing that the 'Qur'an crisis' as a mediatized conflict co-structures an ongoing negotiation between different positions on the most fundamental values of democracy, which has become increasingly contentious in Swedish public and political debate.

Keywords: Qur'an burnings, Sweden, mediatization, daily press, freedom of speech, religious diversity

On 4 April 2023 the Swedish Administrative court ruled against a former decision by the police to deny a permit for a public demonstration. A Qur'an was to be burnt as part of the demonstration, and the police had denied permission on the grounds of increased threats of riots and terror attacks following a series of similar demonstrations in 2022. The court ruling sparked a spate of public burnings of the Qur'an in June and July,

followed by diplomatic protests and violent demonstrations, especially in Muslim-majority countries, and debates in the Swedish parliament. With escalating reactions the 'Qur'an crisis' came to dominate both the Swedish and international media during the spring and summer of 2023. The Swedish prime minister called the event 'the most serious security situation since the Second World War' (Edwards 2023), and the Swedish Institute reported on its repercussions for Sweden's image abroad. In an interview about the situation Simon Anholt, the founder of the Nation Brands Index (NBI), stated that the 'Qur'an crisis' caused nearly as much opprobrium for Sweden as for Denmark after the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2006 by the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (Swedish Institute 2023).

In the aftermath of the flames and debates it is time for a reflection on the Qur'an burnings as a 'crisis' in the context of the social, political, and religious changes that have occurred in Swedish society in recent decades, as well as how they are related to broader debates on religion and freedom of speech. The aim of this article is, first, to present the main topics in Swedish and Nordic daily press coverage of the Qur'an burnings between 1 April and 1 October 2023, and second, to analyse the main frames used to interpret the meaning of the event in Swedish opinion pieces, using quantitative co-occurrence analysis and qualitative frame analysis. The findings will be discussed regarding how the 2023 coverage compares to research on earlier burnings in the Nordic countries (Larsson et al. 2024), as well as daily press coverage of *Jyllands-Posten's* publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 (Kunelius et al. 2007). In conclusion, the framing of the Qur'an burnings as a crisis for Swedish society will be discussed in the context of ongoing debates in Sweden regarding how to practise the democratic values of freedom of speech amidst the increased diversity and contestation of religion in the public sphere (Furseth 2018; Lundby 2018).

Background: Qur'an burnings in Sweden 2023

The right to freedom of speech is granted in the Swedish constitution by the Law on Freedom of Expression (Sveriges Riksdag 1991). The exercise of freedom of speech at public meetings is regulated by the Public Order Act, and decisions on permission are delegated to the local police, based on the possibility of upholding public security and order (Sveriges Riksdag 1993). Freedom of religion is also a constitutional right in Sweden (Sveriges Riksdag 1951). However, Sweden has not had a specific law against defamation of religion since 1970. A new law on agitation against an ethnic or national

group was instituted in 1948, which criminalized utterances involving hatred or disregard of a group based on ethnicity. Later revisions extended the law to religious beliefs, as well as race, sexual orientation, and sexual identity (Sveriges Riksdag 1949).¹ The Swedish situation resembles that in Norway but differs from that in Finland, where the violation of the sanctity of religion is a criminal act. In Denmark a law criminalizing the inappropriate treatment of writings with significant importance for a recognized religious community was reinstated in 2023 (see Larsson et al. 2024).

The police decision to deny a permit for public demonstrations involving burnings of the Qur'an followed riots after burnings performed by the Danish politician Rasmus Paludan in several Swedish cities during 2022 (for more see Kühle 2024). The most violent event took place at Easter 2022, coinciding with Sweden's application to join NATO in May 2022 (see Larsson and Mattsson 2024). A burning outside the Turkish embassy on 21 January 2023 resulted in strong international protests and threatened to obstruct Sweden's NATO application. The decision by the Administrative Court on 4 April was made on the grounds that the right to freedom of speech could not be compromised by expectations of riots or terror attacks in Sweden. Legal grounds for restricting public demonstrations need to directly follow from or concern the act's immediate environment (Kammarrätten 2023).

One of those applying for permission to burn a Qur'an was Salwan Momika, a 37-year-old Christian refugee from Iraq. On 28 June he burned a Qur'an outside one of the largest mosques in central Stockholm, while playing the Swedish national anthem and waving the Swedish flag. The burning was staged during the celebration of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha. In an interview (Hedbom 2023) Momika stated that the act was motivated by a critique of the Qur'an, which should be forbidden both in Sweden and throughout the world, and that Swedish people needed to wake up to the danger Islam posed to democracy. On 20 July Momika attempted another burning outside the embassy of Iraq in Stockholm, but when this failed, he instead violated the Qur'an by kicking and stamping on it. These burnings were followed by several others during July, August, and September, and the events were also filmed and disseminated on the TikTok digital platform.

Momika's public desecrations of the Qur'an caused demonstrations with burnings of Swedish flags in several Muslim countries, and the Swedish embassy in Iraq was attacked on 29 June and set ablaze on 20 July. Several

¹ The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) includes crimes committed out of hostility or hatred towards Islam and Muslims, those who are or are perceived to be Muslims, or representatives of Muslims or Islam in their statistics for such crimes (Brå 2019).

countries suspended diplomatic relations with Sweden, including Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Yemen. On 12 July the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a disputed resolution urging member countries to 'address, prevent and prosecute acts and advocacy of religious hatred' (Henley 2023). On 31 July the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) adopted a resolution against repeated crimes of desecrations and burnings of the Qur'an in Sweden and Denmark. The Swedish prime minister and foreign minister answered the international criticism by repeatedly disassociating themselves from the burnings, stating that such acts were 'legal but inappropriate' in Sweden (Björkman 2023). In August threats of terror attacks from radical Islamist movements such as Al Qaida and Hezbollah escalated. As a consequence the Swedish security police raised the risk level of terror attacks to four out of five on the international scale.

There were public demonstrations and debates in Sweden, the largest taking place in Stockholm on 30 June and 9 July. The situation also created tension in parliament and in the right-wing government coalition,² in power since September 2022. These escalated when a member of the nationalist populist Sweden Democrats, which cooperates with but is not formally part of the government, tweeted derogatory statements about Islam, leading to a vote of confidence on 17 August. On 18 August the Swedish government initiated a revision of the Public Order Act to investigate the possibility of prohibiting burnings of the Qur'an due to security risks (Regeringskansliet 2023). A survey conducted in August 2023 showed that while most of the population strongly supported freedom of speech, 53 per cent supported a ban of the burning of religious scriptures in public (Rosén 2023a). On 30 August the Social Democrats, the leading opposition party, called for an investigation of whether burnings of the Qur'an fell under the law of agitation against ethnic and national groups (Socialdemokraterna 2023).

Public controversies on religion as media events: Previous research

The Qur'an burnings in Sweden followed a series of similar events in Europe evolving from tensions between freedom of speech and the defamation of religious beliefs and symbols, including the publication of the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, *Jyllands-Posten's*

² The Conservatives (Moderaterna), Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), Centre Party, and Liberal Party (Liberalerna). The Tidö Agreement is the basis for cooperation with the Sweden Democrats (Government Offices of Sweden 2022).

publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 and the subsequent debate in 2006, and the attacks against the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015. All these events have been extensively covered and debated in conventional news media and increasingly on various digital media platforms. The media coverage has often displayed a polarization between fundamentalist, most prominently Islamic, religious groups and Western democracy as characterized by freedom of speech, individual liberty, and equal treatment under laws based on the principle of a neutral secular state. The media's performative role in orchestrating polarization between religious and secular values has previously been analysed through theories of media events (e.g. Eide et al. 2008; Couldry et al. 2010), hybrid media rituals (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2023; Pauha 2024), or mediatization (Cottle 2006; Lundby et al. 2018).

The burnings of the Qur'an in the Nordic countries are a topic of growing scholarly interest. A recent special issue of *Temenos*, edited by Larsson, Frydenlund, and Brekke (2024), illustrates the complexity of Qur'an burnings regarding contemporary legal and political factors at local and global levels, as well as historical and theological aspects. The articles in the special issue focus on burnings of the Qur'an in the Nordic countries before or during 2022. These studies' findings provide an important point of comparison for the analysis presented in the present article. This especially concerns Larsson's and Mattsson's (2024) analysis of 60 opinion pieces from a broad range of Swedish newspapers commenting on the Easter riots in 2022. Their findings and conclusions regarding how the burning of the Qur'an ignited different positions and attitudes towards freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and openness to cultural and religious diversity in Swedish society will be further presented and discussed in the analysis of the more recent material from 2023 this article analyses.

Linge and Bangstad (2024) argue that Qur'an burnings by the far-right fringe organization SIAN in Norway represent 'conflict-generating media events' in which symbolic and ritual dimensions are amplified to attract publicity and generate polarization, and free speech as a fundamental democratic right is 'captured' to promote Islamophobia and polarization in society. In such events actors such as SIAN and the media work in conjunction to situate local Qur'an burnings within a larger 'metanarrative' of secularism and free speech in European society. However, the outcome of this process risks turning acts depicted as 'freedom of speech' into a legitimization of 'freedom to hate' – in this case Muslims. This argument is connected with Svensson's (2017) point that the explosive character of Qur'an burn-

ings relies on a shared intuitive understanding between the performers and protesters of an object's sacredness, and how it can be desecrated in ways that communicate contempt and hatred for a particular religious group.

Toft's (2024) analysis of the Norwegian media coverage of Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Norway during Easter 2022 takes a somewhat different approach to 'media events'. Like Linge and Bangstad, Toft starts with an approach that sees media events as disruptive (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2023, 1335). However, the outcome of such events can have different outcomes, depending on how it resonates with shifting sociopolitical circumstances (Cottle 2006). Based on an analysis of interviews with journalists and articles in Norwegian newspapers, Toft argues that the meaning of events such as Qur'an burnings needs to be analysed regarding different layers of coverage such as news, commentary, and opinion journalism. A core finding of the study is that news journalists reflect critically on how they cover and frame such an event. Highlighting this variation in media coverage contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which media representations are connected with various actors and established discourses in a particular society.

In addition to recent work on the media coverage of Qur'an burnings in Nordic societies, previous research on media debates about the 2006 Muhammad cartoons event constitutes a relevant point of reference for the present study. This event has been described as a 'defining moment' that '...left an enduring residue in the form of a repertoire of images and assumptions' (Eide et al. 2008, 11) and has been analysed in numerous publications (see e.g. Klausen 2009; Christoffersen 2016). Two reports from an international comparative project on the media coverage of and debates about the Muhammad cartoons are particularly relevant (Kunelius et al. 2007; Eide et al. 2008). A core theme in this project concerned the dynamic between freedom of speech as a universal value and the possibility of communication across particular contexts (Kunelius and Eide 2007, 11–12). This dynamic can result in tension or clashes, but it also has potential for deliberation and dialogue. In line with Toft's findings this study showed that although news coverage more often seemed to reproduce a clash of values between the 'Western' and 'Muslim' worlds by favouring violent demonstrations and extremist positions, opinion pages reflected a broader spectrum of positions that defended, criticized, or rejected this understanding (Kunelius and Eide 2007, 19–20). The project's Swedish case studies focused on the development of frames (Strömbäck et al. 2008) or discourses (Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007) in articles in daily newspapers during 2006. The results of these studies will be further presented in the discussion of the findings from 2023.

Mediatized conflicts: Dynamics and complexity

This article's analysis departs from theories on mediatization, religion, and conflict. As a concept, mediatization captures interrelated processes between media change and social and cultural change that develop at an institutional level, as well as in daily social interaction (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018). Mediatization also focuses on the media's active role in social and cultural conflicts. In terms of religion the media provides a horizon of orientation, as well as tools for various social actors to engage in such conflicts. Nordic researchers have developed research on the mediatization of religion over the last two decades in a series of publications (see e.g. Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019). This research reveals a growing contestation of Islam especially in the public sphere, as secular journalism increasingly presents religion according to news value and topical political debates (Lundby et al. 2018; Lövheim et al. 2018a; Taira 2019). This contestation occurs against the background of the increasing ethnic and religious diversity since the 1990s. Religion in Nordic societies today is characterized by a complex interplay between continuing secularization in terms of adherence to organized religion and the increasing visibility and contestation of religion in the media and in political debate (Furseth 2018). Here tension and conflict between secularity, culturalized Christianity, and Islam have become more pronounced in discussions of the various challenges of secular democracies (Lövheim et al. 2018b; Taira 2019, 187).

The complexity of religion's public role in contemporary Nordic societies calls for an approach to mediatization that accounts for dynamics and varieties in how the media conditions interaction between actors in a particular event. Media forms and representations can reproduce and reinforce tensions between various interests and actors in society but can also nuance them by displaying alternative perspectives or forms for public deliberation (Cottle 2006). Hjarvard and Lundby (2018, 55, cf. Hjarvard et al. 2015) approach the media's role in contestations of religion through the intertwined dynamics of amplification, framing, and performative agency and co-structuring. Using *Charlie Hebdo* 2015 as an example, they argue that the news and social media's global dissemination of the attack amplified the controversy in the mobilization of worldwide protests against terrorism and support for the magazine, for example. In terms of framing, the incident's dominant representation as a terrorist act against freedom of expression in the Western news media enhanced a particular interpretation of the event's causes and implications. The media can also frame an event by providing platforms for different voices that affect various actors' performative

agency. The dynamic of co-structuring addresses the media's role in public deliberation by giving a voice to different actors in news reporting or opinion pieces, and how access to the media intersects with power dynamics in society. The variety of available media genres and forms, as well as the degree of competition between them, plays an important role in whether the media aligns with or challenges such power structures. The degree of disunity within politics or civil society also creates opportunities for the media to engage in commentary and criticism from a variety of perspectives (Cottle 2006, 20). Media conflicts should therefore be conceived of as dynamic and complex rather than constant or linear. Mediatized conflicts open public spaces where diverging views and voices define and defend their claims and aims. In this process '...the state of democracy in today's societies becomes revealed and, in important respects, constituted and open to evaluation' (Cottle 2006, 5).

Data and methods

The analysis of media coverage of and debate about the Qur'an burnings starts with articles published in a selection of Nordic daily newspapers between 1 April and 1 October 2023. This material cannot be seen as representative of public opinion, as debates about the burnings of the Qur'an in Sweden also took place on digital media platforms such as TikTok and X, and on both national public and global satellite television. Analysing the Qur'an burnings as a hybrid media event permits a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between different forms of media and actors (see Valaskivi and Sumiala 2023; Linge and Bangstad 2024). Nevertheless, focusing on the daily press can be motivated, first, by the aim of contextualizing media coverage of and debate about a topical event within social and political changes in Sweden regarding religious diversity. Despite the increasing use of digital and hybrid media since 2006, national newspapers can still be considered relevant as public spaces where negotiations of the visibility and legitimacy of religion between political and civil society actors take place (Langer and Gruber 2021). Opinion material from the daily press is therefore valid for mapping different standpoints of 'legitimate public controversy on a given issue' (Kunelius and Eide 2007, 11–12). Second, daily press material enables comparisons with previous research on the 2022 Qur'an burnings, the Muhammad cartoons, and longitudinal studies in the Nordic countries of the mediatization of religion, especially Islam, and political debate (Taira 2019, 182). In the Nordic countries the daily press maintains a significant position

in setting the political discussion agenda, enjoying a high level of public attention and trust by international standards (Mediebarometern 2023).

This first quantitative part of the analysis is based on 1,306 articles from 14 Nordic newspapers, representing the largest newspapers with different political profiles, as well as the main religious (Christian) newspaper in each country: in Sweden *Dagens Nyheter* (independent), *Aftonbladet* (independent social democratic), *SydSvenskan* (independent liberal), and *Dagen* (Christian); in Denmark *Politiken* (social-liberal), *Jyllands-Posten* (liberal-conservative), and *Kristeligt Dagblad* (Christian); in Finland *Helsingin Sanomat* (liberal), *Ilta-Sanomat* (independent), *Huvudstadsbladet* (Swedish, independent-liberal), and *Kotimaa* (Christian); in Norway *Aftenposten* (independent conservative), *Dagsavisen* (social democratic), and *Vårt Land* (Christian). Articles were collected manually from the newspapers' websites between 1 April and 1 October 2023 using the search words 'koranbränning', with equivalent terms in Danish (*koranaftbraending*), Finnish (*koraanin poltto*), and Norwegian (*koranbrenning*).³ Fifty-seven per cent of the articles were from Swedish newspapers, warranting a focus on Swedish newspapers in the following analysis. The Nordic newspapers will be used for comparison in the analysis of the main topics. Two people inductively coded the total sample of articles in the SPSS software program by date, newspaper, genre, topic, and actor. Descriptive statistics (frequency and cross tabulation) were used to identify dominant patterns in how the articles represented the event and to compare patterns between newspapers and genres, as well as changes over the period. These results are presented in Table 1 below. Articles from the Swedish newspapers were then analysed through an inductive frame analysis using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1 and Table 2 below.

Framing concerns the process of selecting certain aspects of an event and making them more salient to '...promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman 1993, 52). Miller and Riechert (2001) describe frames as ideological interpretative mechanisms used for claiming meaning in contentious issues, shaped in dynamic interaction between the news media and various stakeholders representing opposing interests and values. This approach emphasizes the interplay between significant changes in the political debate and news media representations, which connects well with the dynamic of co-structuring in mediatization theory described above (Strömbäck et al.

³ For Nordic newspapers the search was filtered to include only Qur'an burnings in Sweden.

2008, 121). Frames are manifested in 'the choice and range of terms or words that provide the context in which issues are interpreted and discussed' (Miller and Riechert 2001, 105). Frames can thus be identified by analysing the frequency with which words occur and co-occur in texts.

For the Swedish newspaper articles a quantitative latent semantic analysis of the most frequently co-occurring words in news articles and opinion articles respectively was made using the Leximancer program, a software package offered by Leximancer Pty Ltd.⁴ The program performs an analysis of concepts, defined as words that occur together with a certain frequency in sentences of selected texts compared with other sentences. A concept map (see Figure 1 below) visualizes the relations between concepts in a sample of texts, based on the probability of these words' co-occurrence (Lundgren and Jensdotter 2022).⁵ This analysis can be seen as a form of unsupervised machine learning approach (Boumans and Trilling 2016, 14) in that it builds a thesaurus of co-occurring words from the texts, not from predetermined categories. It is therefore suitable for performing an inductive frame analysis.

The quantitative semantic analysis of the Swedish opinion articles was followed by a qualitative analysis of a sample of articles in which the co-occurring concepts identified in the map were most frequent. These articles were subject to a close reading of framing in the sense of the interpretation of the event's meaning, problem definition, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

Coverage of the Qur'an burnings in the Nordic daily press

A quantitative analysis of the total sample from the Nordic daily press shows that most articles were published in July (522) and August (440), followed by September (148) and June (111). In October 2023 very few articles appeared, which follows a common pattern of the news or issue cycle of similar events (Miller and Riechert 2001; Strömbäck et al. 2008). The majority of articles (110) were published on 20 and 21 July, the dates of a Qur'an burning outside the Iraqi embassy in Stockholm and the attack on the Swedish embassy in Iraq.

The analysis of the articles' topics generated 12 categories (see Table 1), of which *international reactions*, *news events*, *security*, *law*, and *freedom of speech* were most frequently represented. An analysis by genre shows significant

⁴ Version 5, Leximancer User Guide released Dec 2021.

⁵ Leximancer applies Bayesian statistics to measure the prominence of co-occurring words, which is a form of conditional probability measurement.

differences between news and opinion articles. The topics *event* (news reports), *international reactions*, *person* (which includes burners of the Qur'an, most frequently Momika), *security*, and *Nordic politics* dominated the news articles, while the opinion articles almost exclusively focused on *freedom of speech*, *religion*, and *Swedish politics*.

Table 1. Topics in Nordic newspaper articles, percentage (rounded), N=1,306.

Topics	Total percentage	News articles	Opinion articles
International reactions	24	93	6
Event	16	97	2
Security	13	91	9
Law	13	77	23
Freedom of Speech	8	27	73
Swedish politics	6	64	32
Swedish protests	6	84	16
NATO	3	77	23
Religion (including Islam)	3	57	42
Person (burners)	3	94	6
Nordic politics	2	90	10
Disinformation	2	86	14

An analysis of topic changes over time shows that the coverage shifts from *international reactions*, which is most frequent in July, to *security*, *freedom of speech*, and *Swedish politics* in August. In September the topics of *Swedish protests* and *person* are most frequent. Differences between newspapers show that *Aftonbladet* stands out as focusing mostly on *Swedish politics*, while *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, based in Southern Sweden and Malmö, where several protests against burnings took place, mostly covers *Swedish protests*, *NATO*, *law*, and *disinformation*. Among the Nordic papers *Jyllandsposten*, *Politiken*, and *Huvudstadsbladet* most frequently report on the significance of the events for Nordic (domestic) politics. *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* focus more on *NATO*, which can be explained by Finland's and Sweden's parallel membership application processes. *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen* focus more on *freedom of speech*. Finally, among the Christian papers *Dagen* and *Vårt Land* focus mostly on the topic of *religion*, while *Kristeligt Dagblad* predominantly covers *Nordic (domestic) politics*.

To summarize: the findings from the quantitative analysis of the Nordic newspapers show several similarities with previous research – for example, of the Muhammad cartoons in the Swedish and Nordic press, which use similar material and methods. The coverage in news articles focus on international reactions, violent demonstrations, and security threats where Muslims also dominate as actors, which resembles the dominant frame of conflicting values between the ‘Western’ and ‘Muslim’ worlds found in previous studies (Kunelius et al. 2007). Changes in topics over the period, from Qur’an burnings and international reactions to the implications for Swedish society, including security, freedom of speech, and domestic political debates, also follow the patterns these studies report (Strömbäck et al. 2008, 131; Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007), as well as the dominance of freedom of speech within opinion articles. The prominence of the topics of *law* and *person* in the coverage of the Qur’an burnings in 2023 is noteworthy. This pattern is also displayed among the most frequently co-occurring words in news articles, which were (in translation): *Swedish*, *Qur’an burnings*, *Qur’an*, *Momika*, *police*, and *agitation*.⁶

Frame analysis of opinion articles in Swedish opinion articles

For a deeper analysis of how the Qur’an burnings were interpreted in the Swedish press this last part of the analysis focuses on framing in opinion articles – including editorials, opinion pieces (op-eds), cultural debate, and columns – in the four Swedish newspapers *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Dagen*, and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (n=87). Figure 1 below shows the most frequently co-occurring words resulting from the analysis using the Leximancer software program: *Swedish* (Svenska); *Muslims* (muslimer); *Qur’an burnings* (koranbränningar); *hate crime* (hatbrott); *freedom of speech* (yttrandefriheten); and *sacred* (heliga).

A closer analysis of the co-occurrences shows that *Swedish* is most frequently connected with the words *Muslims* and religion, *hate crime* with *Qur’an burnings*, hate, the law, and ethnic group, while *freedom of speech* is connected with protect and government, and *sacred* with the Qur’an and the modal verb should (‘borde’). These co-occurrences indicate that the opinion articles’ framing of the event focuses on the implications of the Qur’an burnings for Swedish society in general, Muslims living in Sweden, and the protection of both freedom of speech and minority ethnic groups against hate crimes. The final aspect also includes the question of the sacredness of religious scriptures.

⁶ In Swedish *Svenska*, *koranbränningar*, *Koranen*, *Momika*, *polisen*, *hets*.

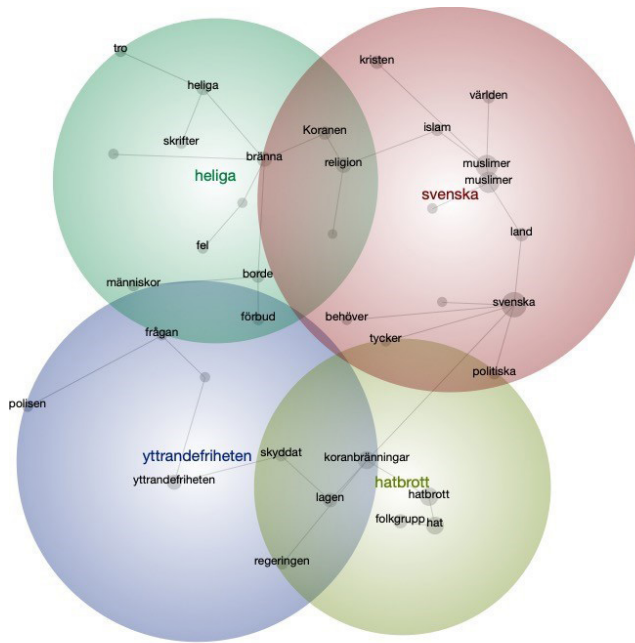


Figure 1. Concept map of most frequently occurring words in Swedish opinion articles.

A qualitative analysis of 30 articles in which the co-occurring concepts identified in the map are most frequent generates three main frames regarding the implications of the Qur'an burnings. The first is characterized by an emphasis on *freedom of speech as an absolute and universal value*, and a *core feature of Sweden as a democratic society*. *Dagens Nyheter* (2023) states that the right to freedom of speech also protects the rights of minorities to practise their religion: 'In free Sweden burning the Qur'an is allowed – and celebrating Eid.'⁷ Burnings and defamations of the Qur'an are considered provocative and disrespectful, but the right to harm religion is a necessary element of freedom of speech. Violent reactions and threats from Muslim groups and international actors, often described as 'fundamentalists', 'fanatics', or 'extremists', can never be a reason to restrict freedom of speech. *Dagen* (Crosson 2023) states: 'If freedom of speech is restricted, the henchmen of violence will continue to demand concessions and attack the values and ideals that build our democracy until nothing remains of freedom and pluralism.'

⁷ All quotations from Swedish newspaper articles have been translated by the author.

The second frame argues that *freedom of speech needs to be discussed and negotiated against the value of pluralism in the public debate*. Pluralism and dialogue on equal terms are crucial for democracy in a religiously and culturally diverse society. Qur'an burnings can be criticized on the grounds that they damage the possibility of a rational, responsible, and respectful dialogue between secular and religious citizens, but they cannot be prohibited by a blasphemy law, for example. Any revisions of the laws on freedom of speech should be based on the equal treatment of all religions. An opinion piece by several Swedish authors in *Dagens Nyheter* (Goldman et al. 2023) argues that 'Swedish Muslims have a right to be supported against mockery and offence', but the freedoms of religion and speech are universal values that cannot be limited to certain groups.

The third frame argues that *freedom of speech can be restricted due to the risk of increased hate and violence against minority groups*. Protecting the rights of minorities to participate in public debate and exercise their rights is the most important value for a functioning democracy. Burning the Qur'an is not an act of freedom of speech but of violence directed at Muslims, who have increasingly been exposed to hate and discrimination in Sweden. Advocates of this frame argue that 'Qur'an burnings are agitation against an ethnic group' (Abbas 2023) and call for a revision of the law in certain cases. The rights of minority groups to exercise their democratic rights by safely participating in public debate is emphasized more frequently than arguments based on the rights of religious groups or Muslims per se.

The three frames were used to code the total of 87 opinion articles in the Swedish newspapers. Table 2 presents the result of this analysis:

Table 2. Frames in opinion articles in Swedish newspapers, absolute numbers (n=87).

Newspaper	Opinion articles	FoS absolute, universal value	FoS needs to enable pluralism	FoS restricted by minority rights
Dagens Nyheter	32	19	9	4
Sydsvenska Dagbladet	17	8	6	3
Aftonbladet	21	6	5	10
Dagen	17	9	5	3
<i>Total</i>	87	42	25	20

As the table shows, the first frame emphasizing freedom of speech as an absolute value is generally most frequent in opinion articles. Most editorial articles, 14 out of 18, take this position. This is particularly salient in the independent *Dagens Nyheter*, where all editorials take this position, as well as the independent liberal *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, and the Christian *Dagen*. However, most editorials in the independent social democratic *Aftonbladet* represent the third frame on restricting freedom of speech to protect minority groups. Other opinion piece forms (columns, op-eds, and cultural debate) represent more variety, as the three frames are generally almost equally represented among the articles. Here the most salient differences between newspapers are that few articles represent the third position in *Dagens Nyheter*, but they represent a majority in *Aftonbladet*. The analysis further reveals that the second frame, emphasizing the value of pluralism and dialogue, is most common in all newspapers in articles authored by researchers, authors, and spokespersons of religious denominations and interfaith organizations. Spokespersons of Christian denominations are most frequently represented in this frame, arguing for the rights of all religions to be treated with respect in a secular society. Some Muslim leaders also argue for respect and dialogue between secular and religious groups in general, as expressed in this article signed by the chairperson of Swedish Shia denominations: 'As Swedes and Muslims, we invite dialogue on how the law on freedom of speech can be protected while avoiding its utilization for agitation against ethnic groups and to increase hate in society' (Ibrahim 2023). Advocates of the third frame often argue that Qur'an burnings represent 'normalized islamophobia' in Sweden (Kukka-Salam and Eneroth 2023) or support the political agenda of right-wing extremist groups and populist parties, as in this editorial in *Aftonbladet*: 'Burning the Qur'an should be seen as a hate crime. Don't permit the extreme right to define freedom of speech' (Lindberg 2023). This category also includes Muslim claims for recognition in Swedish society: 'We Muslims are part of Swedish society. Those who burn the Qur'an harm our right to peacefully practise our religion' (Miaji 2023).

Dynamics of mediatized conflicts: Framing, co-construction and deliberation

The approach to mediatized conflicts applied in this article starts from a dynamic perspective, in which the media amplifies, frames, and co-structures events such as the 2023 Qur'an burnings in Sweden (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018). This implies that mediatization can reproduce and reinforce tensions

between various interests and actors in society but also open public spaces for different views and voices that reveal, re-evaluate, and reconstitute the state of democracy in a society (Cottle 2006, 5).

The focus on newspapers in the Nordic countries rather than television or social media limits an analysis of amplification. The dominance of the topic of *international reactions*, however, shows that Nordic newspapers' reports contribute to an amplification of the event as a 'crisis' between Sweden and Muslim-majority countries in particular. In terms of framing, the quantitative analysis shows that news articles primarily focus on reactions in the form of critiques, protests, and threats of violence from Muslim countries and organizations, following the dominant frame of conflicting values between the 'Western' and 'Muslim' worlds in previous studies of the Muhammad Cartoons and Qur'an burnings (Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007; Strömbäck et al. 2008; Linge and Bangstad 2024).

The analysis of framing in the Qur'an burnings in Sweden 2023 shows continuity and change compared to the findings of previous research. The first frame identified in opinion articles, arguing for the absolute value of freedom of speech, represents similar arguments to those dominating the coverage of the Muhammad cartoons in 2006. In their analysis of opinion articles in the Swedish daily press in 2006, Wallentin and Ekecrantz (2007, 193) found two main discourses on the cartoon controversy. The 'ultraliberal discourse', claiming freedom of speech as a universal and unconditional right, was most common, particularly in editorials. The 'moderately pragmatic discourse', claiming freedom of speech as a universal right but with some conditions and responsibilities, was slightly more common in other opinion articles. Articles defending liberal freedom of speech were also dominant in Larsson's and Mattsson's (2024, 150) analysis of 60 opinion pieces about the 2022 Easter riots in Swedish newspapers. Two less frequent discourses identified in this study were debates about Sweden as a multicultural society and the cultural differences between 'Muslims' and Swedish society. These discourses are connected with Strömbäck et al.'s (2008, 126, 135) analysis comparing coverage of the Muhammad cartoons in the *New York Times* and *Dagens Nyheter*. They found a frame of intolerance in *Dagens Nyheter*, highlighting that the insult Muslims felt because of the publications was more frequent than framings of the publication as an act of freedom of speech, which was more frequent in the *New York Times*.

In line with these findings in previous research on similar events, the analysis of coverage of the Qur'an burnings 2023 shows that several interpretations of the event are present in the daily press: a strong defence of

freedom of speech as a universal value but also arguments that freedom of speech needs to be exercised with conditions and responsibilities, including reflections on how society should respond to experiences of discrimination and hostility among Muslims living as a minority group in Western societies. This variation in the media coverage corresponds to and strengthens Toft's (2024) argument about the importance of analysing the complexity of media events and distinguishing between how such events are framed in different layers of the coverage such as news, commentary, and opinion journalism.

In the Swedish opinion articles from 2023 arguments represented by the second and third frame, which in different ways call for a renegotiation of the absolute value of freedom of speech, seem more prominent than in other studies. Together, these articles are as frequent as articles defending the primacy of freedom of speech as a fundamental democratic value. While arguments about the importance of exercising freedom of speech responsibly and rationally represent a continuity of arguments from the 'moderately pragmatic discourse' on the Muhammad cartoons, the third frame, arguing for the possibility to restrict freedom of speech to protect Muslims as a minority group in Swedish society, was barely visible in the study of how the press framed the Muhammad cartoons in 2006 (Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007, 194). Although a direct comparison between these two studies' findings is impossible due to differences in methods and so on, this difference between the framings of similar issues in the Swedish daily press calls for further analysis.

The dynamic of co-structuring emphasizes that media debates are not detached from but embedded within the transformations and contestations of values and social relations in society. How the media gives voice to different actors and perspectives intersects with contestations between different groups in society (Cottle 2006, 20). Both variety and competition between media actors and the degree of disunity within politics or civil society play an important role in how the media positions itself regarding competing power interests.

Taira argues that 'there is a need to consider how religion-related media discourses and portrayals ... are entangled with social changes in their capacity to direct and reflect the public presence and boundaries of the groups and practices conventionally named religion' (2019, 175). Nordic longitudinal comparative projects have shown that between 1988 and 2008 critique and debate about Islam were less frequent in media and parliamentary debates in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries (Lövheim et al. 2018a; Lundby et al. 2018). The Swedish population's tendency for relative

tolerance of religious diversity compared with other Nordic countries was also confirmed in a survey of opinions about Islam as a threat to national identity (Lövheim et al. 2018b). A study of the coverage of religion in Swedish newspapers between 2008 and 2018 (Lövheim 2019) showed that religious diversity rather than absolute secularity remained the starting point for media representations of tensions between religious practice and values considered crucial for Swedish democracy, such as gender equality and individual freedom. However, diverging opinions regarding the challenges of a high tolerance of religious diversity in Sweden had increasingly become a burning issue in the daily press (Lövheim 2019, 288).

In the 17 years since the publication of the Muhammad cartoons Sweden has become more ethnically and religiously diverse. Inhabitants born outside Sweden have almost doubled, comprising 20 per cent of a population of 10.5 million in 2023 (SCB 2023). Immigrants from Africa and Asia, where there are many Muslim-majority countries, comprise around 1.1 million people. In political debates issues related to Islam but also to religion as part of human rights have increased since populist right Sweden Democrats' arrival in parliament in 2010 (Lindberg 2020). The politicization of religion is also affected by the change from a 'disengage strategy' towards the Sweden Democrats, which in contrast with the situation in other Nordic countries was practised by other political parties and the news media from 2010 (Lindberg 2020, 97). Since the cooperation agreement between the Sweden Democrats and the current government coalition was signed in November 2022, the party has become increasingly vocal in its criticism of Islam and has proposed restrictions for mosques and other public displays of Islam, despite the risk of infringements to the right of freedom of religion (Rosén 2023b). These demographic and political changes are also reflected in the public's attitudes towards freedom of religion. Demker (2023, 119) shows that concern about freedom of religion as a threat to the population is strongest among those sceptical of immigrants' freedom to practise their religion. This, she argues, shows that support for public expression of religion is conditioned by the majority population's understanding of how this freedom is practised.

Larsson and Mattsson (2024) also find that press coverage of the riots following the burning of the Qur'an in Sweden in 2022 ignited several different positions and attitudes towards freedom of speech and religion in Swedish society. However, they conclude that the riots were mainly seen as a result of a failed multicultural policy in Sweden and a perception of Islam as an obstacle to liberal democracy and thus to freedom of speech (2024,

151). Linge and Bangstad (2024, 96) argue that Qur'an burnings performed by far-right groups in Norway capitalize on the endorsement of the critique of Islam as a reprehensible but nevertheless necessary part of free speech by the mainstream media and political actors. The analysis of Swedish opinion articles discussed in this article presents a more complex connection between the daily press and the current political debate. The three identified frames display both variety and competition between the four newspapers in the study and within them through differences between editorials and other forms of opinion pieces. The almost reverse pattern in frames in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet* editorials highlights how framing in newspapers is co-structured by the degree of disunity or struggle within current Swedish politics (Strömbäck et al. 2008, 136). *Dagens Nyheter's* framing follows the position taken by the right-wing coalition government, while *Aftonbladet* criticizes the government for supporting the right-wing populist agenda and supports the Social Democratic opposition's attempts to revise the law on agitation against ethnic groups. The findings of the study presented in this article are therefore aligned with Toft's conclusion concerning how the meaning of a media event such as Qur'an burnings is contested as various actors inside and outside the media reframe it to fit dominant patterns and alternative framings with established discourses (2024, 122). The second and third frames' strong presence, which disputes the absolute value of freedom of speech and argues for dialogue with and protection of Muslims in Sweden, can be interpreted as a sign of how the media becomes an arena for acknowledging minority groups' experiences and claims in a situation of increasing contestation of tolerance (Cottle 2006, 168). These frames can be seen as representing continuing support for diversity in the practice of freedom of religion in the daily press. Arguments about protecting the rights of Muslims in Sweden, however, are primarily related to their situation as an exposed minority, not to their religious beliefs. Arguments concerning respect for religious beliefs and values are primarily voiced by spokespersons for Swedish Muslims or Christian and Jewish groups. Further studies are therefore needed to assess whether support for Swedish Muslims in opinion pieces is conditioned by ideals of religious minority citizens supporting the majority's conception of democratic values (Abdel Fadil and Liebmann 2018, 287).

In conclusion, the Qur'an burnings were represented in the Swedish and international press as a 'crisis' for Swedish society. This study's findings have shown that although topics of international reactions, violent protests, and security dominated the first months of the news coverage, the 'crisis' came

to concern the status of freedom of speech as a foundation of democracy versus a public debate representing the population's increased diversity and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities threatened by the increased politicization of Islam. The analysis thus highlights how the 'Qur'an crisis' as a mediatized conflict is co-structured by ongoing and complex social, political, and religious changes, and that this complexity can enhance polarization but also deliberation and negotiation between different democratic rights and values in contemporary Sweden.

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