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Negotiating tolerance:

Freedom of expression, secularism, and contemporary political communication

Safeguarding freedom of expression entails the protection of democratic values and values of national identity. When controversial speech acts involving religious and ethnic groups challenge these notions, the particular understanding of secularism becomes a crucial factor to consider. In France, *laïcité* decrees the separation of church and state. In Denmark, secularism is practiced in the form of a democratic philosophy of egalitarianism. This paper draws on two cases that present an opportunity to consider how these issues intersect with processes of political communication: the cases of Danish poet Yahya Hassan and French comedian Dieudonné. They are both ethnic minorities who are performance artists, and they have both performed speech acts which have aggravated the place of religious and ethnic people in their respective countries, consequently igniting debates on the parameters of free expression. If we consider freedom of expression and secularity to be cornerstones of (Western) democracy, then how governments address such controversies directly influences the political climate of a given country. This then raises some interesting questions. What do media debates on such expressive genres reveal about the limits of tolerance in each country? Does this affect how freedom of expression is framed in each country's contexts? Based on a qualitative content analysis of online newspaper articles and interviews from France and Denmark, this paper focuses on the deliberative aspects of freedom of expression by moving such controversies from a normative-philosophical aspect to a realist-constructivist aspect by exploring how a society re-constructs the meaning and practice of free expression.