CHAPTER 3

Willingness to discuss the publishing of religious cartoons. Spiral of silence in the private and public spheres

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The publishing of religious cartoons has spurred crucial debates about freedom of speech in Western societies. Cartoon debates represent contestations where symbolic boundaries are drawn towards what are 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' positions in public debates. According to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory, individuals who perceive that their opinions are incongruent with the dominant opinion climate are more likely than others to remain silent in public debates. Based on survey data, the empirical analysis explores people's

willingness to discuss whether news media should publish potentially offensive religious cartoons. Two dimensions are explored: different arenas for discussion (public, semi-public and private) and different climates of opinion (general public and peers). The results suggest, first, that people with personal opinions perceived to be incongruent with the dominant positions held by the general public are less willing to discuss the publication of religious cartoons. Second, the results suggest that spiral of silence mechanisms are stronger in private than in public arenas, i.e. that people are especially wary of both the general opinion climate and the opinions of their peers when discussing the publication of cartoons among friends, family and workmates. One implication of the findings is that symbolic boundaries work to reinforce majority positions in both public and private discussions.

Introduction

Particularly in the past two decades, the publishing of religious cartoons has spurred crucial debates about freedom of speech in Western societies. The Mohammed Cartoon Crisis in 2006, in important ways, set the stage for the debate about the role of religion in modern societies, and how respect for religious identities and feelings should be weighed against the principle of freedom of speech. The terrorist attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris and on the local cultural centre Krudttønden in Copenhagen in January 2015 set aflame renewed debates on the current threats to this freedom. Different as they were, both of these events were characterized by the use of violence to protest against cartoon publication. In the case of the Mohammed cartoons, their publication had global repercussions, entailing the torching of consulates and embassies in the Middle East, and violent protests in a range of countries in Asia and Africa. As many as 241 people are estimated to have died in

connection with demonstrations during the spring of 2006 (Klausen, 2009, p. 107).

The publishing of religious cartoons has thus been marked by highly dramatic events, which have brought to the fore the conflict between the principle of freedom of speech and questions of blasphemy and intercultural tolerance. In Norway, public debate on freedom of speech reached its peak during the cartoon crisis and the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks (see Colbjørnsen, chapter 6). These debates were characterized by high temperature and strong disagreement. Crudely put, advocates of unlimited free speech state that no limits should be enforced on the publication of strongly provocative cartoons. More restrictive voices, on the other hand, argue that freedom of speech is only one of many bricks in a liberal democracy, the protection of minorities and their religious beliefs being another. Hence freedom of speech must be balanced against its possible negative consequences, especially in terms of reinforcing social cleavages and hurting particular minority groups. As pointed out by Erich Bleich (2011) both positions tend to accuse the other side of creating a situation where crucial democratic principles are undermined.

In relation to this book's discussion of the boundaries of freedom of speech, the publishing of religious cartoons is relevant in a double sense. First, exploring the attitudes of the population towards publishing religious cartoons is an indicator of where people draw the boundaries for freedom of speech vis-à-vis the protection of religious feelings and even blasphemy. Second, cartoon debates represent types of high temperature contestations where one might assume that symbolic boundaries are drawn between what are acceptable and unacceptable positions, either among individuals or for individuals themselves. It is this latter social process that will be the main focus of this chapter.

As we have defined symbolic boundaries in this book, they are linked to contestations between groups and individuals in society, based on disagreement over values, ideas or principles. In this chapter we turn our attention to another type of social process, i.e. the process whereby individuals adjust their expression of opinions to what they perceive to be the normatively sanctioned opinion in their social environment, exercising what may be termed self-censorship. Boundaries, in this context, could thus be seen as self-imposed limitations on expression, rather than as limitations drawn by others. The core of the matter, however, is that such processes of potential self-censorship are closely linked to public debates and opinion.

Based on survey data we ask whether and to what extent people are willing to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons, if they believe their personal opinions are incongruent with the current opinion climate. The survey was carried out in August 2015, at a point in time when the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the right to publish religious cartoons had been fiercely debated for several months (Colbjørnsen, chapter 6). Through our data we can then study mechanisms of self-censorship and the willingness to express one's opinion in the particular case of discussions on publishing religious cartoons. Moreover, the timing of the survey enables us to reflect upon the question of whether spiral of silence mechanisms did occur in the Norwegian context, since it taps into the question of self-censorship at the end of a long period of public discussion.

Noelle-Neumann's (1974) theory of spirals of silence forms the theoretical backbone of our analysis. Spiral of silence theory states that individuals will tend to adjust to what they perceive to be the dominant public opinion, and to be less willing to speak out if they perceive that they are part of a minority. We have a particular interest in what has been termed 'peer effects', i.e. that people may

primarily fear and react to the danger of isolation from peer groups such as family and friends, rather than to isolation from the wider public (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2004). In order to analyze which opinions play a role when people evaluate whether to express their opinion or not, we differentiate between public and private opinion climates and the willingness to speak in public, semi-public and private arenas. A Norwegian study from 2013 showed a general tendency among respondents to be less self-restrictive in the private than in the public setting when faced with various types of risk (Steen-Johnsen & Enjolras, 2016). However, the question asked in that study was more abstract, given that respondents were not presented with a specific case. More importantly, based on the present study we are able to disentangle the effects of various opinion climates and the arenas in which the potential utterance takes place.

Spiral of silence and the opinion climate: our approach

The term 'opinion climate' refers to how individuals *perceive* aggregated public opinion. According to Paul Lazarsfeld (1972), the opinion climate of an issue is closer to the more permanent and subconscious 'value system' of a society compared to the more fleeting everyday reactions expressed by citizens in surveys. Opinion climates have been described as heavily loaded with social and normative meaning, guiding acceptable attitudes and behavior in a social group (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Shamir & Shamir, 2000). In other words, people's willingness to express opinions may be affected by their perceptions of the opinion climate. A person who senses that her opinions run contrary to the majority may be less willing to express these opinions compared to a person with mainstream opinions.

In her famous study of the effects of opinion climates Noelle-Neumann (1974) argued that, due to fear of isolation, people with diverging opinions would gradually be less willing to express opinions, leading to a 'spiral of silence' where only dominant opinions remain. Based on empirical evidence from West Germany on several different political issues, Noelle-Neumann found that people on the 'losing side' were consistently less willing to discuss controversial issues compared to people on the 'winning side' (ibid.). Spiral of silence theory does not assume that people know what the opinion climate of a given issue is in reality; rather what counts is how people *perceive* the opinion climate.

The core tenet of the spiral of silence theory is that willingness to express opinions is influenced by perceived support for those opinions, which is also the topic of this chapter. In the aftermath of Noelle-Neumann's publication however, several empirical studies have found very small spiral of silence effects, leading some scholars to argue that '…the literature provides little support for this [spiral of silence] notion' (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). Noelle-Neumann herself has responded to the criticism that her theory lacks strong empirical support, by stressing the importance of studying value laden issues: '…a situation that involves *real* struggle for public opinion…' (Noelle-Neumann & Peterson, 2004 p. 352). It is a mistake to believe that the spiral of silence theory applies to all situations. This claim is supported in a study by Bodor (2012), which, among other things, stresses the importance of *timing*. Bodor found that during the 2004 US presidential campaign the spiral of silence mechanism was vulnerable to weekly shifts in opinion climates. In a period during the campaign when George W. Bush's chances of reelection seemed to erode, his supporters suddenly became less willing to discuss politics in the workplace.

When the opinion climate again shifted in Bush's favor, his supporters became more willing to discuss politics.

In addition to the criticisms that have been raised about the generalizability of the spiral of silence mechanism on the macro level, concerns have also been raised about the psychological mechanism at the core of the spiral of silence theory, i.e. the fear of isolation (Moy, Domke & Stamm, 2001). For example, Pollis and Cammalleri (1968) pointed out that people's tendency to conform may quite easily be broken if they receive support from just one relevant other, or if they enter the setting together with a friend. Another question concerns the impact of the general, abstract public as compared to the impact of peers and relevant reference groups. Several studies have shown that opinions held by family and friends are more important when deciding whether to speak out (Glynn & Park, 1997; Krassa, 1988; Moy, Domke & Stamm, 2001).

Based on the assumption that people may fear isolation from their reference groups more than isolation from more remote groups or from society at large, one hypothesis states that feeling out of sync with the opinion of family and friends will impinge on the willingness to speak in any context, also public ones. One point that might underpin this line of reasoning is that the boundaries between public and private speech are becoming increasingly blurred, as what is posted publicly in social media might reach a very diverse crowd of friends, family, colleagues and faint acquaintances. The private and the public are hence becoming increasingly interwoven (Mutz & Silver, 2014, p. 77). Alternatively, one might hypothesize that the public opinion climate and opinions among peers ('private opinion climate') are experienced as distinct, and that the willingness to speak in a particular arena depends on the corresponding opinion climate.

In our analysis, we take account of the criticisms raised in relation to Noelle-Neumann's original theory and the new digitalized context for voicing one's opinion, and explore two different mechanisms for self-censorship in the religious cartoon debate in Norway. The first is related to the impact of different *types of opinion climates*, from the private (family, friends and the workplace), to the more public (people who are on social media and comment fields in online newspapers, and whom you don't necessarily know personally), and to the wider public of the edited mass media. Are people more concerned with the opinions of their peers than with the opinion of the general public? Hence, although 'opinion climate' is typically associated with public opinion, in our analysis we distinguish between 'private opinion climates' and 'public opinion climates'.

The second mechanism is related to *the arena* in which the expression of an opinion might take place, i.e. to the question of whether people act differently in public as opposed to the semi-public or private spheres. This is the question of whether congruence with different groups plays a different role in different contexts. More concretely – if people feel aligned with their family and friends on the issue of cartoon publishing, will this make them more willing to discuss the issue, not only in the family context, but also in social media and in edited media contexts? We use the term 'semi-public arenas' to indicate willingness to discuss on social media sites and in online comment sections of newspapers. These arenas are semi-public in the sense that they may include a mix of known and unknown people; they are interactive and not as formal as the edited public sphere.

Taken together these two entries then enable us to examine more closely the question of boundaries that people draw for their own speech in contested issues such as the religious

cartoon debates, and what social forces influence the drawing of these boundaries. In a broader sense the issue of boundary making that we are discussing here is of vital importance to the exercise of free speech. It is both a debate on substance and a meta-debate on principles, laying foundations for the functioning of the public sphere.

In a broader view it is also worth pointing out that most people do not and never will, discuss religious cartoons in public arenas. In this light, it makes particular sense to distinguish between different arenas for discussion, and to be concerned with the private arena as well, since discussions in the private arena may be of great importance to opinion formation. We would also like to emphasize that opinions about contested issues are not necessarily formed prior to discussion, but may rather result from it. Still the theory of the spiral of silence implies that the sense that people have about the relationship between the dominant view in the environment surrounding an issue and their own, may play a role in their willingness to discuss the issue at all.

The case: Publishing of religious cartoons

Ever since the 'Cartoon Crisis' in 2005-2006, ignited by the publishing of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, cartoons have been at the center of public debates on free speech (Colbjørnsen, 2016, this book). It can be argued that debates over boundaries for cartoon publishing thus crystallize contemporary, global debates on free speech, which makes this a relevant case to explore, both substantively and theoretically.

As described above, the debate has in the main elucidated two main positions: a position opposing most restrictions on free

speech, and a more restrictive stance arguing for caution against insulting (religious) minorities (Favret-Saada, 2015). Boosted by the attacks on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, the unlimited free speech stance arguably became the most dominant position in the Norwegian debate, as it was expressed through op-eds and commentaries in the main news-papers. This was also a moment when many opinion leaders, such as pundits and political commentators, used the occasion to revi-sit the 2006 debate in Norway on the Mohammed cartoons and to criticize those who had taken a more restrictive position at that point. Given the violence of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, it seemed easy to pinpoint the more restrictive position as a failed attempt to reconcile principles, and to argue that if one gives in on the prin-ciple of free speech, society is laid open to the oppressing forces of those who are willing to use violence.

While one side of the debate seemed to be clearly dominant in the elite debate, as reflected in op-eds and commentaries, an interesting question is whether these positions were reflected among ordinary people. Before turning to the empirical analysis of people's willingness to discuss the publication of religious car-toons, we briefly present the real distribution of opinions in the population (the 'public opinion climate') concerning whether cartoons insulting religion should be published or not (Figure 3.1). In our August 2015 survey among the general population and journalists (described in chapter 4) respondents were confronted with the question of whether or not media should publish potentially offensive religious cartoons[1]. In this context, we conceive of the journalists as part of an opinion elite, and are interested in seeing whether there are differences bet-ween their opinions and those of the broader population.

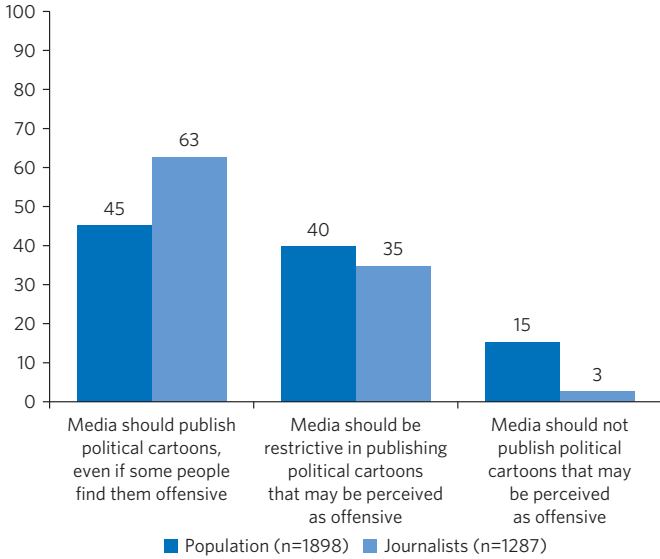1   See the note attached to Figure 1 for the precise question wording.

Figure 3.1. The opinion climate on the publishing of religious cartoons, August 2015. Population and journalists. Percent.

Source: *Freedom of speech survey (2015).*

NOTE: Question wording: 'Which of the following statements is most in accordance with your own opinion?' Don't know answers are excluded. In the surveys the samples were randomly divided into six groups, of which five groups received additional contextual information before the question: In the last few years there has been some discussion about the publishing of religious cartoons in the media. Given that a religious cartoon can be perceived as [1. offensive; 2. offensive among Christians; 3. offensive among Muslims; 4. offensive among Jews; 5. offensive among Christians, Muslims or Jews]… Population data weighted according to age, gender and education.

It was possible to give an unconditional 'yes' (media should publish) or unconditional 'no' (media should not publish) answer, in addition to a conditional answer (media should be restrictive, if the cartoon can be perceived as offensive). In the survey, respondents were randomly assigned to six groups, in which four of the groups got specific information about *who* would potentially feel offended (Christians, Muslims, Jews, and all three together). Figure 3.1 displays mean scores across

groups,[2] among respondents who had an opinion on the matter (don't know excluded).

Figure 3.1 may be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand it may be read as illustrating a relatively one-sided opinion climate, especially among journalists, given that so few state that media should not publish religious cartoons. 45 percent of the population and 63 percent of the journalists held the opinion that media *should* publish potentially offensive religious cartoons (unconditional yes). Only 15 percent of the population and 3 percent of the journalists answered that media should not publish potentially offensive religious cartoons (unconditional no). On the other hand, the population is divided almost in two between the unconditional and conditional yes categories, which indicates that there exist two sides of the question with almost equal strength. Even though one might argue that the main positions in the Norwegian debate were an absolutist yes and an absolutist no to publication, the opinion climate rather seems to have been divided mainly between the unconditional yes and the more conditional position. A relatively large minority of the journalists also favored the conditional 'yes' option, but the general public is more equally divided between the unconditional and the conditional standpoints. This is an important finding, which illustrates the fact that *perceived* opinion climates may differ from what is the actual distribution of opinions in a population. When observing the opinions expressed most strongly in the public sphere through the mass media during the 2015 cartoon debates in Norway, one can hypothesize that people leaning towards the middle position

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2   Variations between the groups were mainly between unconditional and conditional yes. The highest share of conditional 'yes' was given by the Muslim group. There were no significant differences in unconditional 'no' answers. See (Steen-Johnsen, Fladmoe, & Midtbøen, 2016) for detailed analysis.

might have felt that they were part of a minority, even though they were not.

In other words, based on the spiral of silence theory it is reasonable to expect that most people viewed the public opinion climate on this specific issue as leaning predominantly towards publishing religious cartoons unconditionally. In the public debate, expressing more conditional views could easily be viewed as anti-liberal and as 'attacks on the principle of free speech'. For example, when the leader of the social democratic Labour Party, Jonas Gahr Støre formulated his position as a defense of free speech, but also as more conditional on the right to exercise blasphemy, this was described as surprising and shocking, given that 12 people had been killed[3]. Our data, collected in August 2015, are thus well-suited to explore the willingness to speak or to remain silent on a value-laden and rather one-sided political issue. This provides a 'best case' for a study of the impact of spiral of silence mechanisms in debates about free speech.

Data and variables

We use data from the population survey on freedom of speech, carried out in August 2015 (see Online Appendix).

Dependent variables

The dependent variable is the willingness to participate in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons in the media. We followed the proposed method of Glynn et al. (1997) and asked respondents about their willingness to express opinions in different scenarios: 'Imagine a discussion in the near future in one of

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3   http://www.dn.no/meninger/kommentarer/2015/01/08/2200/Terroraksjonen-i-Paris/de-fornrmedes-forsvarer

the following arenas about the publishing of religious cartoons. How willing or unwilling would you be to participate in such a debate?' It should be noted that these questions followed the questions on whether media should publish (different types of) religious cartoons or not (as illustrated in Figure 3.1). As such, the respondents were primed on recent debates regarding this issue. A total of seven different arenas were listed (closest family and friends, at work, in social media, in comment sections of online newspapers, in debate sections in newspapers, on radio, and on TV), and answers were given on a four-point scale ('Very unwilling' to 'Very willing'). We re-coded 'Don't know' answers in a neutral position (3), meaning that the variables had five values[4]. The mean value for each arena is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

The figure suggests that, among closest family and friends and at work, a majority of the respondents are willing to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons. Only a minority of the respondents, however, are willing to take part in discussions in the five other public or semi-public arenas.

All seven items are significantly correlated, but the size of the correlation coefficients varies extensively (0.21-0.95). As suggested by Figure 3.2 the pattern is that the two items 'Among closest family and friends' and 'At work' correlate strongly with each other, but weakly with the six other items. A principal factor analysis confirms this pattern, by distinguishing between three factors (Table 3.1).

The factor analysis suggests that all six public and semi-public arenas could be collapsed into one single variable (Factor 1), but since we are interested in examining the willingness to speak in

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4   Omitting 'Don't know'answers on the dependent and the main independent variable from the analyses yield basically the same results (available upon request), but reduces the sample by 782 respondents.
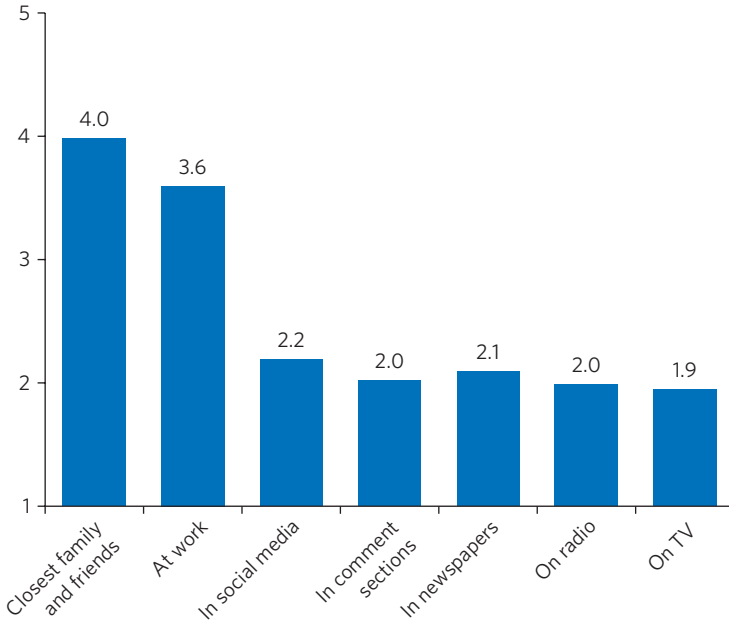
Figure 3.2. Willingness to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons. Mean score and 95 % confidence intervals.

Source: *Freedom of speech survey (2015).*

NOTE: Question wording: 'Imagine a discussion in the near future in one of the following arenas about the publishing of religious cartoons. How willing or unwilling would you be to participate in such a debate?' 1=unwilling, 3=Don't know, 5=Willing. Weighted according to age, gender and education.

a digitalized public sphere (Mutz & Silver, 2016), we keep the distinction between public and semi-public arenas. Even though most social media platforms and comment fields are by default public arenas, most people do not necessarily perceive them as public to the same extent as newspapers, radio and television. Hence, we constructed three dependent variables. *Willingness to discuss – public arenas* includes 'in debate sections in newspapers', 'on radio', and 'on TV', *Willingness to discuss – semi-public arenas* includes the two arenas 'in social media' and 'in the

comment sections of online newspapers'. Finally, *Willingness to discuss – private arenas* includes the arenas 'Among closest family and friends' and 'At work'. Descriptive statistics for these three variables are displayed in Table 3.2.

All three indexes were constructed by taking saved factor scores and standardizing on a 0-1 scale, where a higher value equals more willingness to discuss. As none of the three indexes are normally distributed, we ran additional analyses with normalized versions of the three (natural logarithm of public and

Table 3.1. Principal factor analysis. Varimax rotation (n=1984).

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Among family/ close friends	0.102	0.098	0.782
At work	0.176	0.145	0.781
In social media	0.481	0.635	0.209
In comment sections of online newspapers	0.545	0.695	0.118
In debate sections in newspapers	0.683	0.560	0.159
On radio	0.921	0.267	0.130
On TV	0.918	0.252	0.111
Eigenvalue (after rotation)	2.726	1.365	1.335
Proportion of variance accounted for (after rotation)	0.538	0.269	0.263

Source: Freedom of speech survey (2015).

Table 3.2 Constructed willingness to discuss variables. Descriptive statistics

	Obs	Mean	Std.dev.	Min	Max
Willingness to discuss – public arenas	1984	0.247	0.301	0	1
Willingness to discuss – semi-public arenas	1984	0.277	0.295	0	1
Willingness to discuss – private arenas	1984	0.717	0.268	0	1

Source: Freedom of speech survey (2015).

semi-public arenas and the exponentiation of private arenas). Compared to the 'raw' variables results did not change substantially when regressing normalized variables. For the ease of interpretation, we therefore present results with the original variables in main text and normalized variables in the online Appendix.

Independent variables

The main independent variable is perceptions of the opinion climate surrounding the publishing of religious cartoons in the media. We followed the strategy used in several studies (e.g. Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Perry & Gonzenbach, 2000) and assessed perceived opinion climate by means of a question distinguishing between opinion congruence in different contexts. More specifically, respondents were asked to estimate how many people they believed shared their opinion on the issue (1) among close family and friends, (2) people living in the municipality, and (3) among people living in Norway in general.[5] Answers were given on a five-point scale from 'Almost no one' to 'Almost everyone'. 'Don't know' answers were re-coded in the middle/neutral category ('about half') (see footnote 4).

Some former studies have summed up these different levels of opinion climates and created one single index (e.g. Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Moy et al., 2001; Perry & Gonzenbach, 2000). We are, however, interested in variations between the private and the public sphere, and therefore expand this approach by studying variations between the private and the public opinion climates. Thus based on these items we constructed a variable consisting

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5   The survey also included the item 'People living in your neighborhood', but this is
      left out of this analysis.

of four categories: (1) Most people agree, (2) Most people disagree/neutral, (3) Family/friends agree, larger public disagree/neutral, and (4) Family/friends disagree/neutral, larger public agree. 'Agree' is the sum of the values 4 and 5 on each scale, while 'disagree/neutral' is the sum of the values 1 thru 3. 'Larger public' consists of the two items 'People living in your municipality' and 'People living in Norway in general'. We have labelled these four categories of perceived opinion climates (1) 'Fully supported', (2), 'Unsupported', (3) 'Peer supported' and (4) 'Publicly supported'.

Table 3.3 summarizes the distribution of perceptions of the opinion climate. More than 40 percent of the respondents believe that most people in both the private and public opinion climates agree with them on the issue, while 32 percent believe most people disagree or that the opinion climate is divided half-and-half. 24 percent believe their opinions are shared among people in their private opinion climate, but not among people in the public opinion climate, while only 1 percent believe their opinions to be congruent with the public opinion climate but not with the private opinion climate.

Table 3.3. Perceptions of the opinion climate on the publication of religious cartoons. Typology.

	%
Fully supported	42.2
Unsupported	31.6
Peer supported	25.0
Publicly supported	1.3
n (unweighted)	1984

Source: Freedom of speech survey (2015).

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In the analysis we also include a set of control variables. It is reasonable to think that willingness to take part in discussions is related to awareness of the public debate on the publishing of religious cartoons, and also whether one has felt offended by religious cartoons. We included two items in the survey measuring these factors: 'How closely would you say you have followed the recent years' debate on the publishing of religious cartoons with religious and political content?' (followed very or somewhat closely coded as '1') and 'Have you yourself felt offended by religious cartoons published in the media?' (Yes=1).

We also include controls for the usual suspects: gender (female=1), age, education (higher education=1) and immigrant background. The latter variable is important to include in the analysis because the subsample of immigrants in the survey is not statistically representative of the total immigrant population in Norway. Descriptive statistics for the control variables are summarized in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4.** Control variables. Descriptive statistics.

	Obs	Mean	Std.dev.	Min	Max
Paid attention to the debate about religious cartoons	1984	0.57	0.49	0	1
Has felt offended by religious cartoons	1984	0.03	0.18	0	1
Women	1984	0.50	0.50	0	1
Age	1984	51.53	15.96	18	90
Higher education	1984	0.45	0.50	0	1
Immigrant background	1984	0.17	0.38	0	1

Source: Freedom of speech survey (2015).

Who plays a role when deciding whether to discuss the publishing of religious cartoons?

In order to tap into how the Norwegian opinion climate on religious cartoons was perceived in the autumn of 2015 we begin by mapping out the opinion climate on the publishing of religious cartoons, by perceptions of opinion congruency. Then we go on to the main analyses by exploring the bivariate relationship between willingness to take part in discussions and perceptions of the opinion climate. Finally, we estimate the net effect of perceptions of the opinion climate, controlled for other relevant factors.

Figure 3.3 displays the opinion climate on the publishing of religious cartoons that was presented earlier in the chapter, contingent on perceptions of the opinion climate. Based on what we found in Figure 3.1, we might expect that those in favor of unconditional publication of cartoons would be more likely to think that others agree with them. The figure confirms this, and thus suggests that opinion congruency is clearly related to position in the debate. The majority of respondents that gave an unconditional 'yes' response to the publication of cartoons believed that their opinion was congruent with both family/friends and the general public (Fully supported) or with the general public only (Publicly supported). Conversely, the majority of respondents that gave an unconditional 'no' response to the publication of cartoons believed their opinions to be *in*congruent with the general public. As shown in Figure 3.1, in the population the conditional 'yes' response was almost as widespread as the unconditional 'yes'. However, only 27 percent in this group feel fully supported, which indicates that the impression they get from public debate is that the unconditional position is the dominant one. Concomitantly it is interesting to see that this
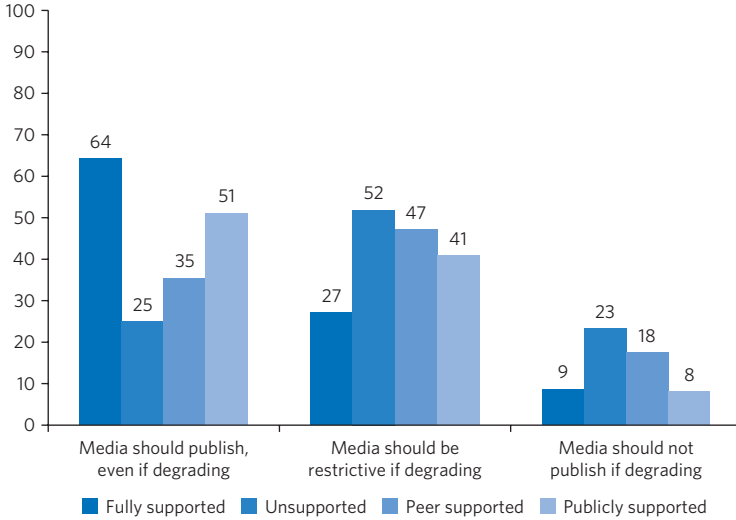
Figur 3.3. The opinion climate on the publishing of religious cartoons, August 2015, by perceptions of the opinion climate. Percent.

Source: *Freedom of speech survey (2015).*

NOTE: Question wording: 'Which of the following statements is most in accordance with your own opinion?' Don't know answers are excluded. In the surveys the samples were randomly divided into six groups, of which five groups received additional contextual information before the question: 'In the last few years there has been some discussion about the publishing of religious cartoons in the media. Given that a religious cartoon can be perceived as [1. offensive; 2. offensive among Christians; 3. offensive among Muslims; 4. offensive among Jews; 5. offensive among Christians, Muslims or Jews]...' Population data weighted according to age, gender and education.

group feels more peer supported than the unconditional group, which probably indicates that a conditional yes is more often expressed in everyday conversations. These patterns underscore the importance of distinguishing between *actual* and *perceived* opinion climates, of which the latter is central to the spiral of silence theory.

Figure 3.4 displays willingness (mean score) to take part in discussions in public, semi-public, and private arenas, by
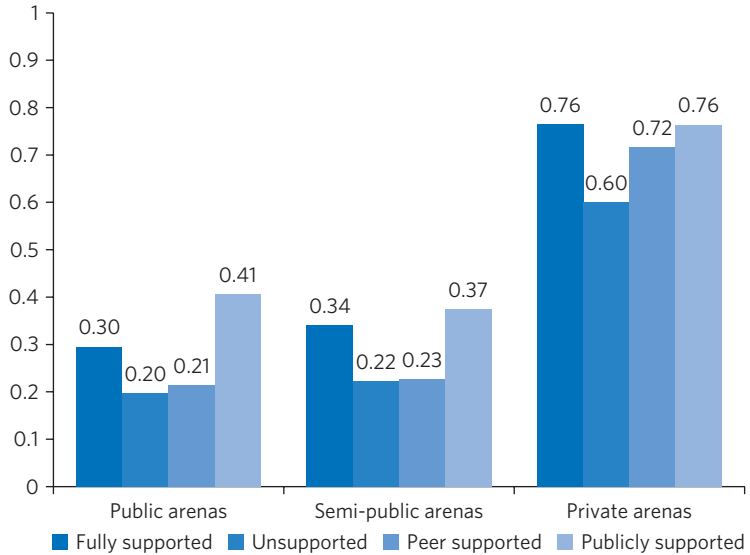
Figure 3.4 Willingness to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons, by perceptions of the opinion climate.

Source: *Freedom of speech survey (2015).*

NOTE: 0=unwilling, 1=Willing. Weighted according to age, gender and education.

perceptions of the opinion climate. The figure suggests that those who believe that their personal opinions are congruent with the opinion climate are more likely to be willing to take part in discussions, compared to people who believe that their opinions are incongruent with the opinion climate. In other words, there is a difference between the unsupported on the one hand, and the fully or publicly supported on the other. This already supports the original spirals of silence thesis, that feeling part of a majority increases the willingness to speak out (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

At the same time, the figure also shows that willingness to discuss in different arenas depends on how different opinion climates are perceived. In public and semi-public arenas,

willingness to discuss the publication of religious cartoons is on the same level, irrespective of whether respondents perceive their opinions to be incongruent with the general public or supported by their peers. In other words, when it comes to discussing religious cartoons on radio, in the newspapers or in social media, it doesn't matter much whether you think that your friends and family agree with you. What matters is whether you feel that you are in line with the dominant view of the public.

A different picture emerges when it comes to willingness to discuss in private arenas. The peer supported, who feel that their family and friends agree, while the public disagree are more willing to speak in the private sphere than those who believe that most people disagree or are neutral (unsupported). This suggests that when discussing the publication of religious cartoons with family, friends or colleagues people are less preoccupied with any incongruence with the public opinion climate. In private arenas what matters is if personal opinions are congruent with the perceived opinions of peers.

Conversely, although the number of respondents is limited, the figure also suggests that the opposite picture may be true. The publicly supported – people who believe their opinions are congruent with the public opinion climate but incongruent with the private opinion climate – are more willing to discuss in the public sphere compared to the two other groups of people who feel unsupported on the whole or who perceive that they are supported by family and friends only.

In sum, these findings underline the importance of taking context into consideration, and looking at the relationship between specific opinion climates and the arenas where a potential discussion might take place. While our findings support the notion that spiral of silence processes do take place, both

in the private and the public spheres, the analyses also show the occurrence of a peer effect. In conversations about religious cartoons in the private sphere, it is not public opinion that counts the most in determining whether to speak out, but rather the opinions in that same group of people. However, this peer effect does not stretch into the semi-public or public arenas, such as social media or the newspapers. In these contexts, public opinion is what matters. Finally, one fundamental, and not surprising insight that might be garnered from this analysis, is that most people are much more willing to discuss controversial issues in private than in semi-public or public arenas, notwithstanding the perceived congruence with the relevant opinion climate.

How unequivocal is the spiral of silence mechanism?

In what follows we examine whether other demographic or personality factors have an impact on the willingness to speak out in the case of the cartoon debates, and whether the relationship between perceptions of opinion climates and willingness to speak still holds when controlled for such factors. Table 3.5 summarizes results from a set of regressions of each of the three dependent variables. For each variable two models were estimated. Model (1) includes the main explanatory variable – perceptions of the opinion climate (most people disagree as reference), and socio-demographics. Model (2) introduces variables measuring attentiveness to the debate about the publishing of religious cartoons, and whether respondents have themselves felt offended by religious cartoons.

First of all, across all models the analyses confirm that those who believe their opinions to be congruent with both the private

Table 3.5. Willingness to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons, by perceptions of the opinion climate. OLS-regressions. Unstandardized coefficients.

	Public arenas				Semi-public arenas				Private arenas			
	(model 1)		(model 2)		(model 1)		(model 2)		(model 1)		(model 2)	
	b	se	b	se	b	Se	b	Se	B	se	b	se
Fully supported	0.062***	(0.015)	0.037*	(0.016)	0.078***	(0.015)	0.052***	(0.015)	0.129***	(0.014)	0.092***	(0.014)
Peer supported	0.016	(0.017)	-0.004	(0.017)	0.017	(0.017)	-0.002	(0.017)	0.111***	(0.016)	0.082***	(0.015)
Publicly supported	0.069	(0.059)	0.063	(0.058)	0.061	(0.058)	0.055	(0.057)	0.110*	(0.053)	0.101*	(0.050)
Unsupported (ref)												
Women	-0.134***	(0.013)	-0.125***	(0.013)	*-0.115***	(0.013)	-0.106***	(0.013)	-0.055***	(0.012)	-0.044***	(0.011)
Age	0.001***	(0.000)	0.001	(0.000)	0.001**	(0.000)	0.000	(0.000)	-0.001**	(0.000)	*-0.002***	(0.000)
Higher education	-0.023†	(0.013)	-0.035**	(0.013)	-0.022	(0.013)	-0.034**	(0.013)	0.056***	(0.012)	0.040***	(0.011)
Immigrant background	0.050**	(0.018)	0.043*	(0.017)	0.048**	(0.017)	0.042*	(0.017)	0.025	(0.016)	0.021	(0.015)

Table 3.5. (*Continued*) Willingness to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons, by perceptions of the opinion climate. OLS-regressions. Unstandardized coefficients.

	Public arenas				Semi-public arenas				Private arenas			
	(model 1)		(model 2)		(model 1)		(model 2)		(model 1)		(model 2)	
	b	se	b	se	b	Se	b	Se	B	se	b	se
Paid attention to the debate about publishing			0.111***	(0.014)			0.110***	(0.014)			0.153***	(0.012)
Has felt offended by religious cartoons			0.110**	(0.035)			0.104**	(0.035)			0.030	(0.031)
Constant	0.211	(0.027)	0.204	(0.026)	0.238	(0.027)	0.232	(0.026)	0.691	(0.024)	0.687	(0.023)
r2	0.075		0.110		0.067		0.102		0.076		0.147	
n	1984		1984		1984		1984		1984		1984	

Source: Freedom of speech survey (2015).

NOTE: Dependent variable is willingness to discuss (0=unwilling – 1=willing).

and the public opinion climates (Fully supported) are more willing to take part in discussions about the publishing of religious cartoons. Even though the size of the coefficients is reduced by introducing other relevant variables, they remain significant. The difference between the unsupported and the fully supported is most sizable when it comes to willingness to discuss in private arenas. In model 2 in the regression of private arenas the predicted difference between these groups, adjusted for several background characteristics, is 9.2 percent (0.092 on a 0-1 scale). In semi-public arenas the corresponding predicted difference is 5.2 percent, while it is 3.7 percent in public arenas. As such, these findings suggest that spiral of silence effects are stronger in private than in public arenas.

In line with what was suggested in Figure 3.4, those in the second group – Peer supported - are not more willing to discuss religious cartoons in public arenas compared to those who believe their opinions are incongruent with everyone (Unsupported). However, the peer supported respondents are about as equally willing as the first group – Fully supported – to discuss religious cartoons in private arenas. Controlling for a range of other variables, the coefficient remains highly significant, underlining the importance of distinguishing between different arenas.

Finally, we see a tendency that the third group – Publicly supported –are somewhat more willing to discuss in the public sphere. The coefficients for this group are as sizeable as the Fully supported, however they fail to meet statistical significance when controlling for other factors. This is probably due to the low number of respondents in this group (n=25).

Considering other variables, across all models people who have paid attention to the debate about religious cartoons are more willing to take part in discussions compared to those who have not paid attention. This variable is probably a proxy, both

for interest in this particular debate and for political interest in general.

Those who have themselves felt offended by religious cartoons are more willing to take part in public discussions, but not in private discussions. Women are less likely to discuss in all arenas, older people and lower educated are less willing to discuss in the private sphere, while lower educated are *more* willing to discuss in the public sphere. While the gendered dimension of willingness to speak in public has been demonstrated in previous studies (Steen-Johnsen & Enjolras, 2016), the differentiated effect of education related to the public and semi-public vs the private spheres is perhaps more surprising. This particular finding does however correspond with a study on participation in social and political debate in Norway. Enjolras et al. (2013) found that the highly educated were overrepresented in offline debates, but not in online (semi-public) debates. As they put it, the contribution of internet debate was to alleviate education based differences in participation in the public sphere (2013 p. 76). Our findings with regard to the semi-public vs private arenas may point to a similar mechanism.

Discussion and conclusion

Since the 'Mohammad Cartoon Crisis' of 2006, Norway and other countries have witnessed intense and value-laden debates on the boundaries between free speech, protection of religious minorities and blasphemy. These debates have contributed to constructing and reinforcing moral boundaries between majority and minority groups, but also between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' opinions in debates on free speech. By applying the theory of spirals of silence we have explored public opinion in the case of publishing religious cartoons, and showed that

people's willingness to discuss this particular issue in different arenas depends on how they perceive different opinion climates. Those who perceived their opinions to be congruent with the general public opinion climate, as well as with the opinions of their family and friends, were more willing to speak out than other groups.

Moreover, we identified a more specific mechanism connected to different reference groups: Those who felt that family members and friends tended to agree with them had a stronger willingness to speak out in private arenas. In other words, we do find a peer effect in our analyses in the sense that feeling the support of peers has an influence on the willingness to speak out when among them. However, being peer supported does not enhance willingness to speak in social media, to debate in comment fields or to write an op-ed piece in a newspaper, i.e. it does not impact debate activity in what we have termed semi-public and public arenas. Rather, speaking privately and publicly stand out as two separate types of activities, that require different types of considerations. To gain a better understanding of these mechanisms, more studies are required.

As pointed out, the spiral of silence mechanism has been difficult to find and replicate in studies following Noelle-Neumanns's original contribution. This study has also showed that the strength of the spiral of silence mechanism relating to the willingness to discuss in public arenas is limited, with the predicted difference between the groups of unsupported and fully supported being 3.7 percent. Thus this particular part of our study supports previous findings of a significant, but weak spiral of silence effect (Glynn et al., 1997). One obvious explanation for this is that many people would not be willing to discuss any value-laden issue in public, irrespective of how they view the opinion climate. There are other barriers to participation in

public debates beyond perceptions of opinion climates. The threshold for participating in discussions in private arenas is lower, and we did indeed see a much stronger spiral of silence effect here (9.2 percent predicted difference).

Theoretically, the results in this chapter therefore suggest that spiral of silence mechanisms are relevant, but that such mechanisms may play a greater role in close social relations on the micro-level than in public debates. This is also underlined by the finding that spiral of silence mechanisms were somewhat stronger in semi-public than in public arenas. Mutz and Silver (2016) have suggested that digital public spheres may feel more like private than public arenas, given that activities here are linked to a network of friends and followers. This would lead to the assumption that the opinions of peers would be of stronger importance here than in the public arena consisting of newspapers and other edited media. Although the differences are small, we do see indications of this in our analysis. This finding speaks to the question of whether social media may contribute to creating meaningful opposition to elite opinions and to what is published in the mass media. The evidence presented here does not suggest that semi-public arenas are particularly apt in breaking spirals of silence.

The observed spiral of silence mechanisms illustrate the stickiness of symbolic boundaries constitutive of the moral order (see Enjolras, chapter 10). People are conscious of what speech is 'acceptable' in different arenas - and what is not, and they adjust to what they perceive as the dominant opinion. It is a reasonable assumption that the spiral of silence mechanism may to some extent have minimized the amount of utterances in favor of the minority position in the cartoon debate that took place during the spring of 2015. As we saw in the empirical section, those believing their opinions to be incongruent with the

opinion climate were more likely to take a restrictive standpoint in the discussion on the publishing of religious cartoons. Hence, although we do not have time-series data, one might infer that after years of debating religious cartoons, intensified by the *Charlie Hebdo* events, a spiral of silence mechanism occurred in Norway where the restrictive position was increasingly less heard. Thus, one implication of the findings is that symbolic boundaries work to reinforce majority positions, both in private and public arenas, through processes of self-censorship.

Cartoon debates are interesting in the sense that they crystallize some of the core debates on free speech in Western societies, and when they have erupted in the past two decades have served to confront some fundamental positions on this question (see Colbjørnsen, chapter 6). If heated cartoon debates lead to the occurrence of spiral of silence mechanisms, this might serve to draw boundaries for free speech that are not in concordance with the views of a small or large minority. As a result, these minority positions may not be sufficiently debated in the public sphere.

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