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## Platformed antagonism: racist discourses on fake Muslim Facebook pages

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines how fake identities on social media create and sustain antagonistic and racist discourses. It does so by analysing 11 Danish Facebook pages, disguised as Muslim extremists living in Denmark, conspiring to kill and rape Danish citizens. It explores how anonymous content producers utilise Facebook's socio-technical characteristics to construct, what we propose to term as, *platformed antagonism*. This term refers to socio-technical and discursive practices that produce new modes of antagonistic relations on social media platforms. Through a discourse-theoretical analysis of posts, images, 'about' sections and user comments on the studied Facebook pages, the article highlights how antagonism between ethno-cultural identities is produced on social media through fictitious social media accounts, prompting thousands of user reactions. These findings enhance our current understanding of how antagonism and racism are constructed and amplified within social media environments.

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Platformed antagonism; racism; fake identities; Islamophobia; anti-Muslim; discourse theory; social media; Facebook; Denmark

## Introduction

The use of fake identities to discredit specific ethnic, cultural or religious groups has existed long before digital media (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Linebarger, 2010). One of the most prominent examples of the twentieth century is the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a pamphlet from 1903 revealing a devious Jewish plot for world domination conceived by Jewish representatives at a secret congress (Bronner, 2000; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). In reality, no such congress ever took place and the document was a deliberate fraud created to justify anti-Semitic agendas in Russia. The pamphlet nonetheless became influential in European politics, as Adolf Hitler referenced it in his infamous *Mein Kampf* and later made it mandatory reading for all members of the Hitler Youth (Bronner, 2000; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012).

Within the last decade, research has shown how fake and concealed identities may be disseminated through digital media, specifically websites, to promote racism and ethno-

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cultural antagonism (Daniels, 2009a, 2009b). Yet, less attention has been given to this topic in the context of social media platforms such as Facebook (Farkas, Schou & Neumayer, 2017; Farkas & Neumayer, 2017). Social media provide new potentials for both constructing fake identities and engaging in racist and antagonistic discursive practices (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Unlike television, radio, static websites and other forms of one-to-many communication, social media sites are distinctly interactive and dynamic (van Dijck, 2013). They enable many-to-many communication (Castells, 2013) and allow users to engage directly with political discourses through re-distribution, negotiation and contestation of user-generated content. These characteristics not only facilitate human communication, but also reshape social relations in new modalities of 'platformed sociality' (Poell & Dijck, 2013, p. 6; see also Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).

This paper adds to our current understanding of how antagonism and racism are shaped and circulated within social media environments by exploring the enactment of ethno-cultural stereotypes as a means of constructing, what we propose to term, *platformed antagonism*. This encapsulates the novel ways in which the socio-technical structure of social media platforms shapes new modalities of antagonism. The article explores 11 Facebook pages claiming to speak on behalf of Muslims in Denmark, plotting to overthrow institutional structures, kill all (non-Muslim) Danes and transform Danish society into a state ruled by sharia law. Through the dissemination of aggressive posts, images and videos, the pages gained thousands of user reactions in the form of comments and shares. While the pages claimed to represent Muslims living in Denmark, they were in fact constructed around fictitious identities.

This article analyses the complex set of discursive practices involved in the production, maintenance and negotiation of platformed antagonism through stereotypical enactments of fake ethno-cultural identities on social media. How do fake Muslim Facebook pages (re-)produce and disseminate political discourses? How is the participatory potential of social media exploited to produce new modalities of antagonism? And how do users react to such platformed antagonism? Based on close to six months of data collection and a multi-modal qualitative analysis drawing on discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 2014 (1985)), the article addresses these overall questions.

### ***Racism, antagonism and social network sites***

Social network sites (SNSs) represent digital spaces in which 'race and racism play out in interesting, sometimes disturbing, ways' (Daniels, 2013, p. 702). At the disturbing end of the spectrum, SNSs can potentially act as powerful means of distributing racist discourses by antagonising ethno-cultural minorities (Caiani & Borri, 2014; Foxman & Wolf, 2013). In this context, platforms such as Facebook or Twitter should not simply be viewed as neutral channels of communication. As complex socio-technical systems, they play a key role in shaping social relations (Langlois & Elmer, 2013), including those pertaining to race and racism (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). As recent research highlights, this complexity requires us to study racist discourses on SNSs at the intersections of technological infrastructures, content policies, policy-enforcement processes, user practices and cultural values (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).

Uncovering new modalities of racism on SNSs relies on examining the interrelation between social and technological processes (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016).

As Matamoros-Fernández (2017) highlights, '[a]busive users can use platforms' affordances to harass their victims ... by highjacking social media sites' technical infrastructure for their benefit' (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017, p. 6). She defines such digitally adapted practices as 'platformed racism' (p. 2), accentuating the non-transparency and co-constitutive role of SNSs' technological infrastructures. Building on this argument, this article proposes the term *platformed antagonism* in order to capture the new modalities of not only racist, but also political, religious and cultural aggression between antagonistic identities on social media.

The idea of *platformed antagonism* advances existing research on SNSs and racist discourses. Poell and Dijck (2013) argue that all human actions on SNSs are influenced by the platform's underlying social media logics. On Facebook, for example, users and organisations have to continuously adjust their communication to maximise the amount of user reactions they receive, at least if they want to reach a wide audience. If not, the platform's algorithms limit the proliferation of their content (Bucher, 2012). In countries such as Denmark, where 72.4% of citizens have a Facebook account and 58% use the platform daily (Rossi, Schwartz, & Mahnke, 2016), understanding and adjusting to social media logics is key for influencing public discourse.

Studies of racist discourses on SNSs highlight that content producers often accommodate and adapt to social media logics in order to promote their agendas. One tactic, highlighted by both Klein (2012) and Ben-David and Mattamoros-Fernandez (2016), concerns the ways in which producers conceal racist discourses in posts, images and videos in order to attract user engagement, while avoiding deletion due to violations of content policies. Ben-David and Mattamoros-Fernandez (2016) refer to such discursive practices as '*covert discrimination*' (p. 1168, original emphasis), while Klein (2012) defines them as '*information laundering*' (p. 429, original emphasis). According to Klein (2012), SNSs have become central to racist groups, as the platforms' network structure enables new modes of proliferation and connectivity: 'What makes social networks so attractive to hate groups ... is how welcoming the culture can be, where new friends and ideas are accepted with little reservation in the click of a mouse' (p. 442). Research moreover emphasises SNSs' ability to circumvent traditional media channels (Kompatsiaris & Mylonas, 2015) and disseminate texts, images and videos (Awan, 2016).

Platformed antagonism in social media can accelerate existing racism. Milner (2013) argues that the humour used in so-called 'trolling' practices on anonymous platforms (such as Reddit and 4Chan) 'often antagonizes the core identity categories of race and gender, essentialising marginalised "others"' (p. 63). Through circulation and dissemination by participatory collectives within social media platforms, such antagonisms can be reinforced and substantiated. While it is not always clear if such actions are cases of politically motivated deception or trolling, as boundaries between these processes are fluid, they can result in the amplification of antagonism based on both race and gender (Phillips, 2015). By enabling anonymity for content producers, for example on Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, social media provide an infrastructure for extending trolling activities. Platformed antagonism based on fake user profiles can amplify existing discourses of racism and marginalisation by building upon fundamental characteristics of Internet culture and socio-technical logics of social media platforms.

This article seeks to expand the current knowledge on the relationship between racism, antagonism and SNSs. It does so by showcasing how anonymous content-producers

tactically exploit Facebook's technological infrastructure and social media logics in order to create and sustain platformed antagonism. To grasp the complexity involved in the production and circulation of such antagonisms, the article attends to discursive practices of both the creators of fake Muslim Facebook pages and of those who react to it, i.e. SNS users who comment, share and like. This makes it possible to investigate how platformed antagonism is produced and maintained based on the interactive, socio-technical characteristics of SNSs.

## Data collection

The article draws on six months of online participant observation as well as data collected from 11 Danish Facebook pages. The fieldwork was commenced in April 2015 and lasted until the end of September 2015. Data was collected throughout the six months using a combination of screenshots, 'print page'-functionalities, and the online application Netvizz (Rieder, 2013) to capture posts, images, videos and user comments. The research was initiated shortly after coming across three Facebook pages, *Islam – The Religion of Peace (Islam – Fredens Religion)*, *Sharia in Denmark (Sharia i Danmark)*, and *Peaceful Muslims (Fredelige Muslimer)*, all existing simultaneously in April 2015. These pages claimed to represent Muslims in Denmark wanting to kill (non-Muslim) Danes and overtake Danish society. The pages soon received hundreds of reactions from Danish users, expressing both aggression towards the pages and Muslims in general. With the aim of exploring and uncovering this phenomenon, we promptly initiated participant observation and data collection in order to investigate the intricacies of this case.

The final corpus of data was assembled over the course of six months through snowball sampling. As outlined by Baltar and Brunet (2012), snowball sampling serves as a useful method in SNS environments, particularly in 'exploratory, qualitative and descriptive research' (p. 60) focused on 'hard to reach populations' (p. 69). In our study, snowball sampling was deployed to overcome two core challenges connected to fictitious identities disseminating ethno-cultural antagonism on Facebook: First, manifestations of this phenomenon were difficult to find, as they were not directly searchable through Facebook or any other digital search tool. Second, these types of Facebook pages only existed for short periods of time, as Facebook continuously deleted them for violations of their community standards, which prohibit both fake identities and hate speech (Facebook, 2016).

Unlike traditional snowball sampling, which relies on research subjects to provide new subjects (Baltar & Brunet, 2012), our sampling strategy relied on close contact with activists fighting against the fake identities and pages. In June 2015, a Facebook group entitled *Stop Fake Hate Profiles on Facebook (STOP falske HAD-PROFILER på FACEBOOK)* was founded to combat fictitious identities spreading hatred against ethnic and religious minorities on Facebook (Farkas & Neumayer, 2017). After receiving permission to take part in this group as participant observers, the activist network continuously led us to new Facebook pages, spreading hatred based on fictitious identities. The 11 Facebook pages shared a number of distinct characteristics: (a) they all claimed to represent Muslims living in Denmark, (b) they were all constructed around fictitious identities, (c) they were all created by anonymous page administrators, (d) they all existed for short periods of time, (e) they all reproduced a narrative of Muslims plotting to overtake Denmark, and (f) they all utilised similar or even identical phrases, names and images.

**Table 1.** Overview of Facebook pages.

Name	Time period (in 2015)	Lifespan (in days)	Posts	User Comments
Sharia in Denmark	30/03–28/04	30	1	48
Islam – The Religion of Peace	06/04–17/05	42	29	788
Peaceful Muslims	23/04–10/05	18	0	2
Ali El-Yussuf [1]	04/06–08/06	5	7	3372
Ali El-Yussuf [2]	11/06–22/06	12	17	3159
Ali El-Yussuf [3]	16/06–22/06	7	3	3
Mohammed El-Sayed	30/06–02/07	3	5	3851
Fatimah El-Mohammed	01/07–02/07	2	1	23
Zarah Al-Sayed	02/07–02/07	1	2	5
Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1]	09/09–12/09	4	12	10,426
Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [2]	13/09–15/09	3	0	72
In Total:	–	–	77	21,749

The 11 Facebook pages, which received more than 20.000 user comments, were discovered and studied throughout the six months of continuous participant observation and data collection (see Table 1). In a theoretical sampling process informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), comments and posts were sampled and coded in a reciprocal process between data and theory until the point of saturation.

A core epistemological challenge throughout the research process concerns the way in which Facebook's technological infrastructure enables page administrators to uphold complete anonymity. As a consequence, we are not able to draw any firm conclusions about the identity or intentions of the page administrator(s) of the studied pages. Nonetheless, as we will describe below, the 11 Facebook pages were all constructed around fictitious identities, producing platformed antagonism that sustained and amplified racist stereotypes and discourses.

### Discourse theory as an analytical framework

To analyse the collected data, consisting of images, videos, 'about'-sections, 77 Facebook posts and 21.739 user comments, we draw on the so-called Essex School of discourse analysis (simply named *discourse theory* in the following), represented most prominently by the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2014 [1985]). Since the 1980s, discourse theory has emerged as a potent analytical framework for examining the construction and contestation of political discourses and identities. In particular, scholars working at the intersection of critical media studies and discourse analysis have turned to discourse theory as a useful approach for studying the articulation and sedimentation of meaning within different media environments (Dalhberg & Phelan, 2011).

Discourse theory is based on a relational approach to meaning, viewing discourses as the structured totality of individual *moments* emerging through practices of *articulation* (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985]). This relational perspective is underscored by a decidedly political approach to the study of discourses and identity formation. From a discourse theoretical perspective, all identities and discourses are treated as the outcome of contingent processes of inclusion and exclusion that reflect particular power relations in society at large. In this sense, any given discourse is always structured by what it excludes. This implies that *all* identities – including those of ethnicity, race, and religion – are fundamentally political constructs. In this light, racist discourses may be seen as the construction of particular identities through the establishment of threatening ethno-racial *Others*

**Table 2.** Three-step analytical process.

Phase	Data	Methodological questions	Methodological description
1. Nodal points	77 Facebook posts, 'about' sections, and images.	What are some of the main signifiers holding together the discourse?	Read data material and highlight key signifiers throughout.
2. Chains of equivalence/difference	77 Facebook posts, 'about' sections, and images.	How are these nodal points connected to other signifiers? What kind of argumentative logics do they form?	Re-read and annotated the texts, examining how nodal points are linked to other signifiers.
3. Reactions	User comments	How do users react to the discourse constructed by the Facebook pages?	Quantify most used words across comments. Read through data material and highlight key signifiers.

(Norval, 1996). Understanding racism relies on critically examining the articulation of antagonism: how the construction of 'us' relies on the production of a 'them'.

In this article, we apply discourse theory as our analytical framework for investigating the use of fake Muslim identities on Facebook as a means of constructing platformed antagonism. Historically, discourse theory has operated based on a fairly open methodological approach (Torfing, 1999), urging researchers to establish their own methods in close dialogue with their particular data and field. In this study, we have operationalised discourse theory through a three-step process (see Table 2). First, we read through the 77 Facebook posts as well as 'about' sections of the studied Facebook pages, focusing on so-called *nodal points* throughout the dataset. Nodal points are understood as 'privileged discursive points' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 99); that is to say particularly important signifiers helping to stabilise a specific discourse. Our main objective in this phase was to identify dominant signifiers within the studied discourse. Profile images and photos were also included in this phase, as they play key role in establishing identities and discursive formations on social media (KhosraviniK, 2017).

In the second phase, we re-read the entire material, focusing on how the identified nodal points connected to other signifiers through *chains of equivalence*. These chains function by *linking* different signifiers together in a common whole (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 115). They serve, for example, to link the concept of 'Danes' or 'Muslims' to other key signifiers in order to equate their meaning. As part of this phase, we analysed argumentative structures, normative ideas and representations linked to the dominant signifiers within the discourse. Finally, in the third phase, we turned to the user comments on the studied Facebook pages. To get an initial overview of the thousands of collected comments, we quantified the most frequently used terms across the 11 pages. Following this, we read through this material in a qualitative content analysis, using discourse theory as a guiding framework to identify nodal points and chains of equivalence in user responses to the constructed discourse.

As Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik (2016) highlight, discourse analysis in social media environments requires scholars to pay specific 'attention to the media practices and the affordances of the technologies that allow social media data to be produced and shared' (p. 282). In this article, findings from our discourse analysis have been supplemented with observational findings from our fieldwork, focusing on contingent, socio-technical processes in which the collected data was produced. This allows us to examine how platformed antagonism is articulated and performed within the contingent and dynamic spaces on Facebook.



## Analysis: constructing fake identities as platformed antagonism

In the Facebook posts, 'about' sections and images produced by the 11 studied Facebook pages, we find two central nodal points: the establishment of 'the Muslim' as a political identity, on the one hand, and the articulation of 'the Dane', on the other. In the thousands of user comments responding to the pages, we also find these two nodal points, yet constructed through modified chains of equivalence. In this section, we first present our empirical findings connected to the two constructed identities, as articulated by the studied Facebook pages. Second, we turn to the user comments and their (re-)articulation of these nodal points. After this analysis, we discuss the presented findings in connection to broader political discourses and ethno-cultural stereotypes about Muslims in Denmark and Europe. Through this approach, we seek to include both the specific stereotypical identities amplified on the studied Facebook pages, reinforcement of the antagonism by commenting users, and finally the relationship between the studied pages and broader political discourses about Muslims in Denmark and Europe.

### Constructing 'the Muslim' as a political identity

In the content produced across the 11 Facebook pages, we find two tightly connected political identities: 'the Muslim' and 'the Dane'. All of the Facebook pages self-identity as belonging to the first group, claiming to speak on behalf of Muslims in Denmark.

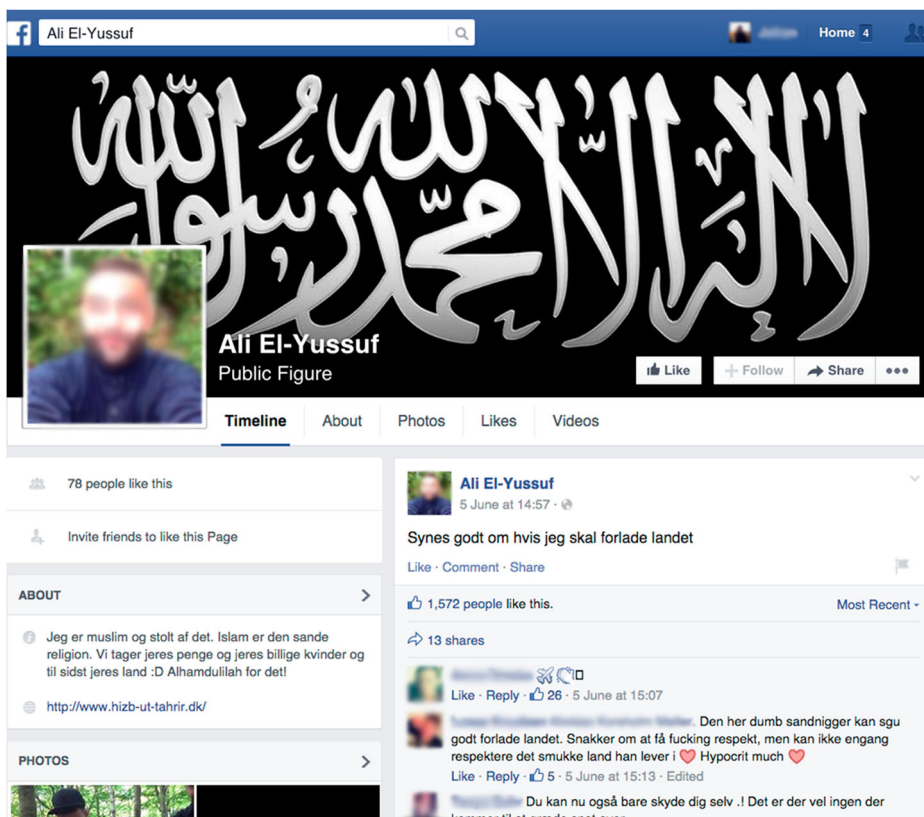
Figure 1 provides an example of the construction of this 'Muslim' identity. The figure depicts the Facebook page of *Ali El-Yussuf* [1], containing a profile picture of a bearded male. This photo is untraceable through reverse image search on Google, indicating that it could derive from a Facebook profile, as the platform enables users to opt out of search engines (Facebook, 2017). The page's cover photo depicts the so-called *Black Standard of Jihad* used by numerous terrorist organisations, including *Al Qaeda* and *The Islamic State of Iraq* (Matusitz & Olufowote, 2016). The prominently displayed 'about' section (at the bottom left side of the figure) contains a link to the Danish branch of the pan-Islamic, political organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. This organisation, however, denied having any connection to the page and stated that they contacted Facebook to get the page deleted (Nielsen, 2015). On the right side of Figure 1, we find a Facebook post with 1572 likes, stating in Danish: 'Like this if you want me to leave the country' (*Ali El-Yussuf* [1], 5 June 2015, Facebook post). On the surface, this post page appears to be created by an individual person who self-identifies as a Muslim.

However, once we take a closer look, there are a number of similarities in the narratives told across the 11 Facebook pages. In some cases, there are even identical wordings, images and names, revealing a systematic pattern of forged identities. In spring 2015, on the first three Facebook pages in our study, all page names referred to unspecific 'groups of Muslims': *Sharia in Denmark*, *Islam – The Religion of Peace*, and *Peaceful Muslims*. The identical 'about' sections of these three pages state:

We are Muslims and proud. Muhammad is a role model for the world who we Muslims follow. Dead to the kuffars [infidels]. Islam is the truth and kuffars are dirty.

This quote highlights how each page explicitly constructs itself as 'Muslim'. Additionally, the use of plural – 'we' Muslims – establishes a connection between the individual





**Figure 1.** Facebook page of Ali El-Yussuf [1].

pages and the entire political identity of ‘Muslims’. To use the words of Laclau (2005), the pages construct themselves as ‘the representation of an incommensurable totality’ (p. 70): *the* Muslim rather than *a* Muslim. This construct is found across all studied pages, also those self-identifying as individual persons. *Ali El-Yussuf*, for example, a name used by three different Facebook pages in June 2015, proclaim that: ‘we take your money, your apartments and your country’ (added emphasis). This exact phrase is found in six different ‘about’ sections across the 11 pages. On *Ali El-Yussuf* [1], [2] and [3], the section moreover contains the exact same introduction as the one cited above, only with the pronoun changed from ‘We are Muslims and proud’ to ‘I am Muslim and proud’.

Throughout our data, we find such similarities, revealing that the studied Facebook pages were not what they claimed to be. For example, half of the pages had either ‘El-’ or ‘Al-’ in their surnames, while some carried near-identical names (e.g. El-Sayed and Al-Sayed) and others had completely identical ones (e.g. *Ali El-Yussuf* [1], [2], and [3]). This pattern reveals that Arabic-sounding names and aggressive statements were systematically, and to some extent crudely, constructed to produce a continuous narrative of Muslims representing a life-threatening antagonistic enemy of (non-Muslim) Danes.

### Five 'Muslim' characteristics

The construction of 'the Muslim' is formed through the coupling of this political identity to a number of other signifiers through chains of equivalence. In this regard, our analysis foregrounds five key discursive logics, showcasing the complex ways in which the notion of Muslims are mobilised in connection to other signifiers.

First of all, a key characteristic of how 'Muslims' are constructed is an omnipresent idea of *violence*. Through chains of equivalence, Muslims are consistently connected to violent behaviour and lack of empathy. Violence is both glorified and found amusing:

Hahahahaha! I just saw a video of 4 Muslims beating up a Danish pig! 😊 Down with the white dogs!!! (*Mehmet Dawah Aydemir* [1], Facebook post, 11 September 2015)

It's beautiful to see infidels getting killed and infidel women being raped by my Muslim brothers. Mash'Allah. (*Islam – The Religion of Peace*, Facebook post, 30 April 2015)

In these posts, Muslims are not only constructed as fundamentally violent, but also as violent towards a specific opponent: namely the weak and naïve Danish 'infidels'. Muslims are said to carry out this violence with no regard for fairness (by attacking four against one) or women (by raping 'infidel' women). In the eyes of the Muslim, the Facebook pages claim, violence is justified as long as it is directed against (non-Muslim) Danes:

It's okay to kill, as long as the victims are infidel bastards. Allahu Akbar! (*Mohammed El-Sayed*, Facebook post, 2 July 2015)

Non-Muslims living under sharia law have three options: 1. Convert to Islam. 2. Pay jizya (a high humiliation tax for the infidels). 3. Get killed. (*Mehmet Dawah Aydemir* [1], Facebook post, 11 September 2015)

Second, Muslims are connected to an idea of *exploitation*. According to the pages, Muslims are deliberately exploiting the Danish welfare state as well as Danes themselves. A recurring phrase is that Muslims are stealing 'your money, your apartments and your country', a statement used in different variations, e.g. 'We take your money, apartments, education, as we Muslims are obliged to do (jizya)' (*Ali El-Yussuf* [2], 20 June, Facebook post). This proclaimed exploitation is articulated as an embedded characteristic of the Islamic faith, suggesting that *all* Muslims are obliged to exploit 'infidels'.

In the same Facebook post from *Ali El Yussuf* [2], a third characteristic of 'Muslims' becomes visible, namely their connection to tropes of *hypersexuality*. The Facebook post quoted above continues: 'We are also obliged to exploit your cheap Danish women by impregnating them to make sure they don't have any infidel children' (*Ali El-Yussuf*, 20 June, Facebook post). Muslims are hypersexual by both nature and culture. Muslim males engage in constant sexual activities, including consensual intercourse with Muslim and Danish (i.e. non-Muslim) women, sex with prostitutes and even rape: 'Insh'Allah I fucked two of your whores in my apartment paid with your money. Mash'Allah, it always feels great to do that after the Friday prayer' (*Islam – The Religion of Peace*, Facebook post, 10 May 2015). The pages equate these sexual actions of 'Muslim individuals' to that of 'Muslims' in general. This universalisation is even found on Facebook pages claiming to represent Muslim females: 'My brothers fuck your cheap women who don't cover their bodies' (*Fatima El-Mohammed*, Facebook post, 2 July 2015). Muslim hypersexuality is presented as having the overall goal of preventing Danish women from having

more 'infidel' children, while increasing the number of Muslims in Denmark. In this way, this trait is not only part of 'Muslim' culture and biology, but also connects to a fourth characteristic: *conspiracy*.

According to the 11 Facebook pages, Muslims have systematically organised their lives to take part in a widespread conspiracy to undermine Danish society and eventually take over the country. This conspiracy does not only exist in the minds of Muslims, the page authors claim, but is currently taking place all over Denmark:

LOL, people write to me saying that Muslims won't take over Denmark, but just look around you!! You can't pretend it's not already happening, while the food you eat is halal. While your cheap women are having sex with Muslim men. While we take your money and apartments. While churches are torn down and Mosques are built. (*Ali El-Yussuf* [1], 4 June 2015, Facebook Post)

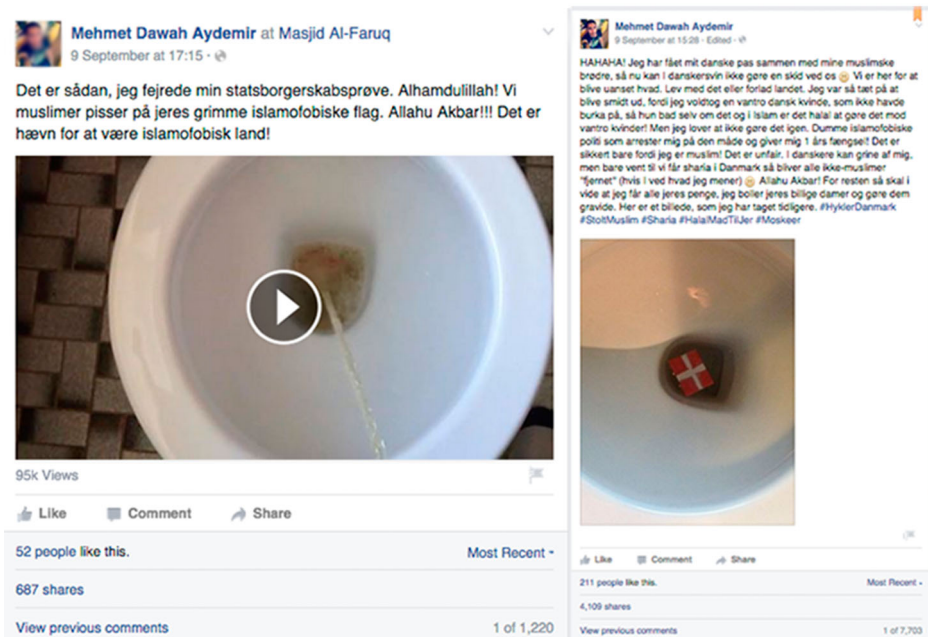
Violence, exploitation and hypersexuality all connect to the Muslim conspiracy of taking over Denmark. Muslims use their aggressive traits as vehicles of societal destruction, the end goal being the extermination of all Danes and instalment of sharia law. Symbols of terrorism, such as the flag of ISIS and the Black Standard of Jihad, are appropriated to underpin this narrative alongside images of burning Danish flags (see [Figure 2](#)). The latter derives from protests in the Middle East following the so-called 'Muhammad Cartoon Crisis' in 2005–6 (Hervik, 2011). In this sense, the pages remediate and refurbish already known political scenarios by dislocating images from their original context and presenting them as symbols of an essential antagonistic relation between the 'Muslim' and ethnic 'Dane'.

On one Facebook page, *Mehmet Daway Aydemir* [1], the anonymous author(s) also uploaded a short video of an unidentifiable person urinating on a Danish flag. This was posted alongside the following statement: 'This is how I celebrated my [Danish] citizenship test. Alhamdulillah! We Muslims piss on your ugly, Islamophobic flag. This is revenge for being an Islamophobic country'. In total, the video received 95,000 views and 1220 user comments. Additionally, a screenshot of the video received 7703 comments (see [Figure 3](#)).

The constructed logics of violence, exploitation, hypersexuality and conspiracy connect to a fifth overarching logic, namely *incompatibility*. Muslims are fundamentally incompatible with Danes and Danish society, meaning that 'the Muslim' is constructed as the exact



**Figure 2.** Pictures of burning Danish flags on two fake Muslim Facebook pages. (© Ritzau Scanpix/Nasser Ishtayeh/AP).



**Figure 3.** Two Facebook posts by Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1].

opposite and sworn enemy of ‘the Dane’. As antagonistic enemies, these identities can never co-exist. Muslims will always seek to annihilate Danes, as they are an incompatible force, inevitably leading to oppression and destruction. They are an antagonistic *Other* situated within Danish society and Danes are simply too naïve, weak, afraid and passive to do anything about it.

### **Constructing ‘the Dane’**

Whereas Muslims are constructed as violent, exploitative, masculine, hypersexual and organised by the Facebook pages, ethnic Danes are naïve, passive and feminised victims of Muslim oppression and conspiracy. A key argument in this regard is that Muslim men are ‘stealing’ Danish women from Danish men. Muslims do this by brute force, systematically assaulting and raping Danish women. Danish women also voluntarily engage in sexual activities and romantic relations with Muslims. According to the pages, Danish women do this, as they ‘really think Muslim men love them’, while they in fact see them as ‘disgusting whores ... used to make Arabs in their bellies’ (*Ali El Yussuf* [2], Facebook post, 11 June 2015). This is all happening ‘in front of the very eyes of Danes’, a statement used identically across eight out of 11 Facebook pages in our study. Danes are supposedly putting up with Muslim oppression and conspiracy for three reasons: inability to wake up and see the ‘truth’, sheer weakness and (co-)conspiring liberal, female politicians. Thereby, the Muslim danger not only resides within the weakness of Danish men, but also in unfaithful and in some cases co-conspiring Danish women.

A large part of the Danish population, the pages claim, has not yet realised the full extent of the Muslim conspiracy, although they just have to ‘look around!’ (*Ali El-Yussuf*

[1], Facebook post, 4 June). The pages continuously mock the naïve Danes for their inability to see the ‘truth’, even though ‘all your food is halal and more women are dating Muslim men ... right in front of your very eyes’ (*Ali El-Yussuf* [2], Facebook post, 19 June). Not all Danes are like this, however. Some Danes *have* realised that they are victims of a Muslim conspiracy. Yet, they do not have the strength to fight back, as they are ‘afraid of us Muslims’ (*Mohammed El-Sayed*, Facebook post, 1 July) and lack support from the Danish government that is ‘weak’ (*Islam – The Religion of Peace*. Facebook post, 21 April). Additionally, liberal, female politicians in Denmark even take part in the Muslim conspiracy by ‘lying to you stupid Danes to make you think Muslims are victims’, while they ‘support the Muslim brothers and sisters, who want sharia law, behind your back’ (*Ali El Yussuf* [2], Facebook post, 20 June 2015). The Muslim conspiracy is thus all encompassing, reaching even institutional politics. The Danes, however, are either too naïve, weak or corrupted to fight against it.

### ***User responses: reformulating nodal points, maintaining antagonism***

The violent rhetoric of the Facebook pages incited thousands of comments from Danish Facebook users. A majority of these users express (counter-)aggression towards the fictitious Muslim individuals through terms such as ‘fuck’, ‘fucking’ and ‘idiot’, which are all among the most frequently used across the pages. Additionally, users reproduce the discursive construction of ‘Danes’ being in stark contrast to the political identity of ‘Muslims’. Among the most commonly used words across the pages, we also find ‘Danish’ and ‘Denmark’ alongside ‘Muslim’ and the racist slur, ‘Paki’ (*perker* in Danish). As all user comments respond directly to the violent discourse of the Facebook pages, it might seem logical that ‘Dane’ and ‘Muslim’ are also nodal points within the reactions. Yet, as we describe in the following, users *reformulate* these nodal points, while reproducing the underlying antagonism between the two.

In a majority of user comments, ‘Muslims’ and ‘Danes’ are articulated as dichotomous adversaries. The constructed image of a weak and naïve Dane, however, is largely replaced by a strong and patriotic one:

The Danish flag is one of the oldest in the world, and we Danes are proud of it and will defend it any time. Denmark will always be a Christian country and that will always be the case!  
(User comment on *Mehmet Dawah Aydemir* [1], 11 September 2015)

The Danes’ weakness and passivity, as articulated by the pages, is rejected and reformulated through new chains of equivalence. Danes are instead strong, heroic and capable of fighting against their Muslim enemies. Numerous users express a willingness to take part in a battle between the two ethno-cultural groups, if or when time should come. Unlike this re-articulation of the Dane, commenting users only marginally reformulate the identity of Muslims. In a majority of user comments, Muslims are still represented as aggressive, exploitative and hypersexual. Yet, Muslims are simultaneously articulated as incapable of attracting Danish women and carrying out their conspiracy due to stupidity and an underestimation of the Danes’ strength:

Taking over the world, but you can’t even keep a fucking job. Relax you monkeys. (User comments on *Mehmet Dawah Aydemir*, 9 September 2015)



You destroy more and more for yourself, but that's how you stupid Muslims are. Just look at your own countries that don't work for shit, because you are so ridiculous and live your lives according to an old crappy book you call the Quran. You are lazy and stupid and won't ever manage to carry out anything, any of you. (User comments on *Mohammed El-Sayed*, 2 June 2015)

These comments highlight the (often) racist sentiments, expressed both explicitly and implicitly across the thousands of user responses to the 11 Facebook pages. A majority of users accepted and reproduced the discursive construction of Muslims as exploitative and aggressive. Additionally, users adopted the self-identification of the suppressed Danes, fighting against their antagonistic Muslim enemies.

Through a continuous creation of posts, images, videos and user comments, each Facebook page thereby became a space of antagonism and racism, shaped by the socio-technical characteristics of Facebook. These discursive practices not only relied on the production of text, but also on the social media platform's facilitation of concealed personal identities, construction of fake accounts and algorithmic dissemination of aggressive posts, images and videos. As sites of *platformed antagonism*, the interactive characteristics of Facebook became a means of struggle and hostility between two ethno-cultural identities, constructed as fundamentally incompatible by both the Facebook pages and a majority of commenting users. Within these comments, a widely proposed solution to this supposed 'problem' with Muslims in Denmark is that the page authors should go back to 'where they came from':

What an unsympathetic and disgusting human, you are. Clearly a parasite in our society ... With luck, you will get the fuck out of our country and perhaps go back to whatever 'jalla country' [racist slur] you originated from, and take part in their caveman practices. Good luck with that, scumbag! (User comments on *Ali El-Yussuf* [2], 19 June 2015)

You fucking ISIS pigs. Denmark should throw you out of our country so the countries you fled from can fuck you again. (User comments on *Islam – The Religion of Peace* 20 April 2015)

This 'solution' is found across hundreds of comments on the Facebook pages. Some comments take the argument even further, stating that the pages represent 'empirical evidence' for why Denmark needs harsher immigration policies:

This is why we need closed borders! (User comments on *Ali El-Yussuf* [1], 11 September 2015)

Clown!!! Good evidence why they don't belong in our country. Hallelujah for DF [The Danish People's Party]. (User comments on *Mehmet Dawah Aydemir* [1], 11 September 2015)

User comments clearly express both antagonism and racism. Nevertheless, some also challenged these discursive positions by articulating two contrasting positions. We define these as a *particularising position* and a *contesting position*. Among the reacting users, those who took a particularising position expressed belief in the proclaimed authorships of the Facebook pages, yet rejected the idea that the pages represented *all* Muslims in Denmark. They negotiated the political identity of Muslims by particularising the articulations of each page, dismissing their constructed universality:

Omg!!! Not all Muslims are like that, far from it!! What a way to behave, douchebag! (User comments on *Mehmet Dawah Aydemir* [1], 9 September 2015)

Luckily, you don't represent the majority of Muslims in Denmark! It's probably just a stunt to get attention or else you just had a sunstroke. But if you're dissatisfied, we can easily start a

**Table 3.** The articulation of Muslims and Danes on the studied Facebook pages.

Nodal points	Muslim	Muslim	Dane	Dane
Articulated by	Facebook pages	Users	Facebook pages	Users
Chains of Equivalence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• Exploitation</li> <li>• Hypersexuality</li> <li>• Conspiracy</li> <li>• Incompatibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stupidity</li> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• Exploitation</li> <li>• Hypersexuality</li> <li>• Incompatibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passivity</li> <li>• Naiveté</li> <li>• Victimhood</li> <li>• Femininity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strength</li> <li>• (Counter-) aggression</li> <li>• Patriotism</li> <li>• Masculinity</li> </ul>

fundraiser for a one-way ticket back to your home country. (User comments on *Mohammed El-Sayed*, 1 July 2015)

To these users, the pages *did* represent violence, exploitation, hypersexuality, conspiracy and incompatibility. Yet, instead of deriving from ‘the Muslim’, i.e. a representation of all Muslims, the traits solely connected to ‘a Muslim’, a specific extremist individual. Another minority of reacting users took a different, critical position, contesting the validity of the proclaimed identities altogether:

His profile was created yesterday so it’s probably fake. (User comments on *Mehmet Dawah Aydemir* [1], 11 September 2015)

The Nazi who created this fake profile must be laughing his ass off over all the negative comments, which was the intention. Fight fascism. Use your brains. (User comments on *Ali El-Yussuf* [1], 5 June 2015)

Some contesting users went as far as creating a Facebook group to combat fake Muslim Facebook pages by collectively reporting such pages to Facebook for violations of the company’s community standards (Farkas & Neumayer, 2017). Yet, a majority of users encountering these pages continuously reproduced the antagonism between Muslims and Danes, which the pages constructed. Additionally, the anonymous administrator(s) of the Facebook pages systematically removed comments stating that the pages were fake, making contestation both challenging and complex (Farkas & Neumayer, 2017). All in all, the violent discourse constructed by the pages was only marginally negotiated and contested in user comments. The dominant discourse across the pages continuously remained around antagonism and dichotomy between ‘the Dane’ and ‘the Muslim’ (see Table 3).

### Discussion: the civilised, barbaric, and naïve

The platformed antagonism found in our analysis resonates with and extends the findings of a number of existing studies. In a study of far-right discourses in Finland, Keskinen (2013) found that anti-immigration and anti-Muslim narratives centred around four antagonistic relations: ‘(1) the ‘civilized West’ and the ‘barbarians’ (Muslims and non-western migrants), (2) the naïve ‘multicultural elite’ and the brave, realistic but marginalised intellectuals, (3) feminists and the common Finnish man, (4) women and men’ (Keskinen, 2013, p. 230). These antagonisms are almost identical to those found across the studied Facebook pages. Here, we also find ‘the barbaric Muslim’ standing in direct opposition to ‘the civilised Dane’. We find ‘the naïve Dane’ who is incapable of realising the Muslim conspiracy happening ‘in front of their very eyes’, constructed as the opposition to the brave



minority of ‘patriotic Danes’. We find ‘the Muslim man’ who steals ‘the Danish women’ from ‘the Danish man’. And we find ‘the feminine, liberal politicians’ who take part in the Muslim conspiracy betraying ‘the (non-Muslim) Danes’.

By comparing the ethno-cultural antagonism on the studied Facebook pages with studies of far-right discourse, it becomes evident that both the pages and commenting users tapped into a larger reservoir of xenophobic, anti-Muslim and racist discourses proliferating in Europe (Awan, 2016; Brindle, 2016; Horsti, 2016). In Danish politics, Muslim immigrants have repeatedly been portrayed as harmful to the economy, a threat to national security and fundamentally irreconcilable with Danish culture (Hervik, 2011; Yilmaz, 2016). In this sense, the fake Muslim Facebook pages played on existing discursively constructed stereotypes by enacting an already *antagonised Other*.

The pages and a majority of commenting users (re-)produced a stereotypical construction of Muslims and Danes (or Europeans more broadly), similar to what is found within far-right discourses. As Ekman (2015) highlights in a study of online Islamophobia, ‘the idea that the Western world is ‘under attack’, ‘silently occupied’ by, or even at ‘civil war’ with Islam, is widespread among actors in the populist far right’ (p. 1986; see also Bangstad, 2013). Within this discourse, Muslims are supposedly conspiring to take over Europe from within through exploitation of European welfare states and breeding of Muslims (Horsti, 2016). Sexuality plays a key role in such narratives, as Muslim men are portrayed as hypersexual rapists who assault and exploit European women (Horsti, 2016; Keskinen, 2013). As Horsti (2016) highlights, Scandinavian far-right bloggers on the one hand ‘depict Muslim men as strong agents, who deliberately and strategically rape for the purpose of conquering the West. On the other hand, they depict Muslim men as non-thinking, animal, or virus-like organisms’ (p. 11). This paradoxical depiction of Muslims as both highly organised and non-thinking savages is exactly what we find on the studied Facebook pages. According to the pages, Muslims have organised their lives to take part in an elaborate and insidious Muslim conspiracy. Yet, as stated on the pages, Muslims are simultaneously animal-like beasts driven by primal instincts. By constructing fake Muslim identities on social media, the page administrators tapped into existing antagonistic stereotypes about Muslims in Europe. At the same time, however, the fake Muslim Facebook pages represented these antagonistic discourses in a novel and distinctly *platformed* manner by relying on the socio-technical characteristics of Facebook to conceal their identity, construct fictitious Muslim identities and disseminate antagonism through user networks. While the logics of *platformed antagonism* facilitate old categories of racist stereotypes, their amplification, distribution and mainstreaming works within the logics of the social media platforms, i.e. Facebook.

### **Concluding remarks: platformed antagonism on social media**

As Matamoros-Fernández (2017) argues, racism takes on new *platformed* shapes on social media, as content creators adapt to SNS environments. Building on this contribution, this article shows how the interactive, dynamic and multi-modal characteristics of SNSs can become a means of continuously constructing and disseminating new modes of ethno-cultural antagonism. Through the use of fictitious names, combined with the ability to upload text, images and video and algorithmically disseminate such content through user networks, the studied Facebook pages created antagonism based on the fundamental

characteristics of SNSs. As Phillips and Milner (2017) have pointedly argued, social media are indeed *ambivalent* in this regard, as the boundaries between what we would consider as trolling, fake or inappropriate are fluid. Similarly, platformed antagonism moves between fake Facebook pages and their sharing in legitimate public discourse, reinforcing but also normalising antagonism between ethno-cultural identities.

While the use of forged identities to cultivate antagonism against ethnic, racial and religious minorities has existed long before the Internet (Bronner, 2000; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012), the manifestation of such antagonism on Facebook involves new *platformed* elements. By taking advantage of the multi-modal and interactive characteristics of SNSs, ethno-cultural *Others* are 'brought to life' in new ways. By tactically exploiting Facebook's technological infrastructure, content producers can construct antagonistic discourses through the enactment of political identities that are continuously shaped, reproduced and solidified through posts, images, videos and user comments. The 'participatory' or 'social' potential of SNSs is thus key to understanding these new forms of antagonism. In the studied case, user comments served as a key component for the continuous reproduction and dissemination of ethno-cultural antagonism. Reactions from users added an important, extra layer to the production of aggression and hostility by embodying the enemy of the political identity of 'Muslims', as constructed by the Facebook pages. While antagonism and racism are certainly not new phenomena, SNSs enable new, dynamic and interactive manifestations of such discursive relations.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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