

A Close Call on Publication of Charlie Hebdo Cartoons

By Margaret Sullivan

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Was The Times cowardly and lacking in journalistic solidarity when it decided not to publish the images from the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo that precipitated the execution of French journalists?

Some readers I've heard from certainly think so. Evan Levine of New York City wrote: "I just wanted to register my extreme disappointment at what can only be described as a dereliction of leadership and responsibility by the New York Times in deciding not to publish the Charlie Hebdo cartoons after today's massacre."

(...) And many outside commenters and press critics agreed. Jeff Jarvis of City University of New York wrote: "If you're the paper of record, if you're the highest exemplar of American journalism, if you expect others to stand by your journalists when they are threatened, if you respect your audience to make up its own mind, then dammit stand by Charlie Hebdo and inform your public. Run the cartoons."

I talked to the executive editor, Dean Baquet, on Thursday morning about his decision not to show the images of the prophet Muhammad – a position that was taken by The Washington Post (on its news pages), The Associated Press, CNN and many other American news organizations. BuzzFeed and the Huffington Post were among those that did publish the cartoons.

The Washington Post's editorial page published a single image of a Hebdo cover on its printed Op-Ed page with Charles Lane's column; that decision was made by the editorial page editor, not the executive editor of the paper, who presides over the news content. The executive editor, Martin Baron, told the Post's media reporter Paul Farhi that the paper doesn't publish material "that is pointedly, deliberately, or needlessly offensive to members of religious groups."

A number of European newspapers did publish the images, often on their front pages or prominently on their websites.

Mr. Baquet told me that he started out the day Wednesday convinced that The Times should publish the images, both because of their newsworthiness and out of a sense of solidarity with the slain journalists and the right of free expression. He said he had spent "about half of my day" on the question, seeking out the views of senior editors (... and reporters). They told him they would not feel endangered if The Times reproduced the images, he told me, but he remained concerned about staff safety.

"I sought out a lot of views, and I changed my mind twice," he said. "It had to be my decision alone."

Ultimately, he decided against it, he said, because he had to consider foremost the sensibilities of Times readers, especially its Muslim readers. To many of them, he said, depictions of the prophet Muhammad are sacrilegious; those that are meant to mock even more so. "We have a standard that is long held and that serves us well: that there is a line between gratuitous insult and satire. Most of these are gratuitous insult."

(...) I asked Mr. Baquet about a different approach — something much more moderate, along the lines of what the Post's Op-Ed page did in print.

"Something like that is probably so compromised as to become meaningless," he responded, though he was speaking generally, not of The Post's decision.

The Times undoubtedly made a careful and conscientious decision in keeping with its standards. However, given these events — and an overarching story that is far from over — a review and reconsideration of those standards may be in order in the days ahead.