



Islamophobia on Social Media: A Qualitative Analysis of the Facebook's Walls of Hate

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Abstract

Facebook has become one of the fastest growing social media platforms. At the end of 2013, Facebook had 1,23bn monthly active users and 757 million daily users who log onto Facebook. Within this online space, there are also a growing number of online virtual communities, and hate groups who are using this space to share a violent, Islamophobic and racist narrative which attempts to create a hostile virtual environment. It is important to analyse these 'new' communities by monitoring the activities they conduct, because the material they post, potentially can have a damaging impact on community cohesion within society. Moreover, as a result of recent figures that show an increase in online anti-Muslim abuse, there is a pertinent need to address the issue about Islamophobia on social media. This research examined 100 different Facebook pages, posts and comments and found 494 instances of online hate speech directed against Muslim communities. The findings revealed some interesting parallels and common characteristics shared within these groups, which helped the author to create a typology of five characteristics of anti-Muslim hate espoused on Facebook. Overall, this study found Muslims being demonised and vilified online which had manifested through negative attitudes, discrimination, stereotypes, physical threats and online harassment which all had the potential to incite violence or prejudicial action because it disparages and intimidates a protected individual or group.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Online, Social Media, Facebook, Internet, Extremism.

Introduction

The growth and expansion of the Internet has created many positive opportunities for people to communicate and engage in a manner. However, it has also acted as a double-edged sword (Back et al., 2010) by creating an online vacuum and platform for people using hate as a means to appeal to a wider audience often under the cloak of anonymity that allows them to supersede and bypass editorial control and regulation (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Blair, 2003; Citron, 2014; Hodges & Perry, 1999). The Internet therefore provides new opportunities for cyber-bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski, et al., 2012) and cyber hate (Jaishankar, 2008).

Online hate speech, bullying, incitement and threats of violence have in recent times become a key issue for social media networks, the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and policy-makers. In England and Wales, it is an offence to stir up and incite

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hatred through illegal hate content on the grounds of: race, religion and sexual orientation. There are also other offences such as using the content of a website which can also be illegal when it threatens or harasses a person or a group of people. If such material is posted because of hostility based on race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender then it can be viewed as a hate crime. This material can also be disseminated in either words, pictures, video, music and could include; messages calling for racial or religious violence, direct webpages with pictures, videos or descriptions that glorify violence against anyone due to their race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or because they are transgender and chat forums, where people ask other people to commit hate crimes.

Messages can be spread at great speed, people can remain anonymous and the nature of cyber space remains unregulated. In particular for hate groups, wanting to recruit people for their cause and also be given a platform to spread unsolicited material which can often go unnoticed (Hewson et al., 2003). This allows them to capture audiences and use the Internet as a propaganda tool for those purposes. Indeed, these communicative messages can also cause a lot of discontent and impact upon measures of community cohesion (McNamee et al., 2010).

Hate speech in this context is any form of language used to depict someone in a negative fashion in regards to their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or physical and mental disability with promotes hate and incites violence (Yar, 2013; Feldman et al., 2013). This also links into the convergence of emotional distress caused by hate online, the nature of intimidation and harassment online, and the prejudice that seeks to defame groups through speech intending to injure and intimidate.

Hate on the Internet can have direct and indirect experiences for victims and communities being targeted (Awan & Zempi, 2015a; Awan, 2016; Chakraborti & Garland, 2009). In one sense, it can be used to harass and intimidate victims and on the other hand, it can also be used for opportunistic crimes (Christopherson, 2007). The Internet, therefore is a powerful tool by which people can be influenced to act in a certain way and manner. What also is left in terms of direct impact is important, because it impacts upon local communities and the understanding of how this could constitute acts of violence offline (Douglas et al., 2005). Awan and Zempi (2015) found that online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime can impact upon people's lives to the extent that they feel a sense of anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation. This is particularly strong when considering hate speech online that aims to threaten and incite violence.

As noted above, a lot of the material online can also cause a lot of fear and it is imperative that the police and other agencies within the security sector work together to tackle hate crime on the Internet (Awan & Zempi, 2015b). The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) (2013) note how online hate material can cause damage to community cohesion. They state that: "We understand that hate material can damage community cohesion and create fear, so the police want to work alongside communities and the Internet industry to reduce the harm caused by hate on the Internet" (cited online, 2013).

Hate crime on the Internet, can also be used as a means to create a virtual storage and communicative messages that go beyond the physical to the virtual dimension (Iganski, 2012). For Perry (2003, p.19) this means the spectrum of hate crime does cross the line into the virtual realm and as such Coliandris (2012, p. 82) argues hate crimes "are capable

of sending a message to particular communities.” The Internet, therefore has become a safe haven for many of these groups and individuals, who are using it effectively to target, marginalize and demonise a group or community. A lot of this has been dedicated to far-right groups and lone wolf actors who have engaged in what has been defined as cyber squatting and Google bombing. This is where anti-hate webpage’s, Google searches and wider online sources are used to create content that creates a measure of intolerance and targets specific individuals or groups. This has been used by far-right groups and those such as the Anti-Defamation League, the English Defence League and now Britain First, who have used the Internet to create a public presence and been successful in using social media sites such as Facebook, as a platform to disseminate further online hate and intolerance.

Keats et al., (2011) for example found social media sites such as Facebook were being used to facilitate this type and form of online hate speech and Hall (2013, p. 204) argues that: “The increase in the use of the Internet as a vehicle for hate is therefore seemingly undeniable, be it organized hate groups or those expressing prejudice and hostility in a more casual manner.” This type of online hate speech can intensify following key trigger events, such as the Paris attacks in 2015 and the Brussels terrorist attacks in 2016 (Awan & Zempi, 2015b; Awan, 2014). Williams and Burnap (2016) argue that such incidents also lead to reprisal incidents which target the group which have the same characteristics or background as the offenders.

Facebook started in the United States and has since evolved to become one of the largest social media networks in the world.² The number of people logging into Facebook once a month rose to 1.35bn and the company has revealed profits have doubled to more than \$1 billion. The CEO and founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, has stated that: “We continue to focus on serving our community well and continue to invest in connecting the world over the next decade” (Rushton, 2014). Despite these impressive financial statistics, in May 2013, Facebook was forced to respond to a letter by a number of prominent female celebrities who had been threatened with violence on Facebook. The letter had demanded that Facebook take action over gender-based stereotypes and threats of violence against women.³ The letter made the case that there had to be a zero-tolerance approach towards jokes about rape on Facebook (Lee, 2013). Furthermore, as the current refugee crisis has emerged, many migrant communities have chosen Europe as a safe haven and a place of safety. At the same time, Germany who had welcomed in thousands of refugees began to see a pattern of online racist abuse and hate speech emerge on Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg who met with the German chancellor Angela Merkel stated: “Hate speech has no place on Facebook and in our community...until recently in Germany I don’t think we were doing a good enough job, and I think we will continue needing to do a better and better job” (Associated Press, 2016).

Facebook operates within its community standards which have been set to define what it considers to be hate speech, which is defined as content that ‘attacks people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or disease is not allowed. We do, however, allow clear attempts at humour or satire that might otherwise be considered a possible threat or attack. This

² Facebook is a social networking site, where people can post updates, news feeds and comments.

³ Full Letter published in the Huffington Post (2013). Retrieved from:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/soraya-chemaly/an-open-letter-to-faceboo_1_b_3307394.html.

includes content that many people may find to be in bad taste (jokes, stand-up comedy, popular song lyrics, etc.)’ (Facebook, 2015).

The Online Hate Prevention Institute (2013) report on anti-Muslim hatred on Facebook revealed that despite reporting a range of images considered to incite religious-based hate speech that Facebook chose not to remove the images because the images had not breached their community standards. They state that: “The fact that this page was, and continues to, inciting hate against people on the basis of their religion, specifically Islam, is grounds for complete closure. Reports of the page, however, were not successful” (p.11). The report also makes the recommendation that Facebook should allow users the opportunity to lodge a single complaint via multiple items of content and for those items to be reviewed independently.

In the UK, pressure on social media companies has become intense with the Attorney General demanding Twitter and Facebook do much more to help remove online hate speech (Morris, 2015). In particular, the issue of religious hate crime on social media sites has led to a number of questions. For example, how far does online hate speech, breach the right to freedom of speech? And how effective are social media sites in regulating and controlling online hate speech? Tell MAMA, a third party reporting agency that measures anti-Muslim attacks found 548 verified incidents (of 729) which were reported to them concerning anti-Muslim hate crime. The majority of incidents took place online (402 out of 548) (Littler & Feldman, 2015). This study examined how one of these social media network sites, namely, Facebook was being used to portray Muslim communities. In particular, Facebook, like other social media networks such as Twitter (Awan, 2014), have been criticised, for their lack of positive action towards tackling online hate speech and this study makes an important contribution in helping us better understand the role of tackling hate crime on social media networks.

There is a pertinent need to expand the earlier researches on hate crime in Facebook and the present study aims to examine how Muslims are being viewed via one main social media platform, namely Facebook. This study will be examining how, Facebook is being used to promote online prejudice and hate speech that targets Muslim communities. These types of online hate speech can be threatening and thus act as an echo chamber, where extreme views are shared and can equally have an impact on victims, who are being targeted (Chakraborti & Garland, 2009). This qualitative study will examine how online hate is determined and also look at the different forms of communications being made online with regards anti-Muslim hate crime on Facebook. This study will show that there is a need for an improved dialogue between the different stakeholders such as the CPS, social media networks and the police in order to ensure that anti-Muslim hate incidents are taken seriously online.

The reason for choosing Facebook, was because it remains an important social media platform that allows people to stay up to date with the news of people in a way that makes them accessible and stay connected through the exchange of quick and frequent messages. By focussing on Facebook, the author hope this study will give us a better understanding of how social media sites such as Facebook have been used in some cases to generate ideas of online Islamophobic hate. Clearly, there are drawbacks to using and analysing data via social media sites such as Facebook. For instance, there were issues encountered in relation to anonymity and public and private posts. However, the author hope this study has

addressed some of those concerns with the use of electronic software, key terms used and the overall sample size.

Methodology

This study examined 100 different Facebook pages, comments and posts and found 494 instances of specific anti-Muslim hate speech. In particular, this study found four key emerging themes, where anti-Muslim hate was intensified, namely after the Rotherham abuse scandal in the UK, the beheading of journalists, James Foley, Steven Sotloff and the humanitarian worker David Haines and Alan Henning by the group (ISIS), the Trojan Horse scandal and the Woolwich attacks in 2013. With this in mind, the author created a typology of five offender behaviour characteristics, which helps define and categorise those types of behaviour. These include; the *Opportunistic*, the *Deceptive*, *Fantasists*, *Producers* and *Distributors* (see Table 2).

These offender behaviours are situated and divided into five walls of Islamophobic hate used on Facebook by such individuals and groups. As noted above, they include depicting Muslims as; 1) terrorists; 2) rapists; 3) Muslim women wearing the Niqab/Hijab are a security threat; 4) Muslims are at war with 'us' and 5) Muslims should be deported. This study also found links to a number of the individuals with far-right groups such as Britain First and the English Defence League.

The research questions in this study included:

- What, if any content is being used via Facebook to demonize and stereotype Muslims?
- What physical and non-physical threats are being used against Muslims via Facebook?
- How is Facebook being used to describe Muslims as a threat and national (British) security issue?

This paper used a mixed methodology as part of a wider content analysis utilizing both qualitative data gathering techniques embedded within grounded theory. The Facebook pages were analysed between January 2013 and November 2014 and utilised the electronic database NVivo. By using the software system NVivo, the author was able to collate 'high frequency' words and patterns that are directly related to anti-Muslim hate. Comments and all posts were then compiled into a large word cloud. The word cloud was analysed using a word frequency count which was created to explore core issues and recurring themes around how Muslims were being viewed on Facebook (see Table 4, for a full list of key terms and frequencies that appeared).

In order to carry out a Facebook analysis, the author searched for outputs using the terms Muslims, *AND* Woolwich, Muslims *AND* Islam, Muslims *AND* Extremism and Muslims *AND* Terrorism. These searches generated over 550 results. These searches were then used to examine 100 Facebook pages, comments and posts that included the following inclusive criteria – articles regarding Woolwich, Rotherham, Trojan Horse and ISIS. Following this, the author examined the Facebook pages, posts and comments to try and find out how Muslims were being viewed and targeted by online hate speech. Some of the most common reappearing words used to describe Muslims in a derogatory way were then examined. As noted above, this study also made the use of electronic software NVivo, because it allowed the author to collate and identify comments, posts and patterns that emerged. All the Facebook posts and comments were imported into NVivo and the

discussion around Muslim communities in a negative fashion. For example, a large majority of words were referenced with accompanying text such as ‘England’, ‘Islamic’, ‘Mosques’, ‘Halal’, ‘ISIS’ and ‘Trojan’. Below is a small sample of examples found on Facebook:

How Muslim scum celebrate Eid.

WISH THESE PAKIstanis WOULD FUCK OFF FOR GOOD.

True, vermin, bunch of Muzrats.

Fucking Paki’s. Kill them All.

Kill them all they leave there own country to infiltrate and then breed like rabbits and live of the tax payers money they demand laws for there religion want there mosques etc if they want Muslim faith and buildings fuck off home they seek asylum in our countries after they have more than likely commuted terrorist acts against our troops....round them all up stuck them on a island them kill each other...I say fuck em.

Table 1: Top 20 Collocation network of key words across word cloud

Words	Frequency
Muslim	20
Islamic	33
Muzrats	18
Paki	25
Paedo	22
Gang	7
Rapists	24
Asian	27
ISIS	21
England	36
Dirty	44
Mosque	35
Scum	28
Bomb	27
Extremists	33
Halal	28
Trojan	17
Terrorists	22
Killing	12
Filthy	19

Table 2: Offender Behaviour Typology

Type	Characteristics	Example Cases	No of Cases
<i>The Opportunistic</i>	Someone using Facebook to create a posts and comments of hate directed against Muslim communities after a particular incident. In particular, these individuals are using Facebook to post offline threats and promote violence following incidents such as Rotherham, ISIS and Trojan Horse.	Britain First Page English Defence League The English Brotherhood	43
<i>The Deceptive</i>	Someone creating fear through the use of posts which are specifically related to false events in order to intensify the Islamophobic hate comments online. For example, a number of people were attempting to capitalise on false stories with links to incidents such as Peppa Pig and Halal meat.	The English Brotherhood The English Defence League	32
<i>Fantasists</i>	Someone using Facebook webpages to fantasise over Muslim deaths and consequences with respect to Muslim events. In particular, these individuals have blurred the lines between reality and fiction and are making direct threats against Muslim communities.	Britain First Page English Brotherhood	36
<i>Producers</i>	People who are using and promoting racist images and videos which are used as a means to create a climate of fear, anti-Muslim hate and hostility. These individuals are closely linked to the distributors.	Britain First Page English Defence League	47
<i>Distributors</i>	People who are using social media and Facebook in order to distribute messages of online hate through posts, likes, images, videos and comments on Facebook.	Britain First Page English Defence League	42

The non-profit organisation, Faith Matters have also conducted research, post the Rotherham abuse scandal, analysing Facebook conversations from Britain First posts on Tuesday 26th August 2014 using the Facebook Graph API. The comments they analysed were from posts on the 26th August and compiled into a large corpus. Similarly, to this

study, they also found some common reappearing words which included; Scum (207); Asian (97); Deport (48); Paki (58); Gangs (27) and Paedo/Pedo (25). Indeed, a number of the comments and posts revealed in both these studies show people with direct links to organisations such as Britain First, the English Brotherhood and the English Defence League. Indeed, the Faith Matters Report (2014, p. 11) states that: “This environment (around the Rotherham incident) activates and rationalises language that positions Muslims as irretrievably not-British, making them into an enemy. Derogatory language comes in place to paint all Muslims as criminals and action words turn this denigration into concrete demands for political action.”

Within this climate, this study has been able to assess and propose five types of offender characteristics who have been engaged with Facebook as a means to target Muslim communities with online hate, either through specific pages or comments and posts. These five types are the; *Opportunistic*, the *Deceptive*, *Fantasists*, *Producers* and *Distributors*. This typology is intended as a starting point for a framework around Islamophobia on Facebook (see Table 2). The majority of people involved in these acts were males (80%) and females (20%) (see Table 3). Whilst, a number of the individuals were primarily based in the UK (43%), there were also a number of online users who were identified as being from the United States (37%) and Australia (20%) (see Table 4). In particular, for the latter, there were a huge number of pages such as the ‘Ban Islam in Australia’ and ‘Ban Islam in America’ pages that had a large increase in anti-Muslim hate speech.

In 2013, the Online Hate Centre, published a report entitled: ‘Islamophobia on the Internet’, which analysed 50 Facebook pages and found 349 instances of online hate speech. They had identified 191 different examples of hate speech, with the most common themes appearing in seven distinct categories. They included Muslims being seen as; 1) a security threat; 2) a cultural threat; 3) as an economic threat; 4) dehumanising or demonizing Muslims; 5) threats of violence, genocide and direct hate targeting Muslims; 6) hate targeting refugees/asylum seekers, and 7) other forms of hate. In this study, the five distinct categories discussed above also related to the type of engagement these groups of people were involved in on Facebook. As noted previously, they included; 1) Muslims being viewed as terrorists; 2) Muslims being viewed as rapists; 3) Muslim women viewed as a security threat because of their clothing; 4) a ‘war’ between Muslims and finally Muslims should be deported (see Table 5) for a full breakdown.

Table 3: Gender of Perpetrator

Male	80%
Female	20%

Table 4: Country of residence

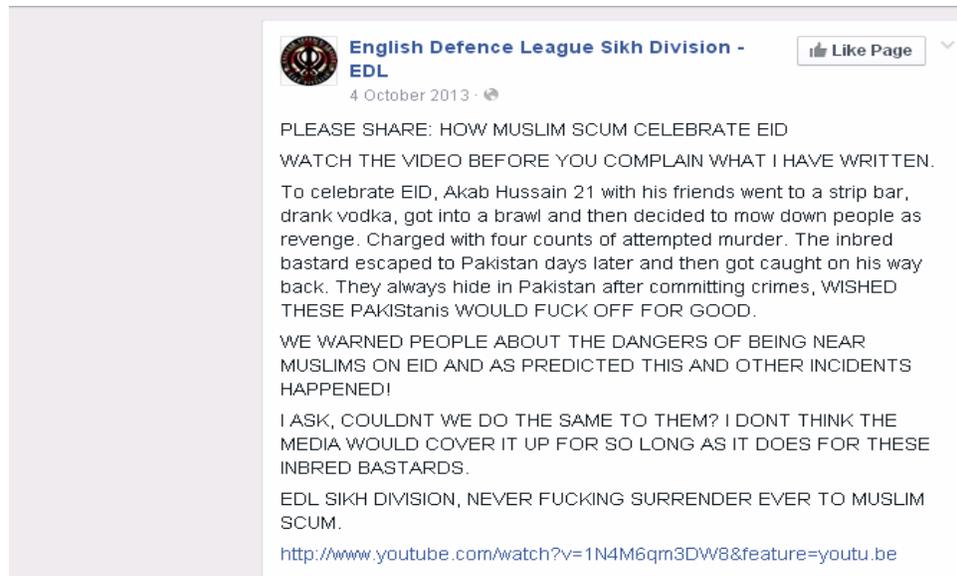
United Kingdom	43%
United States	37%
Australia	20%

Table 5: The Five Walls of Islamophobic Hate

Facebook Walls of Hate	Types of Engagement	No of cases
<i>Muslims are Terrorists</i>	Use of visual and written communications depicting Muslims as aggressive terrorists. The key being that there is no distinction made between Muslims and non-violent Muslims, as all are depicted as terrorists.	58
<i>Muslims as Rapists</i>	Use of material following incidents such as the Rotherham abuse scandal to depict Muslims as sexual groomers and serial rapists.	45
<i>Muslim women are a security threat</i>	The use of visual and written material to depict Muslim’s as a security threat. In particular, Muslim women wearing the veil are used as an example of a security threat.	76
<i>A war between Muslims</i>	Extremely dangerous and emotive piece, whereby Muslims are viewed in the lens of security and war. This is particularly relevant for the far-right who are using English history and patriotism as a means to stoke up anti-Islamic hate with the use of a war analogy.	53
<i>Muslims should be deported</i>	The use of immigration and particular campaigns such as banning Halal food as a means to create online hate and fear. This also involves the use of casual racism which blurs the line between anti-Muslim comments and those which specifically target Muslims because of their race, gender, religion and beliefs. This is used to imply that Muslim’s are taking over the country and should be deported before Shariah Law is adopted.	62

A number of examples of the walls of Islamophobic hate (see Table 5), are used here via the Britain First, English Brotherhood and English Defence League Facebook webpages which aimed to create an atmosphere of fear and anti-Muslim hate. For example, following an incident involving someone committing an offence for drink and driving, the English Defence League Sikh Division on the 4 October 2013 posted a message entitled: 'HOW MUSLIM SCUM CELEBRATE EID' (see figure 2).

Figure 2: English Defence League Sikh Division



This specific page had 93 likes, 50 shares and 39 comments. Some of those comments included:

They all need the lethal injection dirty vile bastards.

its not just paki muslims, all muslims are scum...bengali muslims, Iraqi muslims, afghani muslims, indian muslims, english muslims etc.

In a previous post, the same webpage directs readers to a message regarding Halal food. Interestingly, the association here is made with Islamic Jihad and the comments that accompany this also help create lazy assumptions that directly conflate and blur the lines between Muslims, Halal food and acts of terrorism. This is done through the use of an image of Halal food. This particular image had 186 likes and 163 shares (see figure 3). Interestingly, whilst some of these images and comments should have been removed for inciting hate, Facebook has been criticised for their lack of action in such cases. For example, the Online Hate Prevention Institute (2013) which examined Islamophobia via Facebook, actually reported a number of pages for online hate, however despite this, Facebook administrators took little or no action.

Figure 3: English Defence League Posts on Halal Food



Moreover, the ‘Get poppy burning Muslim scum out of the UK’ page was created as a direct result of the now banned group Islam4UK actions in burning poppy’s in relation to Britain soldiers involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In May 2013, it began sending posts out following the Woolwich attacks in order to gather support and create further anti-Muslim rhetoric. The page has 672 likes (at the time of writing) but seems to be operating on the basis of reactionary events such as Woolwich and others. Clearly, this page and others similar to this, act as virtual repositories of news feeds that marginalise and demonise Muslims communities.

Figure 4: Get poppy burning Muslim scum out of the UK



Similarly, the ‘ban Islam in Australia’ page has been much more successful at gathering widespread support for the anti-Muslim hate elements they have been posting (see figure

5). At the time of writing, they have 3,246 likes, and on the main webpage they describe Islam as being evil and that they are ‘getting rid of this murderous cult.’ It is also one of the most active and hostile pages using religious vilification against Muslims as a means towards promoting online hate speech and prejudice. This page is particularly significant, because as noted above, it has a widespread of followers. The images used clearly are intended to stir up racial and religious discord by inflaming tensions with the online hate rhetoric that it espouses. In a number of posts, the page uses images and videos to portray Muslims as violent extremists who are a threat to society because they are ‘Muslim’. The attribution of extremism and terrorism are also used as a means to create racial and religious tensions with particular reference made also to mosques being built and the influx of immigrants as a means to create fear.

Figure 5: Ban Islam in Australia webpage



Below is an image (see figure 6) used via the ‘Ban Islam in Australia page’ which received considerable comments and posts regarding Muslims.

Figure 6: Image used via ‘Ban Islam in Australia’ webpage



This image had 159 likes, but it is the accompanying text that continue to show religious hate messages that are of concern. The images and words also were used and ‘liked’ by a number of individuals who form part of the wider typology of Islamophobia discussed above. Some of those comments below include:

Oh sorry Islam is like ebola virus.

they are the worst of all human race full stop.

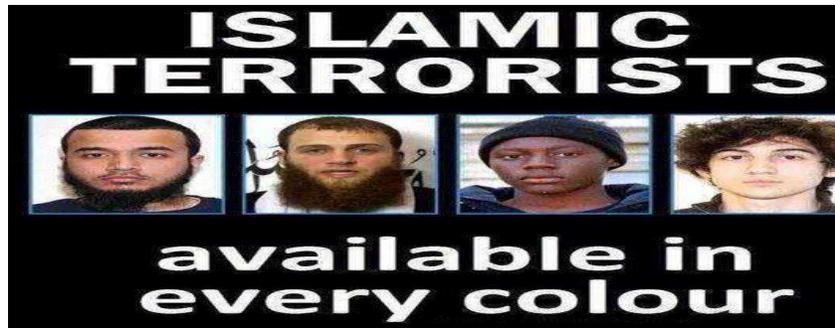
Islam is cancer.

Fuckn scum fuck every single one of you Muslim dogs.

Allen (2014) has also found similar strong links of Facebook users and growing public opposition about mosques. In Allen’s study, he investigated a pilot study which sought to investigate opposition to a proposed Dudley “super mosque.” By focusing on the Facebook group ‘Stop Dudley Super Mosque’ and ‘Islamic Village’, Allen found that members were engaged actively in online discourse which was opposed to the mosque. Some of the themes that emerged from this, included, issues regarding social identity, otherness and the Islamification of Britain. Another problem that emerged within the discourse of Islamophobia was the issue of Muslims being a threat to national security. This type of threat was intensified following high profile incidents such as Trojan Horse and ISIS actions to try and show that Muslims were attempting to adopt Shariah Law across Britain. This was particularly true for groups such as the English Brotherhood and Britain First who attempted to show that Britain adopting Halal meat was just the ‘tip of the iceberg.’ This type of anti-Muslim hate, was used under the banner of English patriotism (see figure 7) and was being used to demonise and dehumanise Muslim communities. This type of hate clearly was being used with respect to religious persecution of a group and the posts, comments and images all had a provocative and racial barrier attached towards them.

Figure 7: British Patriotism via the English Brotherhood





What's the difference between an extremist muslim
& a moderate muslim?

A quick change of clothes



A number of these pages, also called for ‘wiping out Muslims’ and considering Muslim as intolerant, evil and inherently backward. Some of the examples they have used include depicting and showing Muslims as murderers, rapists, torturers and sexual predators⁴. Within this context, Muslim women were also deemed to be part of the ‘Islamic problem’. This was true, when discussing the face veil and the comments used to describe Muslim women as a national security threat. The hate images and posts in particular contained a number of loaded generalisations with respect to Muslim women and Muslim communities. Below is a selection of images accompanied by text and posts that showed an intensification of anti-Muslim tone. Clearly, some of the material posed on these pages was inciting hate against people on the basis of their religion, specifically Islam (see figure 8). As a result, whilst it may look as though only Muslim women are considered a threat, it does in fact show that it stereotypes and legitimises all Muslims in the same fashion, and therefore considers them as not a race and a group that can be expelled, deported or killed⁵ by using hostile imagery and depicting them in an innately negative fashion.

Figure 8: Muslim women are a security threat



⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/BanIslamInCanada?fref=ts>;
<https://www.facebook.com/banislamfrommyanmar?fref=ts>;
https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ban-Islam/460376464099422?sk=photos_stream

⁵ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/131642910223888/>;
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/All-Muslims-Are-Not-Terrorist-But-Most-Terrorists-Are-Muslim/117671504932480?fref=ts>; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/159328874220049/>;
<https://www.facebook.com/IslamPiss>; <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Piss-Islam-Pisslam/469019746496271>; <https://www.facebook.com/IslamFraud>;
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/I-Hate-Islam/307956872572344>;
<https://www.facebook.com/ifhix>;
<https://www.facebook.com/search/results/?init=quick&q=hate%20islam&tas=0.7220548475161195>

The discussed pages, posts, images and comments on Facebook reveal that Islamophobia has been perpetuated on social media networks such as Facebook where individuals and far-right groups have used it to inflame religious and racial tensions. A study for the British-based think-tank group Demos (2011) found that far-right populist movements are gaining in support across Europe and playing upon a small perception of public disenfranchisement within society to promote an agenda of protecting national identity as a method to whip up online anti-Muslim hate on Facebook. The Demos study (2011) would seem to suggest that the EDL have become a web-based far-right group that are using social networking sites such as Facebook where it has gained a core group of online sympathizers (Awan & Blakemore, 2012). The Demos study found that on a national scale, 72% of supporters for the EDL were under the age of 30, and 36% of people were aged between 16 and 20; thus reflecting the movement's desire to attract a "younger" audience on social networking sites such as Facebook. Indeed, more recently the Britain First Facebook group has received considerable attention, because of its strong counter-messaging against Muslim communities.

Whilst the group has had little electoral success, it has via social media gained considerable momentum, with over half a million likes on Facebook within its first year of inception. Using British patriotism as a means to whip support for the group, it has been successful at also promoting a strong anti-Muslim tone. For example, after posting an image about eating British breakfast, a comment posted by one of the users, was: *"For every sausage eaten or rasher of bacon we should chop of a Muslims head"*. The worry is that such comments could lead to actual offline violence and clearly groups such as this, are using Facebook to promote racial tensions and disharmony (Allen, 2010). Indeed, the language being used clearly attempts to agitate and bring in new members and as this study has highlighted some of those emerging problems and concerns.

Conclusion

This study attempted to examine how Muslims were being viewed on one social media platform, namely Facebook. Based on this research, it is clear that Muslims are being stereotyped and actual offline violence is being promoted as a means to target Muslim communities. The worry is that these online groups and communities will use this support to foster an offline extremist counter-narrative. It should also be noted here, however that whilst there is a dearth of online material that could cause offence, this does not equate to it necessarily being illegal in the UK (Clarke, 2003). Often the notion of freedom of speech and expression are used by those who post such material with their constitutional right to do so, but at the same time recognising the need to balance people's right to freedom of speech (Gurak & Logie, 2003). Clearly, from the evidence established within this study, Islamophobia on Facebook is much more prevalent than previously thought and is being used by groups and individuals to inflame religious and racial hate. This is prohibited by English Law and can be in most cases construed as an offence in England and Wales.

Prejudice and discrimination come in many forms, from offline physical violence, verbal abuse and hate, but also to online hate which can equally have a damaging impact upon community cohesion and society. This study has highlighted how if potentially messages and communications of this nature are ignored then we risk creating an intolerant society. Fundamentally, this study has shed light on helping us have a better understanding of Islamophobia on the Internet. The pages and comments reviewed in this

study clearly risk alienating Muslim communities and ultimately these posts and images can damage communities. Online hate is a strong word and therefore from the sample surveyed it was clear that there was a problem of religious vilification against Muslim communities. It should be noted that freedom of speech is a fundamental right that everyone should enjoy, however this study has found that Facebook pages have been used as a means to promote hate and conflated those principles of free speech with religious and racial hatred of communities, simply because of the way they dress and what they practice.

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