Speaking in stolen voices: Impersonated propaganda and use of Queer and Muslim identities by the Internet Research Agency

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

As part of Russia's ongoing foreign interference campaign, The Internet Research Agency (IRA) appropriated marginalised identities and created impersonated propaganda, including the Facebook groups LGBT United and United Muslims. Guided by critical theory and informed by feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives, this study examined 500 posts from LGBT United and 500 posts from United Muslims, to explore the groups' content, purpose, and use of marginalised identities. Qualitative content analysis revealed several themes, including (Attempted) Identity Theft (efforts to appear legitimate), A Call to Inaction (discouragement of political engagement), "Us" Against the World (encouraging isolation and anger), and That's the Thing I'm Sensitive About! (potentially generating antagonism towards the marginalised community). Findings discuss the possibility that these posts are multitarget (intended to influence not only the impersonated community, but groups hostile to it), explore potential danger to marginalised groups, recommend consideration of proactive strategies, and encourage community partnership.

Keywords: Internet Research Agency; IRA; propaganda; social media; Muslim; queer;

Dedication

Dedicated to my Grama. Thankyou for caring for me, and teaching me to care about others. You dragged me through school as a kid, and then supported my serpentine wending through university. Thankyou for your love, your sacrifices, your shoulder to cry on, your decades-long encouragement of my curiosity and willingness to help me find the answers to my questions. Thankyou for your example of compassion, and hard work, and your stubbornness (that you passed on, and that we've honed into a virtue). Thankyou for feeding me toast when I was in literature-reading fugue, and combatting my imposter syndrome, and putting up with hours and hours and hours of me rambling about disinformation on social media when you'd really rather have been reading.

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List of Acronyms

IRA	Internet Research Agency
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
TERF	Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist

Glossary

Disinformation	"[F]alse, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country" (Shultz & Godson, 1984, p. 41)
Evangelical Christians	A distinct group of Protestant Christians with high political influence, usually conservative beliefs, and a tendency towards homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia.
Homocolonialism	A term coined by Rahman (2014), "the deployment of LGBTIQ rights and visibility to stigmatize non-Western cultures and conversely reassert the supremacy of the Western nations and civilization" (pp. 6-7).
Homophobia	Prejudice against individuals who are not heterosexual, or who are seen as falling outside of heterosexual norms
Imperial feminism	Prioritising of white, middle-class, Western women and their experiences and goals, while ignoring the experiences, needs, and agency of other women, especially marginalised women. This includes prioritisation of Western values, and forcible promotion of Western culture.
Islamophobia	Prejudice against individuals who are Muslim, or who are seen as Muslim
Propaganda	"[T]he planned use of any means of communication to impose one's will, in an actual or potential conflict situation, on anyone not ordinarily disposed to acquiesce peaceably to that will" (Becker, 1949, p. 221).
Queer	An umbrella term for the community of individuals who are seen as outside the sexual, romantic, or gender norms; this term is used in lieu of such terms as LGBTQ2S+, and includes (but is not limited to) individuals who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, nonbinary, queer, two-spirit, asexual, aromantic, et cetera.
Transgender	An umbrella term describing individuals who do not conform to the gender norms of a society
Transphobia	Prejudice against individuals who do not conform to the gender norms of a society

Chapter 1.

Introduction

The Internet Research Agency (IRA), an organisation linked to the Russian government, has struck fear into the hearts of many nations. In the past few years, governments and researchers have rallied a great deal of analysis to understand, and fight against, the IRA's political interference efforts and foreign influence campaign (e.g. Badawy et al., 2019; DiResta et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018; Linvill et al., 2019; Lukito et al., 2019; McCombie et al., 2020; National Intelligence Council, 2017; Rodriguez, 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a). Much existing research has focused upon the actions of the IRA in terms of right-wing groups, specifically their impersonation of right-wing individuals and creation of right-wing groups on social media. However, IRA-controlled Facebook groups also impersonated and influenced marginalised communities and used marginalised identities to foment discord far beyond the 2016 US presidential election (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Lukito, 2020).

According to Howard et al. (2019), 85% of adult Americans use the internet regularly, and 80% of those people are Facebook users. Social media, such as Facebook, is a source of news and more general information for many. While marginalised groups have used social media to create communities of support and activism, foreign actors have seen the opportunities these social media communities present, misrepresenting and harming marginalised groups as they go (Cavalcante, 2019; Islam, 2019; Lukito, 2020).

Impersonated (or 'black') propaganda is "presented by the propagandizer as coming from a source inside the propagandized" (Becker, 1949, p. 221; Farkas et al., 2018a). The IRA used impersonated propaganda in its efforts to influence foreign politics, including the 2016 American presidential election, creating social media groups which alleged to represent marginalised communities (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Keller et al., 2020; Lukito, 2020). The purpose and uses of these groups purporting to be marginalised communities may be more complex than is typically presumed.

The IRA put significant effort into these social media accounts, in the form of manpower, man hours, and money. Advertisements targeted to marginalised groups were among the costliest, with the greatest expenditure by the IRA. These groups were also amongst the top accumulators of likes and general interactions (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). It is likely, therefore, that these groups served a purpose, and were seen as a valuable part of the IRA's overall strategies. To better understand the purpose of these groups, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth exploration of what these groups posted, what they were attempting to achieve, and how marginalised identities related to these efforts.

1.1. The threat

Nations have long committed campaigns of foreign interference. Russia has an extensive history of interfering in the United States, and the United States has an extensive history of interfering in Russia (DiResta et al., 2018b; T. Jones, 2019; Ziegler, 2018). The IRA uses old and new methods to take advantage of the unique milieu of social media; their actions pose a severe threat to democracies worldwide, and may endanger the concept of democracy itself (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Lukito, 2020; National Intelligence Council, 2017; Rodriguez, 2019; Ziegler, 2018).

Most attention has focused on Russian interference in the American presidential election of 2016. However, the IRA has acted and seen success in numerous nations, including its own. Nowhere is truly safe, with evidence of IRA interference in the Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and other nations (Dawson & Innes, 2019; Paul & Matthews, 2016; Ziegler, 2018). Successes, such as the election of their preferred candidate, Donald Trump, may drive the IRA to continue and expand their campaign, sophisticating their methods to even greater effectiveness (DiResta et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019).

According to the report of the National Intelligence Council (2017), "Russian media hailed President-elect Trump's victory as a vindication of Putin's advocacy of global populist movements…and the latest example of Western liberalism's collapse" (p. ii). The rise of populism and authoritarian rule is both a source of pleasure for Russia

and a goal they actively work towards (Bastos & Farkas, 2019). This encouragement of authoritarianism, and attack on liberal democracy, presents a powerful threat.

The threat is not a temporary one. Elections are "merely a small subset" of the IRA's overall campaign to create massive political and social discord (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 11). It is not only governments and political systems which are under attack: the IRA weaponizes citizens against each other, purposefully manipulating long-standing issues and prejudices, while creating new conspiracies (Badawy et al., 2019; DiResta et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2019; Whitehead et al., 2018).

The IRA's actions intend to stoke hate and discord, and indeed to directly incite violence (DiResta et al., 2018b). Marginalised groups, in particular, are in danger, as the IRA's methods involve encouragement and fomenting of hatred against marginalised groups, using that hatred to drive attacks on democracy as a whole. Marginalised identities are key to fuel conflict and animosity (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018). At the same time, the IRA attempts to ensure the election of governments who are hostile to these marginalised groups and will pass harmful laws, and encourage hateful rhetoric (Blair, 2017; Whitehead et al., 2018; Ziegler, 2018).

The IRA purposefully works to increase division and violence, and decrease trust in potential sources of truth or refutation like the media (Howard et al., 2019; Linvill et al., 2019). They also try to erode trust in the government, especially amongst marginalised people, literally eroding faith in democracy while mobilizing chaos (DiResta et al., 2018b). The IRA's actions create a climate which is hostile to the success of democracy, and places marginalised people in danger.

1.2. Relevance to criminology

The IRA leverages prejudices and stereotypes about marginalised groups; many of these stereotypes include supposed violent tendencies, actions, or a predisposition to commit crime (Howard et al., 2019). When impersonating the right-wing, the IRA talks about Muslims as terrorists, queer people (especially transgender individuals) as rapists/pedophiles, and Black Americans and irregular immigrants as criminals (Blair, 2017; DiResta et al., 2018b; Heiskanen, 2017; T. Jones, 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b). Criminology itself must reflect on its

role in supporting and propagating these stereotypes, in how we write and teach, and in our research focus (Arrigo & Bersot, 2015; Ball et al., 2014).

When impersonating marginalised groups, the IRA emphasises issues that are far more legitimate. They present true stories of homophobic, transphobic, and Islamophobic hate crimes, discuss police brutality and the role of the criminal justice system in oppression, and present examples of misuse of the law as a tool of discrimination (DiResta et al., 2018b, 2018a; Howard et al., 2019; Kim, 2018). All of these issues concern criminology (Belknap, 2015).

In addition, criminology should be very concerned with the outcome the IRA desires: discord and, potentially, violence (Howard et al., 2019; Lukito et al., 2020). Criminologists may be concerned that the IRA's actions - inflaming prejudice and spreading conspiracy theories - could have an effect on crime rates, especially as marginalised groups are vulnerable to becoming victims of violence (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Kondakov, 2019). Criminologists could also create beneficial research by looking at the actions of the IRA with specific theories and paradigms, such as in terms of the process of incitement to violence, and radicalisation (Benkler et al., 2018; Devine, 2017; DiResta et al., 2018b). There are also questions about the IRA's actions and how they fit within international law (Rodriguez, 2019).

We must also beware of academia being used for nefarious purposes, seeing the danger of publicising questionable research to support questionable points, as previous Russian propaganda and interference campaigns have featured Russians posing as academics themselves (T. Jones, 2019). Russia has a history of planting academic articles in scholarly journals – using scholarly publications to influence not just public, but academic thought, while using academia as an arena for creating 'legitimate' support (Boghardt, 2009; T. Jones, 2019). As many marginalised academics can attest, it is difficult, already, to have a voice in academia, and to create research that challenges prevailing narratives (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). How much more so, how much more disheartening, to have this field open to, and used by, political actors who wish them harm?

1.3. The current study

1.3.1. LGBT United and United Muslims: IRA-controlled

This study examines organic posts from two IRA-controlled marginalised-impersonating Facebook groups, LGBT United and United Muslims. There is substantial evidence that these groups were created and controlled by the IRA. Facebook included LGBT United and United Muslims on its list of IRA-created Facebook groups, which was submitted to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, as part of that Committee's investigation into IRA activity (United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b).

This identification is confirmed by various links, paper trails, testimony, and documentation (Howard et al., 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). For instance, Facebook identified patterns in advertisement purchases by many IRA-controlled groups. Despite claiming to be based in the United States, many of these groups paid in Rubles, had Russian internet addresses (or even Russian physical addresses), and used falsified information on PayPal to complete the purchases (T. Jones, 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). These payments appear in budgets submitted to Concord Catering, the company that provided the IRA with significant funding (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018).

The interlinked nature of the assorted IRA-controlled social media accounts, which stretched across platforms, provided evidence in the form of repeatedly-used e-mail addresses, names, and other tell-tale features (United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b). The IRA left a paper trail while creating various events, such as rallies and protests, on American soil; United Muslims, for instance, paid a person to hold a sign for an advertisement, as well as ordering posters to be printed for a rally (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). In addition, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence relied on evidence obtained from within the IRA itself, such as internal memoranda, e-mails, and statements from former IRA employees (United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b). The evidence reliably demonstrates that United Muslims and LGBT United were operated by the IRA.

1.3.2. Research questions

The current study seeks to describe, analyze, explain, and give insight into the methods used by the IRA's marginalised-impersonating groups, and the messages they contain. The aim of this study is to explore and describe the content of the IRA Facebook pages that impersonated marginalised communities, namely the queer and Muslim communities, and to investigate the purposes and potential impacts of this content, uncovering latent meaning and complexities. The research questions are:

1) What does the content of LGBT United and United Muslims look like?

2) What were the messages in this content?

3) How do these particular marginalised identities factor into the content and messages?

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

This chapter begins with discussion of the queer and Muslim communities as groups who are marginalised within Western society, as well as the circumstances and vulnerabilities this position creates. Then, it addresses the ways in which these groups use social media, and the unique role social media plays as a place of community, safety, and activism. Subsequently, it presents the situation of queer and Muslim communities within Russia, considering the ways in which this informs Russia's view of these groups, and Russia's experience in manipulating these groups for political purposes. Then, the chapter provides information about the IRA, looking at studies that describe the IRA's origin, methods, purpose, and impact. The chapter closes with a delineation of gaps in the literature.

2.1. Muslim and queer communities as marginalised groups

"Marginalization—a complex, relational, and contextual phenomenon—is an outcome of ideological and structural oppression wherein certain identity groups and their respective interests are relegated to the margins of political and public spheres" (Coe & Griffin, 2020, p. 2). Both the queer and Muslim communities are considered to be marginalised, experiencing oppression, inequality, discrimination, and, frequently, victimisation (Coe & Griffin, 2020; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This marginalisation makes them uniquely vulnerable to exploitation and harm. In both groups, people of colour face the greatest levels of prejudice, fear, and violence (Karaman & Christian, 2020; Kaufman & Niner, 2019; Lucero, 2017; Patel, 2017; Ramirez et al., 2018).

There are 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, and 1.1% of Americans are Muslim; this community is vast and heterogeneous, including racially. Islam cannot be considered simply as a religion or ideology; it is also "an intersection of culture, ethnicity, and religion" (Rahman & Valliani, 2016, p. 80). Therefore, Islamophobia is often discussed in terms of racialization of religion, wherein "a group of religious people become associated with phenotypical and cultural characteristics that are deemed unchanging and

hereditary" (Kaufman & Niner, 2019, p. 490). Islamophobia, in this view, is sometimes described as racism against Muslims (Garner & Selod, 2015; Karaman & Christian, 2020).

"In the twenty-first century, Muslim has become synonymous with terrorist in media…political…and public discourse in the US" (Kaufman & Niner, 2019, p. 490). While blatant, government encouraged Islamophobia, and Islamophobic hate crimes and violence rose after 9/11, the tropes of Islamophobia have existed as part of Western Christian beliefs since before the Crusades, serving as justification for invasion, violence, and discrimination (Hafez, 2020; Kaufman & Niner, 2019). Muslims have been framed as a common enemy, a scapegoat and a means for Western nations to appeal for solidarity (Brayson, 2019; Crosby, 2014; Hafez, 2014; Winnick, 2019). These beliefs ascribe characteristics to Muslims, framing them as inherently different, inherently inferior, incompatible with Western values, violent, misogynistic, and dangerous (Garner & Selod, 2015; Hafez, 2014; Kaufman & Niner, 2019).

It is incredibly difficult to estimate the worldwide queer population, and while this does partially relate to issues of definitions and methodology, it might also largely come down to a more upsetting reason: for most people, it may simply be too dangerous to admit being queer (Kondakov, 2019; Pachankis & Bränström, 2019; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). Pachankis & Bränström (2019) estimate that up to 83% of the global queer community may be 'in the closet', concealing their identity.

With the addition of the aforementioned challenges relating to how exactly researchers define or determine membership in the queer community, few concrete numbers are found (Borgogna et al., 2019; Carrotte et al., 2016; M. G. F. Worthen, 2020). As an example, a 2017 Gallup Poll asked the question, "Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?", which means their results may not include potential members of the queer community who identify as pansexual, asexual, nonbinary, queer, et cetera (Carrotte et al., 2016; Gates, 2017; M. G. F. Worthen, 2020). Additionally, asking about self-identification (how someone labels their own sexuality or gender identity) creates different results than if questions specifically ask about behaviour or attraction: for instance, Gates (2011) found that 11% of Americans have experienced same-sex attraction, though only 3.5% of American adults identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Borgogna et al., 2019; Gates, 2011).

The queer community, like the Muslim community, is both marginalised and heterogenous (Belfort, 2017; Cavalcante, 2019; Lucero, 2017; Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017; Whitehead & Perry, 2015). Individuals experience this marginalisation in different ways, with intersecting identities – not only their gender or sexual orientation, but also characteristics such as race, religion, disability, immigration status, socioeconomic status, or occupation - affecting their experiences and the prejudice they experience (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017; Lucero, 2017; Meyer, 2020; Patel, 2017; Travers et al., 2020). Transgender individuals, in particular, are highly marginalised and subjected to intense prejudice and violence (Patel, 2017; Spencer, 2019; Travers et al., 2020).

Queer individuals frequently experience discrimination, both interpersonal and societal (Fisher et al., 2017; Harmer & Lumsden, 2019; Jenzen & Karl, 2014; Travers et al., 2020). Members of the community describe suffering homophobic and/or transphobic violence, and facing abandonment and trauma (such as being disowned by family), as well as higher rates of mental illness, suicidality, poverty, homelessness, harassment in the school and workplace, and legalised discrimination (Dessel & Rodenborg, 2017; Gal et al., 2016; Jenzen & Karl, 2014; Liang et al., 2019; Murib, 2019; Patel, 2017; Travers et al., 2020).

2.1.1. White evangelical conservative Christians

Effective consideration and nuanced contextual analysis of propaganda that impersonates marginalised communities, such as that found in LGBT United and United Muslims, requires consideration of another societal group – evangelical Christians, specifically *white* evangelical Christians. This group features a conjunction of race, religion, affiliation, and political loyalty (Gorski, 2017; Johnston, 2016). They also have a very important outlook on, and relationship to, these two marginalised communities, and therefore potentially to the IRA (Johnston, 2016; Kuruvilla, 2017; Wolff et al., 2012).

A notable similarity between the Muslim and queer communities: these are two identities which white evangelical conservative Christians may feel it is acceptable to have active, outspoken hostility towards (Castle, 2019; Glass, 2019; Johnston, 2016; Whitehead et al., 2018). Evangelical Christians may view these groups' very existence as a threat, and their mere presence as an assault on Christianity and an affront to God (Colliver et al., 2019; Johnston, 2016).

Evangelical Christians are the largest religious group in the United States, comprising one-third of Americans, and are recognised as Donald Trump's primary base of support (Kurtzleben, 2015; Kuruvilla, 2017). Evangelicals "constitute a distinct sector of Christianity known for their social and political influence and … share a core set of beliefs as a group" (Kanamori et al., 2017, p. 77). Specifically, evangelical Christianity is known for combining religion and politics (Gorski, 2017; Johnston, 2016; Kurtzleben, 2015).

Evangelical Christianity is difficult to define, leading many studies to simply ask participants to self-identify as evangelical (Kanamori et al., 2017; Wolff et al., 2012). However, the National Association of Evangelicals purposefully worked with LifeWay Research to create a set of four statements an evangelical would strongly agree with, to be used for academic purposes:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation. (National Association of Evangelicals & LifeWay Research, 2015, p. 1)

These characteristics - especially the supremacy of the Bible, and the drive to convert others to Christianity - are relevant not only to evangelicals' religious beliefs, but to their political actions, (Gorski, 2017; Johnston, 2016; Todd et al., 2020).

Race is an essential issue to consider, not just religion. While evangelical Christianity as a whole cannot be seen as intrinsically conservative – in fact, most Black evangelicals vote Democrat - *white* evangelical Christianity *can* be seen as intrinsically conservative (Glass, 2019; Gorski, 2017; Kuruvilla, 2017). White evangelicals are the most likely group to feel negatively towards both the queer and Muslim communities (M. Campbell et al., 2019; Sherkat & Lehman, 2018). White conservative Christianity is, according to Glass (2019), the "central cleavage in contemporary American political and social life" (p. 9). Amongst all religious groups in the United States, white conservative evangelical Christians hold the most negative attitudes towards queer people,

immigrants and refugees, and a very strong and specific dislike of Islam (D. Cox et al., 2017; Kuruvilla, 2017; Sherkat & Lehman, 2018; Whitehead et al., 2018).

Only 34% of white evangelicals believe homosexuality should be accepted in society (in comparison, 52% of Muslims believe homosexuality should be accepted in society) (Kuruvilla, 2017). Being Christian, especially being a white evangelical Christian, significantly increases the likelihood of holding negative attitudes and prejudices regarding the queer community (e.g. M. Campbell et al., 2019; Castle, 2019; Fisher et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2017; Todd et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2012). Transgender people are viewed even more negatively than other members of the queer community; many evangelicals see transgender people as opposing God and his divine will (Colliver et al., 2019).

Many of these beliefs seem to be linked to the concept of Christian hegemony – the belief that the US should be Christian, and Christians should be in power. The queer and Muslim communities are seen as a threat to this power (Rana, 2007; Todd et al., 2020). With the combination of white evangelical tendency to have negative feelings towards marginalised communities, and evangelicals' recognised political importance, especially as supporters of Trump, this group may serve as a ready target for propaganda, particularly propaganda that revolves around the queer and Muslim communities (Gorski, 2017; Whitehead et al., 2018).

2.2. Marginalised people on social media

Marginalised groups have a unique relationship to social media, and may be particularly vulnerable, and particularly affected, by online interference campaigns. For many marginalised individuals, online communities hold a recognised role as spaces not only of community and identity, but of support, safety, and trust (e.g. Bahfen, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019; Eckert et al., 2019; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Islam, 2019; Lucero, 2017; McConnell et al., 2017; Wills & Fecteau, 2016). By assuming that existing role, and taking advantage of the trust associated with it, the IRA and other interference campaigns have the potential to wield a great deal of power with limited effort (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019).

Social media is a useful, sometimes even vital, platform and tool for marginalised individuals, as a place where their voices can be heard, and they can find a community (Bahfen, 2018; Gal et al., 2016; Lucero, 2017; Pennington, 2018). "New participatory digital technologies have facilitated a dramatic shift in minorities' accessibility to public discourse. In recent decades, virtual public spaces have become significant sites for collective identity formation" (Gal et al., 2016, p. 1700). This significance differentiates the IRA social media accounts which impersonated right-wing, dominant groups from those which impersonated marginalised groups: social media has a higher degree of importance, and a larger part to play, in the lives of marginalised individuals (Andreassen, 2017; Downing, 2013; McConnell et al., 2017).

The internet, as a place of interaction and discourse, provides a feasible venue for activism as well as simple, unhidden existence for those who are not in a dominant position in society (McKenna & Chughtai, 2020). For marginalised groups, social media - and their presence and activism on social media - is a source of power, and a means of building and leveraging that power (Gal et al., 2016; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012; Yukich, 2018). Therefore, in targeting marginalised groups via social media, and on social media, imitating those same social media communities that serve as places of identity and safety, the IRA impinges upon the power and agency of these communities as a whole - the IRA commits a further sin.

2.2.1. Use of social media by the queer community

Social media holds a unique place and importance in queer culture, as a safe space (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Lucero, 2017). These online communities are sometimes the only environments where queer individuals feel they can be themselves, especially if they are from a family, or location, where being queer is socially unacceptable, or even dangerous (Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Jenzen, 2017). Social media is often where young people first find the wider queer community, and it serves as a venue for exploration, identity-formation, and information (Cavalcante, 2019; McInroy et al., 2019). Online queer communities are places of trust and vulnerability, with a presumption of safety not often found in LGBT individuals' 'real' lives (Cavalcante, 2019; Liang et al., 2019; Lucero, 2017). The trust these communities hold could be powerful if exploited.

As a population whose existence is inherently political, online queer communities are also places for activism (Jenzen, 2017; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). Social media groups create a mass of individuals who can inform one another and act together, wielding collective power; activism might include laws to protest, petitions to sign, and information about candidates who oppose or support the community as a whole (McConnell et al., 2017; McKenna & Chughtai, 2020). Activism, and politics, are an essential feature of queer social media communities.

2.2.2. Use of social media by the Muslim community

On social media, Muslim users can create a safe place to exist, explore their identity, and create community with people who share culture and experiences (Eckert et al., 2019; Pennington, 2018; Wills & Fecteau, 2016). While social media is still full of Islamophobia, users can create 'Muslim-friendly' spaces through curation via choosing who to friend or follow (Eckert et al., 2019; Pennington, 2018). It is also a place of humour, and enjoyment of participating in fandom as part of communities for fans of particular media (Bahfen, 2018; Pennington, 2018).

For many, social media is a platform for discussions with Muslims and non-Muslims, creating opportunities for educating, engaging, and showing an alternate Islam, one that contradicts the dominant stereotypes (Downing & Dron, 2020; Eckert et al., 2019; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013; Pennington, 2018). It also facilitates discussion of intra-community issues which some may be reluctant to discuss elsewhere, due to the knowledge of how this discussion might be seen and used by Islamophobes to justify prejudice (Bahfen, 2018; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013; Wills & Fecteau, 2016). Even on social media many Muslim users describe the constant pressure to show and maintain a positive image (Downing & Dron, 2020; Eckert et al., 2019; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013; Pennington, 2018).

Social media cultivates a feeling of agency, and of having a voice (Bahfen, 2018; Downing & Dron, 2020; Eckert et al., 2019). This often becomes action - challenging, correcting, and fighting Islamophobia and its rhetoric, without the immediate threat to physical safety. Muslims use social media's connectivity, and efficiency to take political action, from organising protests of the Muslim Ban (an executive order that restricted entry into the Untied States for people from seven majority Muslim countries) to

spreading recordings of injustices like videos of police brutality, to standing in solidarity and fighting against fake news (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Downing & Dron, 2020; Eckert et al., 2019; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013; Pennington, 2018). Overall, social media is very important, as a place of action, safety, community, identity, support, and trust, as well as organisation and political action (Bahfen, 2018; Eckert et al., 2019; Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013; Wills & Fecteau, 2016).

2.3. Queer and Muslim communities in Russia

In the past decades, as Russian nationalism and conservativism have grown, so too has homophobia. In 2013, the Russian government passed anti-gay propaganda laws, vaguely worded and broadly applied statutes targeting queer groups and individuals (Buyantueva, 2018; Kondakov, 2019). This homophobia has not limited itself to laws: numerous queer people have been attacked and murdered, and others are targeted by criminal groups seeking to commit blackmail (Kondakov, 2019; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). Visible queerness is aggressively suppressed, and open or even accessible discussion of queer issues or culture is largely silenced (Buyantueva, 2017). In such a situation, IRA employees are unlikely to be personally familiar with how to convincingly play a queer person – instead, they appear to have turned to researching and subsequently impersonating real online queer communities (Lukito, 2020; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018).

This Russian homophobia is not to be mistaken for simple conservatism: it is also very deliberately wielded for political purposes. Queer people are a handy example to point to as demonstrating negative Western cultural influence (Buyantueva, 2018; Suchland, 2018). Opposition to queer rights is used to define and reinforce Russian national identity in terms of defiance, difference, and moral superiority to the West (Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015; Suchland, 2018). Being opposed to queer rights is framed as patriotic, standing up against Western imperialism, while support for queer rights is framed as unpatriotic (Buyantueva, 2018; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). In the same way as American evangelical conservative Christianity has amalgamated conservativism and nationalism with religion, Russia has amalgamated homophobia and conservatism with patriotism (Gorski, 2017; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015; Suchland, 2018).

Russia's treatment of Muslims is more subtle, lacking such blatantly antagonistic laws (Aitamurto, 2016; Müller, 2019). The government has sometimes used the supposed lack of Islamophobia as a point of pride, separating itself from the 'Islamophobic West' (Simons, 2019). Russia presents a positive face, supporting and sponsoring Muslim community projects (Akhmetkarimov, 2019). President Vladimir Putin even ceremonially inaugurated a new mosque, magnanimously declaring that Islam is an indigenous Russian religion. Nonetheless, his speech also insisted on linking Muslims with terrorism, emphasising the role Russia's 'traditional Islam' must play in the fight against Islamic extremism (Müller, 2019).

This is the key phrase: traditional Islam. While theoretically permitted and even protected by the government, Russian Islam is tightly constrained (Aitamurto, 2016; Akhmetkarimov, 2019). Islam in Russia is completely controlled by the government, which only permits the practice of 'traditional Islam' – anything else, deemed 'non-traditional', is forbidden. What, exactly, traditional Islam consists of is unclear: the flexible definition is used to crack down on opponents, ban books, shut down organisations, and suppress attempts at independence (Aitamurto, 2019; Akhmetkarimov, 2019; Ragozina, 2020).

Some of the 'gist' behind traditional Islam focuses around nationalism; complete loyalty to Russia must come before loyalty to religion or religious community (Aitamurto, 2016; Akhmetkarimov, 2019). Traditional Islam also insist upon generally conservative views – for instance, so-called traditional family values (Müller, 2019; Ragozina, 2020). Traditional Islam demands complete adherence to the government-created religious bureaucratic hierarchies, obedience to government-appointed religious leaders, and education by government-approved Islamic scholars (in government-created schools, with a government-guided curriculum) (Aitamurto, 2019; Akhmetkarimov, 2019; Müller, 2019). Essentially, the government also forbids Russian Muslims to connect with the multinational, worldwide Muslim community, as any external influence is viewed as a threat to Russian nationalism (Akhmetkarimov, 2019; Hunter, 2004; Ragozina, 2020).

Indeed, despite this official permission (and tight control), Islam itself is viewed as a threat, with repetition of familiar tropes of Muslims as terrorists, disloyal, opponents to Christianity, and embodying 'the other'. Modern construing of Muslims as terrorists does not claim to stem from 9/11, however, but from attacks on Russian soil, as well as

actions by Chechen separatists (Ragozina, 2020; Vlaeminck, 2019). This history stretches back farther, with Russia as a conqueror of Islamic states. Russia has long viewed itself as a bulwark, defending Christianity – and Christendom – from the Islamic East. Muslims have long been used as a national 'other'. Muslims in Russia were harshly treated, especially in the USSR with its state atheism, wherein government discouraged, and sometimes forbade, citizens from religious affiliation or practices (Akhmetkarimov, 2019; Hunter, 2004; Vicini, 2020). After a brief period of relative freedom following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Russian government once again implemented intense control, while using their laws as an excuse to avoid accusations of Islamophobia (Aitamurto, 2016; Akhmetkarimov, 2019). This is an old and effective Russian method.

Muslim Russians have a long history of struggling for survival and self-determination, and live, now, theoretically tolerated yet with little political power. Additionally, the government – and non-Muslim Russians – have been pushing back against even this toleration; this pushback can be seen in arguments against hijabs being permitted in schools, along with fewer mosque permits being issued, and the increasing power of the Russian Orthodox Church (Aitamurto, 2016, 2019; Ragozina, 2020). Islam is viewed as "threatening to Russia's cultural integrity and authenticity" (Hunter, 2004, p. 420). This supposed threat, and Russia's insistence that such control is necessary to prevent extremism, are used as a justification for violence, both domestic and military (Aitamurto, 2019; Ragozina, 2020).

2.3.1. Russian propaganda use of these communities

For decades, Russia has deployed international propaganda which focused on marginalised groups, including LGBT people, stirring dissent and political discord by exploiting and inflaming homophobic sentiments, then purposefully pitting this homophobia against the struggle for queer rights (T. Jones, 2019). Exploration of this history is essential to understand the full depth of the IRA's methods, which involve leveraging marginalised identities (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Lukito et al., 2020).

In 1997, for instance, sociologist Alexandr Dugin, discussed the importance of "introduc[ing] geopolitical disorder into internal American activity, encouraging all kinds

of separatism – ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements – extremist, racist and sectarian groups, thus destabilizing internal political processes in the US" (Dugin, 1997, p. 367, as cited in T. Jones, 2019, p. 5). He also pointed out a key finding of this study: the specific focus on conservative Christians, as queer rights are something "about which religious conservatives can become incensed" (Dugin, 1997, p. 367, as cited in T. Jones, 2019, p. 5).

Russian propaganda and interference campaigns have also involved exploitation of feelings and activism around Muslims and Islamophobia. Often this consisted of continual representation of Muslims as a threat to Russian safety and culture (Hunter, 2004; Ragozina, 2020). However, it also sometimes involved positioning Russia as a religiously tolerant nation which respects Islam, in theoretical contrast to the Islamophobic West (Simons, 2019).

For Russian operations, it was logical and valuable to restrict and oppose rights within Russia, while creating propaganda that supported them elsewhere, and vice versa (T. Jones, 2019; Kondakov, 2019; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). Such a dichotomy serves to create a strong feeling of 'us vs. them', uniting Russians against a common enemy, painting Russia as standing strong against a decadent, immoral West (Buyantueva, 2018; Suchland, 2018).

2.4. The Internet Research Agency

The founder of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), Yevgeniy Prigozhin, is known as a close associate of Russian president Vladimir Putin; despite appeals to plausible deniability, the IRA is assumed to operate under the auspices of the Russian government (McCombie et al., 2020; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b). In the beginning, after its official incorporation as a company in 2013, the IRA mostly focused on operations and propaganda campaigns within Russia and in nearby countries. However, they quickly turned their eyes, and expertise, to the United States (Howard et al., 2019; Lukito, 2020; McCombie et al., 2020).

Though it ran multiple campaigns, the IRA put a great deal of effort and attention into its 'translator project', which operated accounts on social media for the purpose of

political interference and information warfare, via impersonated propaganda (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020; Howard et al., 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Impersonated propaganda (also known as 'black' propaganda), is described by Farkas et al. (2018) as disguising its actual source, instead being "presented by the propagandizer as coming from a source inside the propagandized" (Becker, 1949, p. 221).

Hundreds of IRA employees worked around the clock, creating and operating social media accounts that claimed to belong to Americans, especially American activists (McCombie et al., 2020). The IRA researched real United States social media accounts, and even contacted genuine American activists for advice, posing as fellow American activists (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). These specialists ran multiple social media accounts across a plethora of social media platforms, including Facebook. Through these accounts, the IRA attempted to convincingly play the part of American people and groups, to gain followers and influence, to amplify their impact, and to emphasise divisive social issues while spreading disinformation (Badawy et al., 2019; DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; McCombie et al., 2020; Xia et al., 2019).

Supervisors monitored employees' performance and output, giving feedback and instructions telling them what topics to post that day, what issues to emphasise, and even offering potential phrasing. These accounts were set up with different focuses and aims, impersonating people belonging to various communities within the US, and places on the political spectrum (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; DiResta et al., 2018b; Linvill et al., 2019). Posts often focused on known issues and divisions within the US. The IRA's primary goal was identified as the election of Donald Trump, however, their efforts continued and, in some cases, expanded, after the election (Kim, 2018; Rodriguez, 2019). Their overarching aim can be seen as fomenting political dissent, encouraging nationalistic populism, and weakening democracy (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018; Ziegler, 2018).

Numerous studies – governmental, academic, or both – have investigated the social media accounts run by the IRA , exploring this attempt to influence American politics and society (e.g. Badawy et al., 2019; Bastos & Farkas, 2019; DiResta et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018; Linvill et al., 2019; Lukito, 2020; Lukito et al.,

2019; McCombie et al., 2020; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018; Xia et al., 2019, etc.). Research has so far focused on uncovering the origin and practices of the IRA, as well undertaking a broad examination of methods, nature, and themes relating to the purposes of these social media accounts. Studies have looked at ads, as well as organic content (that is, the actual posts posted in the group), as well as metadata provided to the government by social media companies like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b).

Largely, some common themes and findings have emerged, relating to the IRA's goals and methods. The Internet Research Agency undertook "a sweeping and sustained social influence operation consisting of various coordinated disinformation tactics aimed directly at US citizens, designed to exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in US culture" (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 4).

Topics emphasised on so-called left-impersonating groups included feelings of anger and fear around existing issues of violence and harm (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019). For instance, Black-impersonating groups emphasised police brutality, Muslim-impersonating groups emphasised Islamophobia, and queer-impersonating groups emphasised homophobia and transphobia (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; National Intelligence Council, 2017; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b). By 2016, some of these groups had hundreds of thousands of followers, with their content and memes spread widely across the internet (DiResta et al., 2018a; McCombie et al., 2020; Zannettou et al., 2020). Two of the most successful groups were on Facebook: United Muslims, and LGBT United (Albright, 2017a).

Topics on the right-impersonating groups seemed designed to stir anger, and a feeling of outside threat, revolving around hatred and fear of Muslims, immigrants, refugees, queer people, and minorities (Howard et al., 2019; Linvill et al., 2019). These posts also featured frequent appeals to patriotism and Christianity, and were often phrased with violent language and expressed hostility towards marginalised groups (Blair, 2017; DiResta et al., 2018a, 2018b; Lukito et al., 2020).

In right-impersonating groups, the IRA sought to mobilise voters for Trump. In marginalised-impersonating groups they sought to suppress voters, keeping them from voting for Clinton (Howard et al., 2019; Kim, 2018; National Intelligence Council, 2017). In general, the IRA sought to elect Trump, but also to foment violence and discord, while creating distrust in traditional sources of information like the media, and encouraging disillusionment with the government and democracy itself (Lukito, 2020; National Intelligence Council, 2017; Ziegler, 2018).

2.5. Gaps in the literature

While previous research has added much to our knowledge of the IRA and its activities, there are areas which have not been fully explored, and angles which have not been fully addressed. Existing research tends to assume that the community an IRA-controlled account impersonated is *also* the intended audience for propaganda created by that account. For instance, if an account impersonated queer people, it would be assumed that queer people were the intended target of that account's posts (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Linvill et al., 2019). This conflation appears in the tendency of studies to split IRA-controlled social media accounts into fairly broad categories. These categories are often based upon presumed political ideology of the impersonated community/assumed audience, sometimes with the addition of categories based upon race or religion, all of which may create a simplified view of the complexities of the identities involved (Guittar & Guittar, 2015; Massaquoi, 2015).

Thus far, there does not appear to have been categorisation – or analysis – of IRA-controlled social media accounts based upon a clear factor that many of the communities impersonated by the IRA share: being marginalised. Many studies have looked at accounts deemed right-leaning and accounts deemed left-leaning, however even in these projects the primary focus appears to have been on right-impersonating accounts. This focus may be due to the more blatantly hostile language and encouragement to concrete political activity present in these right-impersonating accounts (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Lukito, 2020). While they are discussed in many studies, there has been overall less attention given to marginalised-impersonating accounts; notably, there has been limited in-depth focus on United Muslims, which impersonated the Muslim community, despite the recognised centrality

of Islamophobia and Muslim identity in the IRA's political interference campaign (Badawy et al., 2019; DiResta et al., 2018a; Howard et al., 2019).

Though the literature examining the IRA's social media activity has provided significant insights, there are a number of angles and tools which have yet to be widely employed. Overall, previous studies do not appear to have featured much in-depth consideration of context (historical, societal, and in terms of power relations), application of critical theories, or use of researchers who have insider knowledge of the communities being impersonated. While the research may, in fact, have included researchers from marginalised communities, in most cases whether they did so is unclear, as the majority of studies lack discussion of researchers' positionality (Zempi, 2016).

By focusing on these under-emphasised aspects, bringing in critical perspectives, performing qualitative analysis to examine marginalised-impersonating social media accounts, taking advantage of insider knowledge, and incorporating extensive consideration of context, the current study aims to address some of the gaps in the existing literature.

Chapter 3.

Methods

This chapter describes the methodology (the wider philosophical approach to the research) and methods (the specific choice of techniques) employed in the current study. It explores the choice of qualitative methods, in particular qualitative content analysis, and data collection process, including source and sampling. As well, this chapter outlines the critical perspective that underlies the study as a whole, and the analysis of the data via an iterative coding process, which resulted in a number of in-depth themes. Finally, the chapter features a discussion of positionality and researcher identity.

3.1. Qualitative content analysis of social media posts

Qualitative research facilitates deep analysis and interpretation, and examination of subtleties and nuances that other forms of research may not attain (Barbour, 2019b; Saldana, 2011). Qualitative research is flexible, allowing researchers to select methods that suit the needs of each individual study – the data, the context, the tools, and the researcher themselves (Barbour, 2019b; Flick, 2014; Schreier, 2014).

This study is a qualitative content analysis of organic content – posts posted by the IRA-controlled Facebook groups (Albright, 2017c). Content analysis is a "research method for the subjective interpretation for the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Content analysis is valuable for explaining IRA content, as it excels at digging deep, finding and analysing manifest meanings (those which are most apparent, surface-level), and latent meanings (those which are sub textual, less obvious, and connotative) (Saldana, 2011). It is vital that this analysis consider the context around the data; the real-world events surrounding its creation and reception (Barbour, 2019). This method also provides a method for reducing data, which permits more effective analysis of large datasets (Schreier, 2014).

3.2. Data collection and sampling

This sample originates from data collected and made available by Dr. Jonathan Albright, who is currently research director of Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism (Albright, 2017a; Timberg, 2017). Albright has researched disinformation and Russian foreign interference on social media for several years, and has been part of major reports and projects relating to the IRA (DiResta et al., 2018b; Lapowsky, 2018). While Facebook acknowledged and released information regarding IRA-purchased ads, they did not share data from the actual IRA-controlled Facebook groups until much later, during the Senate Select Committee's investigation (United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b).

Albright, recognising that looking only at ads would give a partial picture of IRA activity and impact, gathered organic posts (Lapowsky, 2018). He used leaks reported in the media to identify Facebook groups which were believed to be controlled by the IRA, identifications subsequently confirmed by financial and paper trails, as seen in Senate reports and indictments (Lapowsky, 2018; Timberg, 2017; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Amongst these groups were 'LGBT United' and 'United Muslims of America'.

Moving to access and preserve data before Facebook removed these groups and associated data, Albright used Facebook's own tool, CrowdTangle, to access and download text posts and associated metadata (Lapowsky, 2018; Timberg, 2017). In this way, he obtained the 500 most recent posts in each Facebook group he pursued. After cleaning, organising, and arranging the data, Albright uploaded it to data.world and Tableau, on Oct. 4, 2017 (Albright, 2017c, 2017a). The 500 posts in the United Muslims dataset range in posting date from Jan. 26, 2016–August 23, 2017. The 500 posts in LGBT Untied range from July 12, 2015–August 24, 2017.

LGBT United and United Muslims were purposively selected because they represent two of the IRA's attempts to impersonate marginalised groups. These 500 posts from LGBT United, and 500 from United Muslims – for a total of 1000 posts - provided enough scope for exploration while keeping the expansiveness of the research to a manageable level (Barbour, 2019b). This purposive sample created a manageable

and useful target for analysis, with hope of reaching data saturation, as well as providing strong room for making comparisons between the two datasets (Barbour, 2019b; Rapley, 2014). In a sense this was also a convenience sample, as Albright's datasets are some of the only readily-repositories of organic posts from IRA-controlled Facebook accounts (Albright, 2020; Saldana, 2011).

In these datasets, only the textual material could be seen, not the associated images which were included in the original posts. Available information also included a modicum of posts' metadata, e.g., the date posted. The collected posts did not include the comments which would have been made in response to the post, nor does it include the type of reactions given to the post, such as likes, 'hearts', et cetera. This information would have been a fascinating and valuable source for analysis.

When possible, further information was gathered regarding the original contents of a post. For instance, if a post referenced a news story or current event, a google search was performed to determine the veracity of statements, and the specific topic of the post. This additional research helped judge if posts were accurately presenting information, as well as giving an indication of the angle of the posts.

3.3. Coding and analysis

Grounded theory guided the analysis, developing theory by allowing insights to emerge that are grounded in the data itself (Barbour, 2019a; Charmaz, 2015). The process involved iterative analysis, constant comparison, and continual reworking and refining (Charmaz, 2015; Maher et al., 2018). Grounded theory was especially appropriate to analyse these datasets, as part of what made this data so intriguing was its enigmatic and many-layered nature.

This qualitative content analysis was also a highly iterative process, with frequent re-examination of data when new themes emerged, comparison of datasets, and coding and re-coding to develop solid themes (Barbour, 2019a; Elliott, 2018; Saldana, 2011). The coding process involved use of NVivo, Excel, and a ridiculous amount of paper. Initial coding largely focussed on categorisation and concepts, noting frequently appearing topics, words, and even formatting. These emergent codes were then organised into categories in a continual iterative process, going through levels of

development and refinement, repeatedly comparing data, codes, and categories, to each other and between datasets. Eventually, these codes and categories were interpreted into themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2014).

Gaining greater context for understanding and interpreting posts required frequent further research. For instance, a number of United Muslims posts necessitated googling Arabic phrases and reading parts of the Qur'an. Analysis also involved simple counting, especially with regard to repeated posts, which were a common occurrence. This counting consisted of doing a dataset-wide text search for every single post, to determine if the post, or even specific phrasing from it, was re-posted at a later date.

Codes, and eventually themes, were highly applicable between the two datasets, supporting the striking initial impression of similarity they gave. There were visible similarities between the datasets; between their formats, methodology, post length, and tactics, as well as many areas of content. These two groups look remarkably similar to one another, but quite different from other IRA Facebook groups, such as Secured Borders or Blacktivist (Albright, 2017c; DiResta et al., 2018a).

3.4. Rigour

Qualitative rigour does not look the same as quantitative rigour; qualitative research aims not for validity, but rather for concepts such as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Barbour, 2014; Maher et al., 2018). In this study, examples from the data will support arguments, with thick description, and references to other academic research, giving evidence to suggest that my findings are plausible interpretations of the data, supporting my claim to credibility and dependability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Maher et al., 2018; Saldana, 2011). In-depth description of methods, actions, challenges, and decisions will hopefully create transparency, contributing to trustworthiness, as well as giving readers sufficient information that it will be possible to see how these conclusions can apply to other contexts, thus enhancing transferability (Barbour, 2014; Greene, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transparency regarding positionality - with implementation of constant reflexivity in considering how my position, beliefs, biases, and assumptions may affect analysis – will hopefully serve to encourage belief that my analysis is trustworthy (Berger, 2015; Maher et al., 2018; Saldana, 2011).

3.5. Positionality and perspective

Positionality relates to the ways in which a researcher's identities and experience inevitably impact the performance and conclusions of research (Saldana, 2011). These identities and experiences are not a negative, but rather something to be acknowledged and addressed, with the potential for attempting to ameliorate negative effects, especially through reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Gould, 2015).

Zempi (2016) lists several aspects of identity that a researcher should address, especially as they relate to research and its context. Guided by this, I enumerate my own position: I am a white, cisgender, disabled, bisexual queer woman. I was raised as a conservative evangelical Christian, was born in Canada with English as my first language, and I have a post-secondary education (as demonstrated by the existence of this thesis). My identities intersect, and affect the way I experience the world; some of my identities are marginalised, whereas in other identities I am part of a dominant group (Crenshaw, 1991; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Massaquoi, 2015; Rahman, 2010).

Nonetheless, identity as a researcher might supersede any other identities, especially in the eyes of members of the marginalised community to which the researcher belongs, which may make it impossible for a researcher to ever truly be an insider (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Bruckert (2014) discusses her fears that, despite her shared identity as part of the marginalised community she was doing research within, her identity as an academic – part of a group which has done great harm to this community - might lead her participants to recognise her "as the outsider I fear I am" (p. 312).

The placement of oneself as insider or outsider must acknowledge the inherent fluidity of such boundaries, which ceaselessly shift a researcher may share some identities, but not others, and which of those identities is most relevant changes from moment to moment and context to context (Bailey et al., 2019; Berger, 2015; Couture et al., 2012). In the present study, I am both an insider and an outsider, and inhabit that strange shifting world in-between, as my multiplicity of identities intersect (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Lozano-Neira & Marchbank, 2016).

I am an insider as a member of the queer community, yet I am an outsider because I am not a member of the Muslim community (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Zempi, 2016). In addition, I am a white person who was raised as a conservative evangelical Christian. While I am no longer part of that religious group, I still have insider knowledge relating to that community. Thus, I take a position analogous to Barbour's (2019) key informant: someone who is no longer within a community or situation, but is still 'in the know' and can provide insights into it based on that knowledge.

The findings of this current study argue that consideration of the evangelical Christian community is useful to explore the IRA's efforts to impersonate Muslims and the queer community. Therefore, my experiential knowledge of being a white conservative evangelical Christian is relevant. As will be discussed, this group is notable, and may be a ripe target for the IRA's impersonation of Muslims and queer people, with the potential to be susceptible to believing false, damaging stereotypes and potentially acting upon these beliefs in harmful ways (Glass, 2019; Gorski, 2017; Lewis et al., 2017; Wolff et al., 2012).

Placing myself as an insider or outsider is yet more complex because the people creating the content are Russians impersonating these marginalised communities (Howard et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018)! However, "fabrications can still "tell us something about the manner in which specific social and cultural ideas …are constructed" (Hookway, 2008, p. 97).

Insiders and outsiders both bring unique benefits, challenges, and necessary practices for encouraging quality of research (Berger, 2015; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). An insider is "better equipped with insights and the ability to understand implied content…and more sensitized to certain dimensions of the data " (Berger, 2015, p. 223).

My identity and insider positions are important, as they frequently play a part in my interpretation of data, as my own lived experience and knowledge create insight and nuance (Berger, 2015; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). This is true both as a member of the queer community, and as a former conservative evangelical Christian. Often my interpretation is supported by existing research; sometimes, however, research into a specific area, issue, or factor simply does not exist, which

might be seen as a rather common experience for members of marginalised groups (Carrotte et al., 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In these cases, my paradigm as an insider provides background and context for interpretation (Berger, 2015; Saldana, 2011; Zempi, 2016).

As a member of the queer community, I am aware of – and fluent in – many queer "shibboleths". Shibboleths are "words or phrases in particular contexts that allow members of a niche group to recognize one another" (Fraser, 2015). They are secret signs, recognisable as correct and familiar to those in-the-know, but difficult to recognise or imitate for outsiders, serving as signals of authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, solidarity, and common experience. Small, widely-known details are passwords, markers, that make someone appear to be 'one of us' (DeCook, 2018; Fraser, 2015).

Failure to adequately pass the shibboleth test plays into a theme discussed later in this study – Bad Imitations. This theme, and this failure, demonstrate the necessity for insider knowledge and researchers; things that appeared blatantly incongruous to me may not have to others (Berger, 2015; Zempi, 2016). What worked to appear genuine for people who were not members of the queer community, may ring false for those more familiar with the community's language and culture (Fraser, 2015; Zempi, 2016).

My experience being raised as a white conservative evangelical Christian gives me another type of insight – insight into Islamophobia, transphobia, and homophobia (Johnston, 2016; Kanamori et al., 2017; Wolff et al., 2012). I have experience with these prejudices, and the fears stoked and stereotypes believed. However, I must be diligent to monitor my assumptions, recognising that every person's experiences and understandings will be different, especially those who have different intersectional identities (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). I must guard against the dangers of imposing my perceptions, by questioning interpretations while looking for alternative explanations and negative cases (Berger, 2015).

In my personal and academic life, I have long respected, and been interested in learning about, the Muslim community. I have researched, read, explored, and asked questions, seeking to know more, while also trying to support the Muslim community and combat Islamophobia. Nonetheless, as an outsider to the Muslim community, I run the danger of bringing in and reinforcing harmful stereotypes, promulgating inaccurate

interpretations, speaking over community members, and reproducing dangerous prejudices (Berger, 2015; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Zempi, 2016).

To increase my understanding, and to try to guard against doing such harm, I dedicated myself to 'putting in the work'. I have immersed myself in reading academic literature, especially critical qualitative research which featured participants speaking about their own experiences, as well as research completed by Muslim scholars. I sought to explore the heterogeneity of the Muslim community, questioning and investigating assumptions and stereotypes, doing my best to delve widely to hear many voices and perspectives. I aimed to look in-depth at context, both historical and current. I also approached non-academic sources, from blogs to websites to rants and memes, as well as discussing issues with Muslim friends.

My analysis of United Muslims is also aided by the potential for comparison provided by LGBT United, which impersonates a community I am more familiar with (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019). Patterns I recognised in LGBT United could subsequently be looked for in United Muslims. However, it must be emphasised: research into propaganda which impersonates – or attempts to incite hatred against – the Muslim community would benefit hugely from insider research by Muslim scholars (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Zempi, 2016).

All research was approached from a critical criminological perspective: intentional awareness of the importance of intersectionality, marginalisation, and power relations (Arrigo & Bersot, 2015; Belknap, 2015). A critical perspective guides researchers to keep in mind goals and principles relating to the power of marginalised groups. A critical lens seeks empowerment of oppressed people, with special attention to disempowerment and forces that do these groups harm (Arrigo & Bersot, 2015; Ball, 2016; Belknap, 2015). Intersectional thought focuses on the complexities of identity and ways in which identities result in unique experiences, and often specifically in unique experiences of victimisation and oppression (Bailey et al., 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; Rahman, 2010).

This research also contains elements of feminist theory and queer theory, both of which are forms of critical theory themselves (Ball, 2016; Ball et al., 2014; Hordge-Freeman, 2018). These theories are guaranteed to inform my research because of my

own identity as a queer woman and feminist, as well as my methodological background as a critical researcher.

Feminist theory is very important to this research, as many of the prejudices and fears discussed and relating to these communities centre around women, and how the excuse of protecting women is used as a justification for discrimination (Blumell et al., 2019). Queer theory is essential, as both groups face the intricacies of prejudices which can relate to transphobia and homophobia, as well as gender (Freude & Vergés Bosch, 2020; Massaquoi, 2015). It is also essential to consider the ways in which identities intersect: Muslim women, queer women, queer Muslims, and queer Muslim women, all very much exist (Thompson, 2020).

In addition, this study is informed by post-colonial theory, to guide examination of issues around Western imperialism and the ongoing effects of colonialism (Kerner, 2018; Santesso, 2017). This is especially vital when considering the Muslim community, which has been, and still is, hugely impacted by colonialism and Western imperialism (Brayson, 2019; Rahman, 2014).

Chapter 4.

Results

This chapter presents the themes that emerged from analysis of organic posts from LGBT United and United Muslims. These themes reveal suggestive patterns and meanings, backed by intense research, insider knowledge, and rich description including frequent use of quotes, to support interpretations. The content is described in terms of its prima facie nature, the surface-level characteristics and notable features. Then, discussion moves to the ways in which the IRA appropriated and impersonated these marginalised identities, seeking to avoid detection while attempting to appear legitimate, often making use of non-textual media, and frequently using the real communities' own work and words. Despite such efforts, these attempts had noticeable flaws.

The third theme focuses on inaction, and attempts to generate political passivity, in distinct contrast to the usual political activism of marginalised communities on social media. The next theme explores the encouragement of feelings of fear, anger, helplessness, and victimisation, and the manipulation of subsequent isolation and in-group trust. Next, there is description of content that was likely to strike at sensitive places, by specifically discussing – and often antagonising – Christianity, as well as repeatedly emphasising 'dog-whistle' issues. Finally, the chapter closes with discussion of a notable feature of the issues raised in these groups: the issues are legitimate.

4.1. Content

As part of the analysis of these datasets, posts were sorted into basic categories based upon their most obvious – prima facie – nature or angle. In this phase of coding, content was not examined in great depth for nuance; instead, most posts were categorised quite simply. Nonetheless, notable findings appeared. The three categories that arose for LGBT United were *Pro-Queer, Anti-Religious*, and *Undetermined*. The three categories that appeared for United Muslims were *Pro-Muslim*, *Anti-Religious* (that is, negative towards religions other than Islam), and *Undetermined.*

Unsurprisingly, given that these pages claimed to be operated by members of their eponymous communities, the majority of LGBT United's posts (68.4%, n=342) were

Pro-Queer, and the majority of United Muslims' posts (60.6%, n=303) were *Pro-Muslim*. Posts designated *Pro-Queer* featured content that spoke positively about queer people, or negatively about homophobia. For instance, "I support LGBTQ+ rights because it doesn't matter who you are, what you look like or how you dress. Love is love and everyone should have equal rights to express that!". Posts designated *Pro-Muslim* likewise featured content which spoke positively about Muslims or Islam, or negatively about Islamophobia, as well as posts that broadly encouraged unity and denounced prejudice. For instance, "Muslims make America great too!", and "MUSLIM AMERICANS AND PROUD !".

If it was not possible to identify the nature of the original post, its angle was categorised as *Undetermined*. 27.6% (n=138) of posts in LGBT United, and 36.8% (n=184) of posts in United Muslims, had an *Undetermined* angle. Often, these posts are very brief, offering little detail about their original nature or intent. Most posts within these datasets were quite short. Such brevity is unusual when compared with IRA-created Facebook pages that imitated right-wing users (such as Patriot Us or Secured Borders), and more prominent non-right-wing IRA-created Facebook pages (such as Blacktivist), which, overall, featured much longer posts (Albright, 2017c). This may also reflect the frequency of content not being apparent in both LGBT United and United Muslims, due to use of non-textual media, as is discussed in subsequent sections. An example from LGBT United reads, "My feelings are like..."; an example from United Muslims reads, "Some people have to understand this..."

Despite its small size, making up only 4% (n=20) of LGBT United, and 2.6 % (n=13) of United Muslims, the final category – *Anti-Religious* - is worthy of note. To be labelled *Anti-Religious* in angle, a post had to feature comments that were negative towards any religion (aside from Islam), or practitioners of any religion (aside from Islam). Most of these *Anti-Religious* posts specifically focused on Christianity and Christians, though some also mentioned the concept of religion as a whole, and occasionally posts had negative sentiment directed towards other religions such as Judaism.

An *Anti-Religious* post in LGBT United stated, ".. Jeeeez I sure do wish we could reinstate biblical law! It was just so rational and moral...*sarcasm*". Within United Muslims, an *Anti-Religious* post read, "Many Non-Muslims and mainly Christians

sometimes Mock how Muslims pray ... here is the surprise !!!". *Anti-Religious* posts often relate to experiences of discrimination from the religious people towards members of the community the Facebook page impersonated.

Table 1 Angles of LGBT United and United Muslims

LGBT United (n=500)		United Muslims (n=500)	
	Frequency N (%)		Frequency N (%)
Pro-Queer	342 (68.4%)	*Pro-Muslim*	303 (60.6%)
Undetermined	138 (27.6%)	*Undetermined*	184 (36.8%)
Anti-Religious	20 (4.0%)	*Anti-Religious*	13 (2.6%)
Total	500	**Total**	500

The concept of fake news is widespread when examining the work of the IRA (DiResta et al., 2018b; Raine et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). With this in mind, the datasets' posts were examined for accuracy, and grouped into multiple categories based upon the reality or confirmability of the statement made. The categories that appeared in LGBT United and United Muslims were *Content Not Apparent, Unsupported Opinion, Partially True, Undetermined, Just the Truth,* and *Fake* (See Table 2).

Table 2 Content Breakdown of LGBT United and United Muslims

	LGBT United (n=500)	United Muslims (n=500)	Both (n=1000)
	Frequency N (%)	Frequency N (%)	Frequency N (%)
Content Not Apparent	284 (56.8%)	195 (39%)	479 (47.9%)
Unsupported Opinion	176 (35.2%)	247 (49.4%)	423 (42.3%)
Partially True	28 (5.6%)	23 (4.6%)	51 (5.1%)
Undetermined	12 (2.4%)	11 (2.2%)	23 (2.3%)
Just the Truth	0 (0%)	22 (4.4%)	22 (2.2%)
Fake	0 (0%)	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.2%)
Total	n=500	n=500	n=1000

Those labeled *Content Not Apparent* simply could not be fully categorised as to accuracy, because part of the original post was not there to examine, and the remaining text did not make such a determination possible. The highest percentage of the 500

posts in LGBT United, 56.8% (n=284), and second-highest percentage of the 500 posts in United Muslims, 39% (n=195), were categorised as *Content Not Apparent*, which is a notable finding, as will be discussed further.

Posts categorised as *Unsupported Opinion* contained statements that were neither truly provable or disprovable: they could not count as literally fake news, because they did not claim to be any news – or fact – at all. Instead, these posts stated opinions, feelings, and (supposed) beliefs. They cannot be fact-checked, because they do not purport to contain facts. The largest percentage of posts in United Muslims, 49.4% (n=247), and second-largest percentage of posts in LGBT United, 35.2% (n=176), consisted of *Unsupported Opinion*.

In United Muslims, these *Unsupported Opinion* posts often made simple claims about Islam, such as in a post reading, "There is no racism in Islam". These statements and slogans often featured exhortations to like and share, such as, "Islam is the religion of peace for all mankind! Like and share if you agree!". *Unsupported Opinion* posts within LGBT United looked somewhat similar, with fairly brief, emotional, or simplistic statements, which were likely easy for people to agree with: "Sanctity of marriage, my a$$. My gay a$$, to be precise. After all unbelievable sh*t people do, gay marriage should not be questioned by anyone.", read one post, while another said, "All parents should be aware that when they mock or curse gay people, they may be mocking or cursing their own child...".

Partially True applies to posts that featured a verifiably accurate piece of information, accompanied by opinion-based commentary which went beyond provable truth. Accuracy was determined by a Google search relating to the statement or event described, searching for evidence of its occurrence and truth, and comparing the confirmed facts to the portrayal within the post. Often, these posts involved real news stories, taken from reputable news sources. *Partially True* posts made up 5.6% (n=28) of LGBT United, and 4.6% (n=23) of United Muslims.

A *Partially True* post from United Muslims stated,

> This man is a former cop named Jim Stachowiak goes radical against #BlackLivesMatter #BLM and the Muslim Communities and openly calls for people to burn down the homes of African Americans and Muslims and to shoot people, including women and children. publicly saying that the killing

> of the Muslim Imam in #NewYork is just the beginning !! How has he not been charged? These are clear and obvious threats. WE DEMAND THE AUTHORITIES TO PUT HIM IN JAIL ! SHARE !

This post features definite elements of verifiable truth. Stachowiak is indeed a former police officer who has threatened and encouraged violence against Black Lives Matter activists, as reported in the *Washington Post* (Holley, 2016). He has also repeatedly threatened and encouraged violence against the Muslim community, as seen in his own frightening, hate-filled YouTube videos, one of which features him standing outside a mosque with a gun, calling for "death to Islam", and another of which features him encouraging people to burn down mosques and murder all Muslims (Mathias, 2016). This post is, therefore, based on actual events and full of true statements. The addition of opinion-based commentary and demands takes it into the category of *Partially True*.

Undetermined was a category for 'oddball' posts, often those which did not actually make a statement, but instead asked a question, shared a quote, or made a request for action. These posts may have related to a desire for engagement, possibly a ploy to drive up numbers (DiResta et al., 2018b; Lukito, 2020). The LGBT United post: "Hey, guys, tell me a little about yourself!", and United Muslims' "Share if you are a Muslim and you are proud !!" both qualify as *Undetermined*. Overall, this category comprised just 2.4% (n=12) of LGBT United, and 2.2% (n=11) of United Muslims.

The remaining categories represent the two possible extremes of fact, and interestingly are both only found in United Muslims. Posts labelled *Just the Truth* featured statements that were demonstrably, provably accurate, with no opinion appended; they made up 4.4 % (n=22) of United Muslims. They usually consisted of news stories, often directly quoting one or more paragraphs from a published article. Most of these stories related to Muslim individuals, usually with a positive bent. For instance, one United Muslims post states "More than 30,000 Muslims from around the world congregated at a farm in the United Kingdom for a three-day event protesting ISIS and religious extremism." This post is an exact quote of the first paragraph from a Mic news story (Harvard, 2016).

The smallest percentage, a mere 0.4% (n=2) of United Muslims, were fully *Fake*. This actually was a single statement, posted twice (repeat posts being a frequent feature within both datasets), which claimed that a UNESCO study had determined that Islam

was the world's most peaceful nation. The content of the post originated from a satirical site, as part of a long satirical article; the truncated satirical article was subsequently passed around the internet as supposed truth, to the point that UNESCO actually issued a statement refuting it (AFP Fact Check, 2019). In the entirety of the data analyzed, this post was the only completely fake news.

An important caveat immediately arises, however, in considering the posts deemed *Content Not Apparent*. These datasets only consisted of text (issues arising from this are discussed in greater depth within the Limitations section). Some of the same potential limitations based in analyzing these text-only data sets are likely to be repeated in circumstances of use of artificial intelligence programs which only read text. Therefore, just as for this study, a large amount of content may go unseen, and potential disinformation remain unexamined, when governments or other agencies attempt to discover interference from hostile forces (Marcellino et al., 2020).

4.1.1. "Tells": Format and patterns

Both United Muslims and LGBT United partially or exactly repeated several posts, often appearing to simply copy-and-paste previously posted statements, right down to the number of exclamation marks. The most frequently repeated posts were usually either highly controversial/provocative, or had the potential to be very popular and therefore frequently liked and shared (DiResta et al., 2018b; Timberg, 2017).

In United Muslims, the most frequently-repeated posts – with 10 repeats in this 500 post sample – were variations on "Muslims are not terrorists, and terrorists are not Muslims. share if you agree."; a simple, catchy, and likely quite shareable sentiment. The second most frequently-repeated posts – with 8 repeats – were versions of "Alcohol and pork is against Christian beliefs too but some people just tend to ignore the things they don't agree with." This statement may have been repeated due to its somewhat confrontational nature, which might succeed in angering conservative evangelical Christians (Gorski, 2017; Whitehead et al., 2018).

Posts frequently featured anachronistic misspellings, which were often repeated. For instance, United Muslims repeatedly used the misspelled phrase "spread the world!" (as opposed to 'spread the word'). Other noticeable features included use of

capitalization, including unusual capitalization of the first letters of multiple words in a sentence. Posts also frequently featured a number of hashtags, often not entirely related to the post in question, which may have been an effort to boost the chance of their particular post being seen, if someone was browsing tags (DiResta et al., 2018b; Miller, 2019).

Increasing the number and variety of tags, especially tagging for widely- popular topics of discussion, could be a method to increase visibility. It may also come up in cases where the hashtag used was potentially a place in which individuals from different ends of the political spectrum might both come, and, perhaps clash, creating a useful situation for discord (DiResta et al., 2018b). For instance, a post from LGBT United reads:

> “You know, God once said "Thou shalt not reproduce if the couple has the combined IQ of potato." Because God is really annoyed by some people's stupidity, just as we are! :-) #homophobia #reproduce #religion #lgbt #humor #family”.

Using #religion means religious users who search that hashtag may come across this post.

4.2. (Attempted) identity theft

As with their other social media pages, the IRA needed LGBT United and United Muslims to be seen as legitimate representatives of the communities they purported to be a part of, to gain influence and audience, while avoiding detection (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019). Their attempts involved taking content directly from the queer and Muslim communities, especially in terms of memes, photos, videos, and other non-textual media. The impersonations, however, showed noticeable flaws - or at least, flaws which might be noticeable to genuine members of the community being impersonated (Fraser, 2015).

4.2.1. Playing a part

The pages deliberately claimed an identity, doing so with repeated statements directly declaring membership, as well as more subtle references and implications. Posts also claimed experience, appealing to the existence (and fight against) prejudice.

Many posts in the datasets might be intended as “bait”: posts that evoke positive emotion, are humorous, or feature popular, highly shareable slogans, with widely agreed-upon sentiments (or clichés) (Kim, 2018). Sharing non-textual media such as memes or screenshots of Tumblr or Twitter posts is a popular feature of many social media groups, and the dissemination and use of seemingly apolitical vaguely anti-prejudice/pro-acceptance posts could draw an audience (Gal et al., 2016; Spencer, 2019; Zannettou et al., 2020). If these “bait” posts were highly liked or often shared, or attracted new page followers, this could increase the perceived credibility of the group, while enlarging the audience for future broadcasting of messages (DiResta et al., 2018b; Linvill et al., 2019).

In fact, many of these simplistic, slogan-based posts specifically exhorted readers to share them, while others requested ‘likes’ to show support for individuals whose stories they described. United Muslims, for instance, repeatedly exclaimed, “Like and Share if you believe we all should be united !”. A post in LGBT United read, “A boy can wear a f*cking dress if he wants! Hell yeah! F*ck stupid gender rules! Like if you agree :-)”

Posts in both groups often featured very broad statements against issues like Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, along with vague but easily digestible declarations about equality and unity, and defense of the community from prejudice. The most frequently repeated posts within the United Muslims dataset focused on quite shareable slogans: “Muslims aren’t terrorists and terrorists aren’t Muslims.” Another post in United Muslims exclaims, “IN ISLAM, THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE, RICH OR POOR... WE ARE ALL THE SAME, KNEELING TO GOD ONLY!”.

Posts in both datasets appeared to purposefully target and exaggerate emotionality. This included sharing positive statements, experiences, or representations of the respective marginalised groups. These positive posts regularly featured appeals to pride, unity, and equality - simple and widely applicable concepts, as well as statements relating to celebration of the values of the community. Other posts, in both groups, merely read as positive, cheerful, and even silly, celebrating identity, with multiple smiley faces, and invocation of group clichés. LGBT United stated, “We are

superheroes. We have a lot of superpowers - love, unity, LGBT pride, equality, acceptance...and many more :-)".

This preponderance of mostly innocuous, unremarkable sentiments could potentially serve as a deterrent to researchers, who may view them as merely apolitical, or filler (Kim, 2018; Miller, 2019; Xia et al., 2019). However, these posts, like all posts on these groups, likely served a purpose as the IRA worked to achieve its goals. The posts could have acted as bait while the IRA was attempting to gain an audience, through making statements that many individuals, both within and outside of the communities are likely to agree with (Howard et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2018). The posts may have served to lull followers - and potential investigators - into a false sense of security.

Other attempts to impersonate and appear to be queer or Muslim individuals included use of community-related terms and language. Much of this use was fairly surface-level. Several posts in United Muslims included Arabic religious terms, e.g. "Subhan Allah", and some posts in United Muslims discussed elements of Islamic faith, such as the Qur'an, though these were few and far between. Instead, the focus was on simplistic statements, one or two Arabic words, and sharing slogans and stories.

Within LGBT United, some use of queer terminology was slightly more sophisticated, with references to concepts like gender roles, heteronormativity, and transphobia (Ball, 2016; Harbaugh & Lindsey, 2015). Nonetheless, again, this failed to go very deep, and may have been picked up from the content they had taken from another source (most likely actual queer individuals). One post read, "It will be a cold day in hell when people finally learn to use gender pronouns for transgender, genderqueer, and other gender-variant individuals correctly." This is a fairly impressive use of community-specific terminology.

As far as could be ascertained, based upon the remaining textual commentary, as well as comparison of comments to images found in archived posts taken from LGBT United's 'sister account' on Instagram, Rainbow Nation, non-textual media often appeared to consist of screenshots or images from conversations or posts created by actual members of the LGBTQ community (Albright, 2017b). This extends to the frequent use of images and videos of real queer and Muslim people, as well as their personal stories, and even their struggles, and in some cases, deaths.

This simple technique of using content created by the actual community that is being impersonated may serve multiple purposes. It decreases workload while increasing perceived credibility: it would likely be easier to simply share content made by actual individuals from a community than it would be to successfully imitate these individuals (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; DiResta et al., 2018b). Additionally, many memes and conversations tend to be humorous in nature, which could appeal to an audience and potentially gain followers (Heiskanen, 2017; Know Your Meme, 2016; Zannettou et al., 2020).

4.2.2. Use of non-textual media

LGBT United (See Figure 1) and United Muslims (See Figure 2) both show heavy reliance on use of non-textual media. The frequent use of non-textual media appears to be an integral tactic in the IRA's attempts to maintain a veneer of legitimacy, and evade detection.

In this study, non-textual media includes images, text-on-image memes (known as image macros), screenshots of text-based discussions (usually conversations from sites such as Tumblr), as well as video clips and gifs. Within the datasets analyzed, this non-textual media was not visible, leaving only the associated text available for analysis. The text on these posts usually featured a brief comment referring to, or commenting on, the image or video which was being shared. For some posts, the general substance of the original post can still be deduced, whereas others are more difficult to parse. An example from LGBT United states, "This Lesbian Couple Made The Best Pregnancy Announcement Ever"; from this, it can rather easily be determined that the original post featured a link to a lesbian couple's pregnancy announcement. Another LGBT United post reading ""what...*facepalm*" is a bit less obvious.

This incomprehensibility of remaining comments, indicating further context was originally present, is one tell-tale sign of the presence of non-textual media. Non-textual media was also evidenced by reference to the format of the associated non-textual media, as in a post from United Muslims reading, "What Halal meat or Halal food means? you shouldn't be scared after watching this video ;)". Posts classified as *Content Not Apparent* (see Table 1) usually appear to have featured non-textual media.

With research, however, it is sometimes possible to find the original non-textual media which was initially associated with that image (See Figure 3).

The use of non-textual Media could be beneficial to the IRA, for a number of reasons. The IRA may be aware of the likelihood that the governments or agencies they are working against may look toward solutions related to text-reading programs and artificial intelligence (Badawy et al., 2018; Hacker et al., 2018). Use of images, therefore, creates a potential method to avoid detection, while also allowing their posts to look more legitimate. The IRA claimed ownership of genuine, community-created material, suggesting they are 'in the know' – though sometimes their captions challenged that presentation, with notably bad imitations - giving them cultural capital and legitimacy (DeCook, 2018; Fraser, 2015; Zannettou et al., 2020).

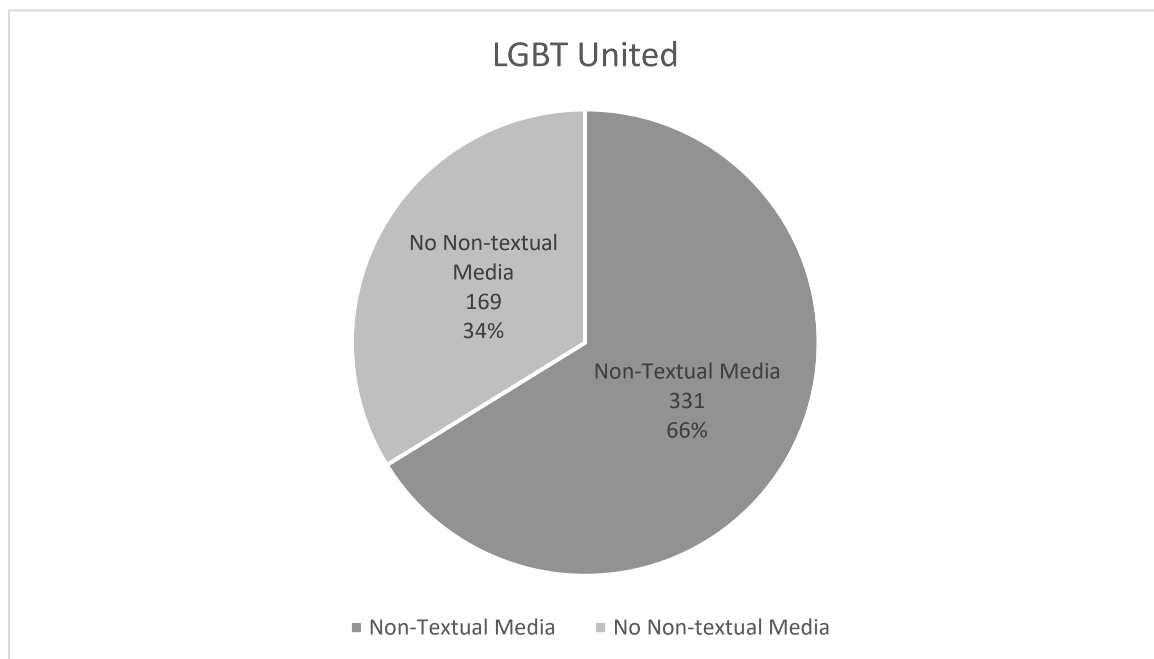

Figure 1. Non-textual media in LGBT United

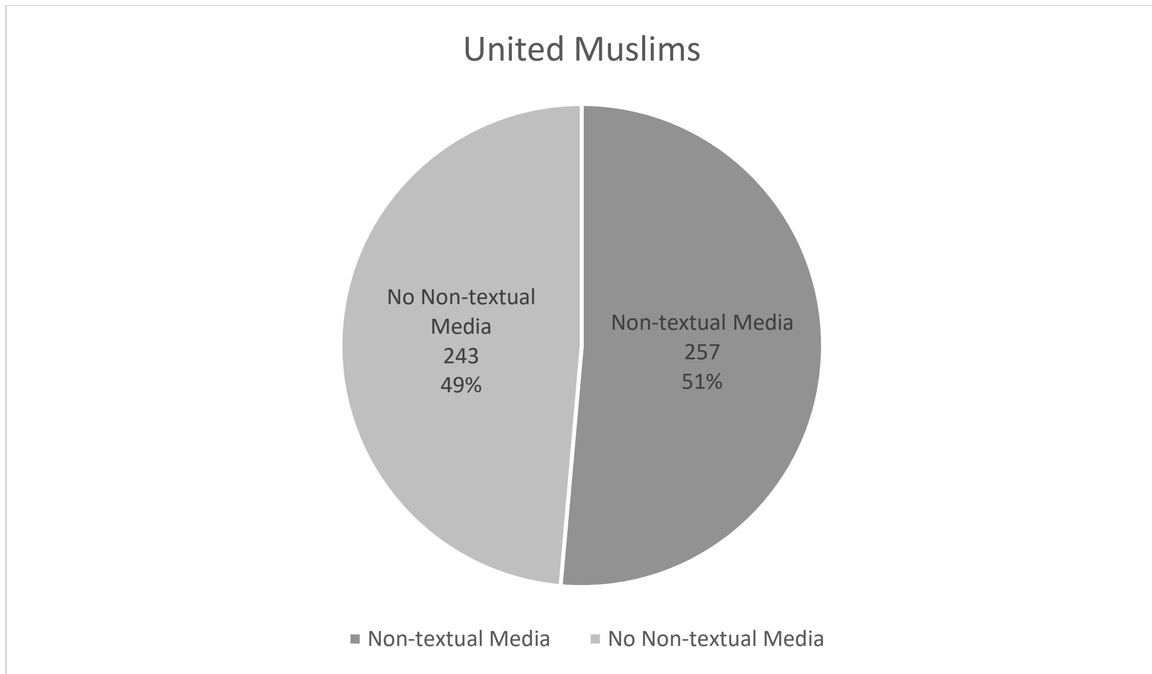

Figure 2. Non-textual media in United Muslims

As DiResta et al (2018) discussed, the IRA's social media uses "image centric (meme) warfare" (p. 8). This often took the form of repurposed memes, taken from real communities, or as community-created text placed on a new background, and adorned with their own logo. This form is an "image macro" – a simple image with text upon it (Huntington, 2016). This likely boosted page popularity because it made use of genuine, in-community thoughts and humour.

Figure 3 shows a meme shared by a LGBT United's sister account on Instagram, Rainbow Nation, taken from data gathered and provided by Dr. Jonathan Albright (Albright, 2017b). This image features plain text on a rainbow-gradient background (an obsession with rainbows seems to be an attempt to appear queer), as well as LGBT United's logo, claiming ownership of this meme. However, this meme, known as the "What's in your pants?" meme, is quite recognisable within the queer community, and in fact its provenance can be traced with some reliability. A plain text version of the exact same words was posted by a Tumblr user in 2015; the LGBT United/Rainbow Nation version appears to have been posted in 2017 (Know Your Meme, 2016).

MUAHAHAHAHA! *evil cackling* LGBT LGBTUN rainbownation rainbow_nation_us queerhumor LGBTPride LGBTSupport Homosexual GayPride Lesbian Gay Transgender Bisexual Pansexual GenderEquality Questioning Agender GenderQueer Intersex Asexual Androgyne GenderFluid LGBTQ LGBTCommunity LoveWins LoveIsLove

Figure 3. IRA-created meme using text that originated on queer Tumblr

Memes are not just effective because they may to boost audience and legitimacy. They also serve as incredibly powerful methods to transmit propaganda (DeCook, 2018; DiResta et al., 2018b; Heiskanen, 2017; Huntington, 2016). The US government has studied memes as "powerful tools of cultural influence, capable of reinforcing or even changing values and behaviour" (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 50). Memes separate big statements from their context, and imply that a view is widely held by real members of a community, carrying cultural signifiers and language making an in-group feeling (DeCook, 2018; Heiskanen, 2017; Huntington, 2016). A statement can be accompanied by an image that appears to "support" the claim, such as women in burqas beneath a textual statement regarding banning veils (DiResta et al., 2018b).

4.2.3. Bad imitations

A main part of IRA efforts in running groups which purported to be marginalised online communities involved attempts to imitate these communities (Lukito et al., 2020; National Intelligence Council, 2017). Some studies which have examined marginalised-impersonating Facebook groups say that the posts show insight and subtlety, “tailored to fit seamlessly into the ordinary online conversations of their particular audiences” (Timberg, 2017). However, consideration of these organic posts, with the benefit of insider knowledge and general familiarity, suggests a potentially different story: these imitations were not always successful (Berger, 2015). Despite the efforts by the IRA, many of the actual text-based posts from LGBT United and United Muslims are distinctly ‘off’, failing to adequately recreate shibboleths (Fraser, 2015). These bad imitations use tropes of these cultures somewhat ineptly, creating posts that may not ring true to members of the actual communities.

Within LGBT United, posts often featured statements that would be considered inappropriate within queer realms, or that simply read as gibberish. In fact, 64 of LGBT United’s posts were categorized as bad imitations: that is, messages that may not sound believably queer to a member of the queer community. For instance, one LGBT United post stated, “The power of the gay… It's not called being gay... It's called being FABULOUS!”. I wield my insider knowledge to say that repeated (non-ironic) use of the word ‘fabulous’ raises an immediate eyebrow.

Another such bad imitation of a queer person reads: “This woman is STUNNING!! Like jaw-drooping-drool-pooling, stunning!! But it's hilarious when I hear women say "she turned me Gay!" No, you been Gay, and it's okay, congrats you're finally out!”. This particular post was repeated four different times in the 500-item LGBT United dataset, despite its distinctly strange tone, which seems far-removed from the way a queer woman would typically speak about a woman they found attractive.

Once again calling upon my experience within the online queer community, I can report that real queer women’s online declarations of attraction to another woman have a linguistic canon all their own, featuring flowery literary hyperbole, or facetious claims of violent actions, or simple declaration of the bald statement “I am so gay”, or, in some cases, extremely specific emojis of eyes. The statement about ‘turning gay’ versus

‘being gay’ would also likely be poorly received, as the specific origin of queerness is considered to be a debate that goes nowhere and may be used to cause the community harm, so it is often viewed as inappropriate to bring up (Blumell et al., 2019; Minter, 2017).

Other posts skated close to being offensive, making proclamations about people’s sexual orientation, and conjuring up homophobic images of queer people supposedly pushing their sexuality onto others (GLAAD, 2016). One post read, “"It's juuuust playing, I'm totz straight"... Stop kidding yourself, we all know you wanna try a girl.” Some posts seemed simply bizarre: “The teacher probably voted for Cruz ... Weeeeell it's our choice to call the teacher Mrs Twatwaffle the Thundercunt!”

Another strange post referenced racial and homophobic slurs in a questionable and potentially insensitive manner, saying:

> Lord.... Oh my, yes he did. And what the Lord told him was "Tommy, boy, how are you gonna raise all that money without a good scapegoat? We tried the K*kes and ni**ers, and they don't work no more, so we still have to keep going after the fa**ots and d*kes, because that's the only ones left to demonize so we can scare the sh*t out those mindless members to keep tithing the hell out of their paychecks..." Oh wait, that wasn't the Lord, that was.... his accountant!!!

Several posts also featured terms that were either out-of-date within their communities, or that would likely be viewed as offensive and unacceptable. For instance, one post used the word “transgendered”, as opposed to the proper “transgender,” reading in part: “When child coming out to their parents as gay, lesbian, or transgendered, many parents experience shock” (GLAAD, 2016; Steinmetz, 2014). Another post used the word “transsexual”, which is also usually viewed as an inappropriate term (GLAAD, 2016).

In United Muslims, attempts to appear genuine appear somewhat surface-level, featuring frequent use of Arabic religious terms, such as “MashaAllah”, and references to famous Muslim figures. These Muslim figures, however, were usually those who could potentially be easily thought of by non-Muslim individuals. Thus, there are repeated posts about Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson, with very few referencing other modern Muslim celebrities, or significant Muslim historical figures. This held true for LGBT United, as well: they had multiple posts about Jim Parsons, who, though he is a member of the queer community, is not really a figure of general renown. Actual queer icons

were mostly missing, supplanted by strange alternatives like Woody Allen and Macklemore.

In addition, United Muslims emphasised specific subjects, such as modesty and the hijab, while dedicating little space to important current political issues such as the Muslim Ban (Yukich, 2018). Posts repeatedly focused on the hijab, with little discussion of specific religious thoughts behind it, and limited discussion of women's agency or choices in relation to it, subjects that would be an expected focus in true discussions of veiling (Allen, 2015; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Zempi, 2019).

In United Muslims, one of the most telling mistakes was very major indeed: in four separate posts, the text names the Prophet Muhammad but does not follow the name with a notation such as 'PBUH', 'peace be upon him', 'SAWS', or any other version thereof. Use of these notations is often considered so essential that it's can even be used on social media as a sign that one is Muslim (Selby & Funk, 2020). One such post read, "Everyone who believe In One God and Muhammed God's prophet, Let's get united and let Allah be the only judge on us all."

4.3. A call to inaction: The curious incident of the dog in the night

Within these Facebook groups, it is important to recognise what *isn't* posted, rather than simply looking at what *is*. Seemingly missing from these groups are encouragements to political involvement, suggestions about voting, breakdown of party platforms, mention of coordinated political efforts, discussion of current legislation, or strategies to combat issues like Islamophobia or homophobia and transphobia. This lack of political concern and action does not appear to reflect the typical use of social media by marginalised communities (Islam, 2019; Jenzen, 2017; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012; Wills & Fecteau, 2016).

Considering what *is* posted, it appears that political passivity is encouraged, and direct political involvement discouraged, by means of primarily posting items that have strong emotional value, but little active use. These include broad statements against issues like Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia along with angry or emotional

statements that do not include recommendations for an action to take, and vague but easily digestible declarations about equality, unity, pride, and love.

LGBT United was noticeably unusual at first glance: it contained very little activism, discussion of political issues, or queer-related news stories. Among the 500 posts, there were no calls to concrete action (e.g. requests to phone or write to politicians, sign a petition, or vote). Politicians were mentioned by name only eight times, usually in quotations from news stories, and these same news stories were typically the only places where specific laws were discussed.

With regard to those specific laws, commentary on LGBT United primarily expressed anger, with no suggestions regarding concrete steps for community members to take. There were only a few references to the government, and those tended to be antagonistic and broad, articulating anger without recommending remedial actions, possibly encouraging disillusionment and distrust (Howard et al., 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). One such post read, in part: "Fucking imbeciles! The majority of the rest of the developed nations are moving forward while we are running back to the mid 1900's! American Freedom and Democracy is Dead!"

Only one post seemed to suggest a way for people to vote:

> That's why Republicans are just hell-bent on division because they want to hurt and divide Americans, and they are so rogue and potentially corrupt and they can't do their job correctly cause they only care about themselves and what they want and what their supporters want, not what ALL Americans want and they don't care about ALL Americans. I would just call for a boycott on the entire Republican Party, they need to go and be stopped from hurting our kids and Americans, and this nation needs to be a Democratic nation and the haters to go and crawl back where they came from, the basement.

United Muslims largely held to the same pattern, with the exception of posts that specifically made a political demand: "Stop bombing Syria!". While 84 of the 500 posts could be seen as vaguely political in nature (e.g. "#Islamophobia is Anti #American, Like and share if you agree!"), only 12 seem to encourage a specific political action. Of those 12, 10 referred specifically to Syria, for instance: "Love him or hate him, the question is Where is Lybia now after bombing it and killing Kaddafi ??? Don't repeat this in Syria!" This is recognised as being in support of Russia's actions and war in Syria, and a

potential attempt to build support for an end to American military action (DiResta et al., 2018b; Lukito, 2020; National Intelligence Council, 2017).

The Muslim Ban itself, while a major political event, is only referred to six times, and none of those posts encourage direct political actions (such as calling a senator, signing a petition, or attending a protest) (Blair, 2017; Yukich, 2018). Instead, as with most of the posts that have any sort of potential political theme, they express anger, fear, or a general negative emotion, without encouraging any actions to take. A post loudly states, "MR #TRUMP, SORRY YOU CANNOT BAN #MUSLIMS"; another exclaims, "If you agree to ban Muslims, then you agree to ban police officers, doctors, soldeirs, doctors, nurses, and many other Muslims working hard everyday for your safety and comfort in this country !!!"

There is also a lack of intersectionality and solidarity: LGBT United said nothing about the Muslim Ban, and United Muslims had nothing to say about the Pulse shooting (in which 49 people were killed at an Orlando gay nightclub) (Meyer, 2020). Marginalised communities, though with plenty of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other prejudices inside them, nonetheless might be expected to support one another and show solidarity in their shared struggle to survive in an often-hostile society (Kuruvilla, 2017; Sirriyeh, 2019). As well, people may belong to more than one marginalised community (for instance queer Muslims) (El-Tayeb, 2012; Shah, 2016).

Overall, both datasets were striking in their general lack of distinctly political content, and exhibited a notable lack of political activism, calls to action, or information about issues affecting these communities. The absence of this content is unusual for such spaces, where politicised, marginalised identities mean that community will also almost inevitably include activism (Huntington, 2016; Islam, 2019; Jenzen, 2017).

Various studies and reports discussed the IRA's tactics of voter suppression in communities that were not right-wing; these tactics ranged from simply not focusing on political issues, to encouraging community members to vote for a third party, to direct lies about how to actually cast a ballot (DiResta et al., 2018b; Kim et al., 2018; Lukito et al., 2020). These datasets' lack of political content appears to be an extension of the IRA's voter suppression efforts in marginalised-impersonating groups: enflaming fear

and anger, but trying to make sure that energy does not drive people to take concrete electoral action.

4.4. "Us" against the world

In much of the world, queer and Muslim individuals face continual danger and hostility from the wider public (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Bender-Baird, 2016; Patel, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). Online communities, however, are safe spaces, serving as sanctuaries where people can discuss and decry discrimination and share their outrage and fear, while receiving support from fellow community members (Cavalcante, 2019; Islam, 2019; Lucero, 2017; Pennington, 2018; Wills & Fecteau, 2016). They become places of trust, of belonging, of sheltering together as a bulwark against an aggressive world.

These feelings are ripe for exploitation.

4.4.1. Evoking anger and fear

The datasets both tended towards broad, imprecise topics, and vaguely positive statements, frequently employing terms such as pride, equality, love, and acceptance. However, some of the more specific issues repeatedly posted were noteworthy, due to their intensely emotional and sometimes controversial nature. Returning to the concept of *Partially True* posts, which featured elements of current events and news articles, most posts categorised thusly related to incidents of homophobia, transphobia, or Islamophobia, and even violence. Dissemination of such stories may be an attempt to stoke fear within the targeted communities, an effect magnified by the emotional, distress-inducing commentary usually appended.

Many posts within LGBT United and United Muslims seem designed to invoke feelings of anger and fear in followers. Some are simple – highly emotionally-phrased – statements which serve to remind the community of the oppression they regularly face. A post in United Muslims exclaims, "STOP HARASSING AMERICAN MUSLIMS !" and numerous other posts include mention (or simply hashtags) of Islamophobia, along with reference to specific examples. One of the most frequent sentiments is that "Muslims are not terrorists and terrorists are not Muslims!", a theoretically positive statement which

still serves as a reminder of the prejudice and oppression Muslims experience in America (Karaman & Christian, 2020; Patel, 2017; Wolff et al., 2012). This phrase, and variations upon it, is continuously repeated.

Other United Muslims posts comment on the disparity of who is labelled a terrorist (Elmasry & El-Nawawy, 2020; Sharma & Nijjar, 2018). One post refers to a real-world murder, stating, “The guy in the picture is an atheist, he shot and murdered three Muslim young students few years ago. yet no one called him a terrorist.” Another asks, rhetorically, “Is it a war on Islam and #Muslims ? and by the way our silence is the problem itself !!”

Homophobia is frequently both chastised and angrily emphasised in LGBT United. One post read, in part, “I am fucking angry because I'm really afraid to leave my home! I'm afraid that if I walk out my home, I'm going to be killed for being gay!”. Unfortunately, especially around the time this was posted, around the aftermath of the Orlando Pulse mass shooting, this might feel like a very relatable sentiment to many queer individuals, and serve as a reminder that they should be constantly wary of their safety (Gal et al., 2016; C. Jones & Slater, 2020; Meyer, 2020).

A LGBT United post written in the first person described feelings of anger and despair many queer people might identify with:

> "Being gay's a choice" I chose to be gay because I enjoy being considered a second class citizen. I chose to be gay because I enjoy lying to my parents about where I am going and whom I am hanging out with. I chose to be gay because I like to keep pretending that boobs are hot in front of my friends. I chose to be gay because I like not being able to share my happy and sad relationship moments with my best friends. I chose to be gay because I want to be not able to bring my bf home and let him meet my parents. I chose to be gay because I refuse to have the right to have a family of my own. I chose to be gay because I don’t want to be able to have kids. I chose to be gay because I want to risk losing my job when they find out about me. I chose to be gay because I don’t want to be equal to others. Do you understand now why I chose to be gay? Obvious, right?!!

This post from LGBT United is based on a widely reported event, with the addition of commentary which identifies numerous sources of anger, reminding members of the community of the oppression they face, as well as expressing anger, though not making it clear where that anger should be directed.

SCOTUS RULES AGAINST KENTUCKY CLERK IN GAY MARRIAGE CASE The Supreme Court on Monday evening denied a Kentucky clerk's request to keep enforcing her "no marriage licenses policy" an attempt to avoid issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples while she appeals the trial court's preliminary ruling. Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis will have to choose whether to issue marriage licenses, defying her Christian conviction, or continue to refuse them, defying a federal judge who could pummel her with fines or order that she be hauled off to jail. For Ms. Davis to enact her own personal policy is completely unacceptable. She is on her fourth marriage, a sinner according to her Bible, yet she's screaming about religious convictions. What a hypocrite! And she doesn't even perform the ceremony, only issue a license. What her religious convictions has to do with it?? It's not up to her to make policy, it's her role only to enact it! Funny how all these "Christians" are preaching and practicing all this hate, eh? If Jesus were around today, his response would be most likely, "What the hell is wrong with you people!" #SameSexMarriage #MarriageEquality #Kentucky #SCOTUS #homophobia #bigotry

4.4.2. You can't trust anyone (except us)

The false media

As discussed in numerous pieces of research, a common theme in both Russian and other propaganda is reducing trust in the media (Howard et al., 2019; Lukito, 2020; National Intelligence Council, 2017). While it is a frequent and widely addressed feature of the IRA's more right-wing-directed groups, it also occurred within the IRA's attempts to impersonate other communities (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Howard et al., 2019; National Intelligence Council, 2017). In the current study, this anti-media sentiment appeared most strongly in United Muslims.

At times, the aim appeared to be to replace actual media with other, IRA-created media, or give highly spun takes on actual news stories (DiResta et al., 2018b). This may also involve taking advantage of real issues that affect the targeted communities, or identifying and emphasising well-known existing facts, such as Fox News and their negative attitude towards Muslims (Considine, 2017; McCombie et al., 2020; Wills & Fecteau, 2016). Posts also serve to suggest that media is always biased against the targeted group, going beyond mere political or ideological bias in the vein of right-wing vs. left-wing or liberal vs. conservative. Instead, within these datasets, the media's perceived attitude was sometimes framed as a deliberate attack upon a community, especially the Muslim community.

United Muslims frequently referenced the media, and the media's hostility towards Muslims, posting statements such as, "The mainstream media doesn't use good examples of Muslims but ONLY negative examples and all of a sudden all Muslims are villains and Islam is to blame" and "FoxNews will not show you Muslims unless they are speaking about terrorism !!"

Building distrust of the media may aid in obfuscation, potentially fostering denial of current events. This feeling of being attacked by the media could also support the notion of persecution, and thereby increase overall antagonism, distrust, and enmity (Heiskanen, 2017; Winter, 2019). Creating distrust in media could give the IRA greater ability to make untrue statements and wild claims, declaring any evidence to the contrary to be a lie. Or, if a supposed event or claim does not appear in the news (due to it simply not occurring), they might be able state that the media is deliberately, for reasons of ideology and persecution, refusing to show it (Lee & Hosam, 2020; Tong et al., 2020).

Thus, encouragement of distrust of the media may have the potential to bolster belief of persecution or threat, which may suggest the need to defend oneself and one's group (Lee & Hosam, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). This may also drive sharing posts from the group, widening the spread of the group and increasing legitimacy, spreading inaccurate or inflammatory information: allegations of media persecution/bias, or incitement to distrust are often accompanied by exhortations to share, with suggestions that doing so will help address the harm done against the community, and spread the truth (Ngwainmbi, 2019; Tong et al., 2020). United Muslims encourages followers to act as the media themselves, thus spreading the IRA's disinformation and hyperemotionality. For instance, a post states, "Be the media", and another says, "DONT LET THE FALSE MEDIA FOOL YOU ABOUT MUSLIMS ... SHARE IF YOU AGREE !"

American freedom and democracy is dead!

Posts in both datasets frequently frame the government, whether federal, state, or even municipal, as an agent of repression and persecution. This portrayal often uses real news stories, which are embellished with highly emotional commentary. There also appears to be an effort to foster outright distrust of the government as a whole (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Howard et al., 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). The rare mentions of the government seem to express either anger, or a sense of futility and

disillusionment, along with general denigration of America and democracy. Such language may serve to inspire an attitude of apathy and helpless cynicism, increasing passivity (Howard et al., 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a). All of this may serve to encourage these communities to feel that the government is either their enemy/persecutor, or untouchable, distant, and ineffective (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Kim, 2018).

On LGBT United, a post reads in part: "Our own government allows people like this to purchase guns and do this kind of shit! We are in a constant state of terror now! This is not the America I want to live in!". A post on United Muslims said, "Muslim-Americans fear U.S. government more than ISIS !!". Another stated, "And they are still willing to register and deport Muslims ...".

Others insisted that the American government itself was responsible for the creation of ISIS, and therefore, in a way, responsible for continuing conflation of Muslims with terrorism: "Guess who created Terrorism ????? Please share and let the whole world see this video! #Hillary #Clinton admits #America created, funded and armed Al Qaeda ISIS terrorists ... but everybody is still blamming Muslims!". LGBT United posted about a genuine news story relating to a potential bill to restrict transgender individuals' bathroom access. The post ended with the declaration, "The majority of the rest of the developed nations are moving forward while we are running back to the mid 1900's! American Freedom and Democracy is Dead!"

Occasionally, these stories around government involve some manner of encouraging news, with positive events such as new laws against discrimination. Even these positive stories, however, may have a purpose, either in emphasising that these new laws have been necessary (thus again pointing out antagonism towards the group), or in creating a greater emotional connection with followers. Perhaps the positive stories or sentiments around the government, rare as they are, might bolster the group's perceived legitimacy, as they celebrate things they assume the real community would celebrate. The positive stories may also serve to encourage sharing and interaction, as celebratory individuals rush to share the story with their network, or simply to "like" the advancement (DiResta et al., 2018b; Miller, 2019).

We are…

With many posts serving to create a sense of looming, ever-present danger and attack, and others showing that there is nowhere to turn and no one to trust, these groups then move on to another step: positioning themselves as trustworthy friends. By sharing stories, slogans, experiences of prejudice, and other indications of in-group membership, they may encourage followers to see them as community – after all, for queer and Muslim individuals, one of the primary uses of social media is to experience the safety of community (Bahfen, 2018; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Wills & Fecteau, 2016).

Some appeals to trust and in-group membership are subtle, with use of terms like “we”. Others offer stories, from sad sagas of discrimination to bits of ‘personal’ information, some seemingly designed to suggest that the poster has experienced many of the same challenges as potential readers. This use of a ‘personal’, first-person voice is especially common in LGBT United. Some posts try to claim shared experiences and understandings, likely attempting to seem relatable to queer people.

> BEING A FEMININE LESBIAN WHO LIKES FEMININE LESBIANS IS SO DIFFICULT. First of, it's almost impossible to tell if they're gay unless you straight up ask, (my "gaydar" is sh*t - maybe because it works only for gay guys? is there such thing as 'lesbiadar' in the known universe??) and you can't tell if they're flirting back or just being a nice girl!

Some claim experience or witness of prejudice, such as a post in LGBT United that says: “One of my best friends was from Texas and ended up homeless when his parents found out he was gay”. Posts also offer affirmation and emotional support, which is something many in the queer community, especially youth, may be desperate for (Cavalcante, 2019; Liang et al., 2019). LGBT United posted:

> It’s okay. It may not seem like it right now, but you are going to be fine. I know it’s scary, but don’t be afraid. You are who you are, and you should love that person, and I don’t want anyone to have to go through many years of their life afraid to accept that.

United Muslims provides slogans refuting the view of Muslims as terrorists, while stating solidarity with members of the Muslim community as a whole. One post states, “We are Americans, We are Muslims, We are successful in our society....And no, we are not terrorists !”. Another post reads: “And we too stand with you brother, one country one

family !!!". Some posts reference events or concepts specific to the Muslim community, such as Ramadan, saying, "MashaAllah ... May Allah bless you all in this holy month!". There is frequent use of terms such as 'brother' or 'sister', and 'family', encouraging this feeling of community.

All of this seems to work to build a front of legitimacy, but also a defense against possible detection. Beyond that, these posts – juxtaposing supposed evidence of community belonging with examples of how the rest of the world is hostile and dangerous – seem designed to create trust (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019).

4.5. That's the thing I'm sensitive about!

Analysis of both the current data and existing academic literature supports the possibility that posts within both United Muslims and LGBT United may be designed to target, and prompt an emotional reaction from, conservatives, especially white conservative evangelical Christians. The specific emotions and "buttons" these posts may be intended to push are targeted in slightly different ways, but overall seem to fit well into pre-existing stereotypes or fears about Muslims and queer people, especially in terms of a supposed desire to 'take over' (Ekman, 2015; Sharma & Nijjar, 2018).

Generally, these posts may be meant to provide evidence or justification for conservatives to feel as if they are under threat. In a way, this use of supposedly real posts from these supposedly real communities fulfills marginalised people's fear when discussing intra-community issues: using in-group statements to 'prove' bigots' points (Wills & Fecteau, 2016).

4.5.1. "Fanatics who worship a book written [by] schmucks": Fulfilling prophecies

Numerous posts in both datasets feature statements which show a negative view towards Christianity or Christians; these posts may have the potential to cause irritation or defensiveness in Christians (Todd et al., 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2015). These are a relatively front-facing attack, featuring insult to a religion or ideological group, even though the insult is sometimes fairly minor. These posts may serve to paint the queer and Muslim communities as being hostile towards Christianity, fulfilling ingrained fears

and expectations, especially amongst evangelical conservative Christians (Belt, 2016; Karaman & Christian, 2020; Todd et al., 2020; Winnick, 2019).

For example, one of the most frequently re-posted posts in United Muslims reads, “Alcohol and pork is against Christian beliefs too but some people just tend to ignore the things they don't agree with.” While to some this might read like a fairly mild snipe, it may be perceived by some Christians as an attack on their theology, Biblical comprehension, dedication, and presumed moral superiority (Kaufman & Niner, 2019; Rahman, 2014; Todd et al., 2020). In the same vein, a United Muslims post declares, “Muslims are maybe the only people who are still trying to keep being modest as all prophets of God taught us.”

Another United Muslims post reads, “Many Non-Muslims and mainly Christians sometimes Mock how Muslims pray ... here is the surprise !!”. Presumably, the post originally contained non-textual media, yet even the remaining visible content shows potential signs of discord-creation. It could remind Muslims of the way in which some look down upon their religious practices; it could also suggest to conservative Christians that Muslims see them as an enemy (Hafez, 2014; Winnick, 2019).

Other posts in United Muslims state hopes that people will convert to Islam, which, while innocuous on its surface, may generate anger and fear within Christians (Dahab & Omori, 2018; Gorski, 2017; Sherkat & Lehman, 2018; Whitehead et al., 2018). For over a millennia, Western Christian political ideology has placed Islam as a threat, the looming invader sworn to defeat Christianity – this provides excuses and justifications for Christian violence against Muslim people (Goplen & Plant, 2015; Hafez, 2020; Karaman & Christian, 2020). It is an underlying and inculcated belief, an ingrained illogical reaction (Goplen & Plant, 2015; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). If an American Christian Facebook page said, “I’m praying they become Christian!” few would bat an eye; when United Muslims posts, “May Allah swt guide them to Islam”, many Christians are likely to take it as an act of aggression (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Hafez, 2020; Karaman & Christian, 2020; Kaufman & Niner, 2019).

LGBT United also directly addressed Christians and Christianity, multiple times. Some posts featured a fairly benign or even somewhat positive statement, usually revolving around describing God as loving, and stating that current conservative

Christians are just misunderstanding or even disappointing God. For instance, "Jesus didn't say a damn thing about gay people. He DID have a lot to say about hypocrites". Again, this is unlikely to be well-received by conservative Christians: it could even be counted as a form of blasphemy, to someone who holds the view that queer people are in direct opposition to God (Colliver et al., 2019).

Some LGBT United posts, on the other hand, went for something a bit more direct:

> What the hell is wrong with these so called Christians? I would much rather stand before my creator, as a gay man, than to be standing before him as a judgemental bigot!! Bishop: Satan is staging a 'homosexual invasion' to steal children We've covered plenty of loony Christian ministers and their outlandish claims about LGBT people, but Bishop Otis Kenner of Louisiana may take first prize. Televangelists often claim hurricanes and other natural disasters are God's wrath for accepting LGBT people. Pope Francis says transgender people will be the 'annihilation of man.' But Kenner thinks we're leading an invasion force to steal Christian children and turn them into agents of Satan to stop God's "colonization of the earth realm." Wow...all I can say is wow right now. I am completely dumbfounded at this one..."stealing" children...how many kids are just sitting their waiting to be adopted into a loving home? Who are the people that believe this shit??? Weak minded!! That's all I can figure. I bet he takes all their money, too. The stupidity of some people boggles my mind. These "Christians" just become more & more delusional!! I look forward to the day when stuff like this is recognized as the mental illness that it truly is and they get the treatment they need!

Another long screed says:

> What is it with fanatics who worship a book written schmucks? Be kind. Don't harm people. Live and let live!! Texas Republican opposed to school trans policy files bill that could out kids A Republican lawmaker in Texas has objected to school policies allowing transgender students to have their needs addressed without informing their parents of their gender identity if the student does not wish for them to know, and has now introduced a bill critics say could require teachers to out LGBTQ students or face consequences. State Rep. Konni Burton filed Senate Bill 242 this month and has said that it merely adds to existing state law, which already requires schools to share information with parents regarding their children in the areas of academics, behavior, and health. One of my best friends was from Texas and ended up homeless when his parents found out he was gay... you know, 40% homeless youth are LGBT+ due to rejection by family members. Outing them could mean the difference between having a home and being homeless! That's why Republicans are just hell-bent on division because they want to hurt and divide Americans, and they are so rogue and potentially corrupt and they can't do their job correctly cause

> they only care about themselves and what they want and what their supporters want, not what ALL Americans want and they don't care about ALL Americans. I would just call for a boycott on the entire Republican Party, they need to go and be stopped from hurting our kids and Americans, and this nation needs to be a Democratic nation and the haters to go and crawl back where they came from, the basement.

These posts are directly aggressive, blatantly full of anger and packed with insults, telling Christians that queer people see them as mentally ill, stupid, and to be stopped. Additionally, the latter post implicitly equates Christians (the people who "worship a book written [by] schmucks") with Republicans, while also insulting the Bible, which is viewed as sacred. Many Christians believe that the Bible was literally written by God, who divinely inspired the human authors (M. Campbell et al., 2019; Worthen et al., 2017). Therefore this post would likely be seen as an astounding affront, an attack on something literally holy.

4.5.2. Sounding the dog-whistle

Other posts, though in the same vein, do not necessarily directly mention or address Christianity or Christians. Instead, these posts have an emphasis on elements - items, concepts, issues – which may be likely to evoke strong negative feelings about the queer and Muslim communities in groups which are predisposed to view these communities with hostility, serving as a 'dog-whistle' (Wetts & Willer, 2019). Dog-whistles are messages that are heard only by a specific group (like a high-pitched dog whistle is audible to dogs, but not to humans), or that are recognised only by those who are already aware of its meaning and connections. Dog-whistles "prime underlying attitudes without referring directly to the group in question (e.g., "border security" in relation to immigrants)—often in a way that discredits and further disadvantages marginalised communities" (Coe & Griffin, 2020, p. 3).

They also serve as a synecdoche: a particular item that represents a whole, embodying a mass of fear and feelings about a group (Crosby, 2014; DeCook, 2018; Huntington, 2016). The repeated mention and emphasis on these specific concepts within United Muslims and LGBT United may serve as a dog-whistle, speaking to - and stoking – Islamophobic, homophobic, and transphobic hostility in those who already have negative feelings towards these communities.

> “A Muslim identity [is] viewed in opposition culturally, religiously, and racially to the West and Christianity” (Karaman & Christian, 2020, p. 3).

> “…by extending legal protections to gays and lesbians, the United States was breaking its covenant with the Christian God, who in their view despises homosexuality” (Whitehead & Perry, 2015, p. 425)

Hijabs are a dog-whistle for Islamophobes, in the same way that bathrooms are a dog-whistle for transphobes and homophobes (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Castle, 2019; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Farkas et al., 2018a; Murib, 2020; Williams & Vashi, 2007). These are potent, recognisable symbols, easy to rally people around, with a built in, excuse or denial of prejudice, via, in both cases, an alleged desire to protect women and children from danger and abuse (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Colliver et al., 2019; Crosby, 2014; Blumell et al., 2019).

Hijabs are seen as anti-American and threatening, and reference to them can activate and imply the validity of feelings of danger, as well as beliefs that Islam is inherently oppressive of women (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Crosby, 2014; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). This is especially true for conservative Christians, however, even supposedly secular societies, like France and Quebec, have moved against veils creating legislation banning or limiting their use (Brayson, 2019; Crosby, 2014; Karaman & Christian, 2020).

Hijabs and other head coverings are the most physically visible symbol of Islam, and women who wear hijabs are the members of the Muslim community most frequently targeted in Islamophobic hate crimes (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). Within United Muslims, the dog-whistle of hijabs, and its associated concept, modesty, appear 28 times. A frequently repeated post states, “I think God has ordered all mankind with modesty, so what is your problem with the Islamic veil (Hijab) ????”; another reads, “Hijab is better for you .... God knows better than all of us”.

Dog-whistle terms continually appear in United Muslims, possibly a reflection of how effective appeals to Islamophobia can be within Western society (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017, 2020; Ekman, 2015; Whitehead et al., 2018). Potentially fear-inducing words and phrases like ‘Sharia Law’ and ‘jihad’ also abound, as in frequently repeated posts saying, “Jihad is not a declaration of war against others !”, and “Sharia Law is not what they tell you in the news...”.

In the LGBT United dataset, six posts specifically discussed laws around transgender individuals' access to bathrooms, usually in conjunction with quotes from real news articles. Within the dataset, 25 posts were actively in favour of transgender rights as a whole. Posts often mention or respond to so-called 'bathroom bills': legislation which would force transgender people to use the bathroom which correlates to the gender they were assigned at birth (the gender which appears on their initial birth certificate) (Murib, 2019; Patel, 2017).

One post reads, for instance:

> F**king perverts!! They can't have a normal life if they're fantasizing about women taking a crap!! CALIFORNIA BALLOT MEASURE TO LIMIT TRANSGENDER RESTROOM USE FAILS TO QUALIFY Backers of a proposed ballot initiative that sought to require transgender people to use the public restrooms that correspond with their biological sex say they have failed to qualify the measure for the California ballot. This state with its high crime rate and drug cartel doesn't need to worry who's using the bathroom!!

Such expressions of rage could resonate with members of the queer community who are transgender or support transgender rights, increasing solidarity with the page (Cavalcante, 2019; Craig & McInroy, 2014). However, transgender individuals' use of bathrooms is also a dog-whistle issue for many people, a potential source of controversy due to vigorous negative reactions from conservative Christians, and often from the general public (Blumell et al., 2019; Murib, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020; Todd et al., 2020). Transgender people face violence and discrimination throughout much of society, and, currently, some of this mistreatment is framed around, and justified by, arguments about their right to bathroom access (Bender-Baird, 2016; Patel, 2017).

Some scholars see the current political and societal focus on attacking transgender rights, particularly around bathrooms, as a purposeful strategic shift. Having failed to prevent equal marriage, right-wing politicians and groups may have moved to a new battlefield in the fight against queer rights (Minter, 2017; Murib, 2019). As activist Laverne Cox said, "[D]on't be fooled: These bathroom laws aren't really about bathrooms … It's about the humanity of trans people, about us having the right to exist in a public space" (L. Cox, 2017).

Right-wing focus on the issue of transgender bathroom access is framed with a familiar justification: protecting women and children (Blumell et al., 2019; Stone, 2018).

Opponents insist that allowing transgender people – especially transgender women – to use bathrooms which match their gender will lead to assaults in said bathrooms (Blumell et al., 2019; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Though there is *no* evidence to support the fearmongering, these claims, along with the larger public's lack of positivity towards, or widespread knowledge about, transgender people, may "creat[e] the potential for feelings of threat, mobilization, and conservative policy" (Castle, 2019, p. 654; Colliver et al., 2019).

Posts in LGBT United frequently mention children. Such posts, though appearing at first to just be banal statements or human-interest stories, may have more of a purpose. LGBT United shares numerous stories of real people – once again demonstrating use and appropriation of real queer individuals' identities – which revolve around parental acceptance (or lack thereof) of queer children. Stories of acceptance might be heartwarming for real queer people, or their families and loved ones. However, these same stories might be threatening to conservatives who fear the prospect of their own children being queer, or who believe that the queer community is 'evangelising' and trying to convince children to become queer (Buyantueva, 2018; Gal et al., 2016; Stone, 2018; Wolff et al., 2012). The juxtaposition of queer people and children calls back to homophobic tropes which insisted that queer people were paedophiles, an association Russia relied on when introducing its so-called anti-gay propaganda laws (Buyantueva, 2018; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015; Wolff et al., 2012).

One post from LGBT United read, "How is two boys kissing gross? Honestly I think this is the most brave thing a young boy can do, kiss a boy and not be scared to...". Another post says, "If watching 2 gay men or 2 lesbians kiss prompts your child to express interest in the same sex, the tv didn't make them gay... it made them a little more comfortable with being gay!"

Some posts – many of which feel 'off' in the same manner as Bad Imitations, failing to sufficiently achieve the right facetious tone – seem to hold the potential to fulfill fears that queer people have hostile intentions towards non-queer people (including the desire to make straight people gay, or cisgender people transgender) (O'Malley et al., 2018; Stone, 2018; Whitehead & Perry, 2015). Homophobia and transphobia often correlate with ideas that non-queer individuals will somehow lose their rights; some posts seem to provide supposed evidence that the queer community wants that to

happen (Suchland, 2018; Todd et al., 2020). This might serve to increase the feeling that non-queer people are under threat, or will be forced to conform to queer identities.

For instance, an LGBT United post states, “The kids that need foster care come from heterosexual families. So I think the straights should be banned from being foster parents!”. This could be seen as a joke; or it could be seen as a genuine intention. Another post reads:

> Really hate it when guys use that "I'm a lesbian too." line. Like, are freaking serious right now? Cause your stupidity really is showing. You're not a lesbian woman, you're a straight man. Get the hell over yourself cuz no lesbian in history wants your d*ck. Guys who keep hitting on lesbians, even after being told off, stop bragging about your ‘magic power’ to turn lesbian straight. So you claim that after you show me your weenie I’m instantly change by deciding to like dick? Fat chance buddy, your fantasies have nothing to do with reality. And you know what? I’m thinking to treat you with your own medicine! So enjoy yourself while you can, soon your not-as-straight-as-you-think girlfriend’ll dump you ‘cause I’m going to steal her from you! #queerhumor #lesbian #bornthisway #sexism #stereotypes”

Overall, these posts that emphasise known dog-whistle issues may serve to legitimise existing prejudices, lend credence to beliefs that are based in stereotypes and stigma, evoke and stoke feelings of anger and fear, and act as evidence to support the supposed need to view the group as a threat.

Chapter 5.

Discussion

This chapter presents a series of propositions: conclusions that arise from consideration of the themes revealed from the data, and the context provided by the literature. These conclusions include a discussion of multi-targeting, a chronicle of the IRA's 'in real life' actions and how these impact marginalised groups, and an exploration of potential prognostications for future IRA activities. The chapter closes with a description of the unique characteristics of the issues emphasised by the IRA in United Muslims and LGBT United.

5.1. Multi-targeting

Based upon this analysis, consideration of the IRA's past and methods, and a great deal of scholarly research, some posts in LGBT United and United Muslims may have been designed to provoke members of the conservative Christian community – especially the white evangelical community – through direct antagonism towards Christianity, and repeated deployment of dog-whistles. These posts in LGBT United and United Muslims may act as the fulfillment of prophecies, proof to support an already-assumed theory: that marginalised communities want to supersede Christianity and destroy American values (Ekman, 2015; Glass, 2019; Todd et al., 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2015). Therefore, marginalised-impersonating groups like LGBT United and United Muslims are potentially quite useful in falsely substantiating a threat, and enflaming fear and reactionism (Ekman, 2015; Farkas et al., 2018a; Gorski, 2017; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015).

The IRA learns from history, and it learns what works (National Intelligence Council, 2017; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Blatantly fulfilling violent stereotypes may not be as effective as a more subtle method, as shown by Farkas et al. (2018). Farkas et al. (2018) analysed Muslim-impersonating Facebook pages that attempted to stoke hatred and fear of Muslims, immigrants, and refugees in Denmark. While it is unknown if these pages were related to the IRA, some of the same strategies described by Farkas et al. (2018) also appear in United Muslims, such as the

use of limited Arabic 'religious' phrases, mention of dog-whistles such as Sharia Law, and overall positioning of Islam as a direct and imminent threat to Christianity.

However, the tone of the posts differs drastically. The pages Farkas et al. (2018) discuss were loud, virulently hateful, filled with graphic threats of murder, sexual violence, and a desire for world domination – messages alleging to be from extremist Muslims determined to take over Denmark. This affected the speed of detection, and the rapidity of removal. People very quickly recognised these over-the-top pages as false, and dedicated action swiftly removed them from Facebook (Farkas et al., 2018).

To be long-lasting, and to achieve other goals like creating and executing events and gathering assets, it may simply be more effective to be subtle, rather than posting content that outright fulfills the most extreme stereotypes (e.g. declaring that all women will be forced to wear burqas, or stating an intent to turn children gay) (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Becker, 1949; Farkas & Neumayer, 2020). More subtle content may appear more believable at first glance, and thus be easier to embed within political discourse, and harder to detect (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Becker, 1949). Such material could potentially also appear more credible as a legitimate voice of Muslims or queer people, even to more judicious investigators; this material could also, however, carry a dog-whistle message designed to provoke fear and hostility in specific audiences (Coe & Griffin, 2020).

If the IRA posts to a right-impersonating group, claiming that Muslims want to make everyone wear a hijab, they can then use United Muslims to back up that assertion. They can show a screenshot of a post that supposedly comes from a very large group of Muslims, which focuses on the hijab. This provision of supposed evidence also relates to the concept of using bait posts to attract high numbers of likes and followers, to give more credibility and weight to these groups, and to statements that might come from them. If a group like United Muslims, at which at one point had 300,000 followers, says something, it looks like this statement is supported and backed up by 300,000 Muslims (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019).

Within the United States, marginalised groups already face constant hostility and violence towards their mere existence (Karaman & Christian, 2020; Patel, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). The deployment of dog-whistle issues to trigger intense

antagonistic beliefs and appeal to already existing prejudices, along with supposed evidence of enmity from these groups to Christians, may be, when combined with apparent legitimacy and duration of the group, a useful tool to potentially encourage further hostility towards these communities.

Russia has already had success with similarly subtle strategies within their own country, as can be seen in their obfuscated Islamophobia, and the initial creation and subsequent intensification of anti-gay laws (Ragozina, 2020; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015; Suchland, 2018). In the United States, and in other Wester nations, it is important to recognise that the IRA are very good at seeing what is already there, and using issues and hatred that already exist (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; National Intelligence Council, 2017). The potential use of subtlety is important in terms of detection and research methodology – it demonstrates that community members may be incredibly valuable to recognise these impostors (Berger, 2015; Fraser, 2015; Zempi, 2016).

It is possible, therefore, that when impersonating a marginalised community, and presumably intending their posts to target that same marginalised community, they may *also* intend for these posts to carry dog-whistle messages meant to create hostility towards the marginalised group. While exploring IRA propaganda use of LGBT youth, analysing ads for various IRA-controlled groups including LGBT United, T. Jones (2019) discussed "double-use", and described how "these LGBT memes were often later disseminated increasingly across 2015-2017 for conservative homophobic American 'Bible-belt' electorates" (p.15).

In particular, T. Jones (2019) detailed an instance where a single meme was purposefully posted in both "LGBT United and US news feeds in conservative areas" (p. 15). This meme may have read as celebratory to many people, as it joyously declared that the Boy Scouts was now permitting gay adults to become troop leaders; however, to other audiences, this same message could serve as a dog-whistle, evoking the very long history of homophobic beliefs linking homosexuality to pedophilia (GLAAD, 2016; T. Jones, 2019; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015).

The current study proposes an alternate, broader term, to acknowledge the breadth of the phenomenon and to recognise the potentially deliberate intentions behind

creation of this propaganda: *multi-targeting*. Here, "multi-targeting" is the term this study gives to a specific concept/phenomenon: creation and use of an item of propaganda (e.g. a post or a meme, or even an entire Facebook group or persona) for multiple purposes, and to target multiple audiences at once. Each target audience receives a different message, and the message intended for the latent target may seek to evoke hostility towards the manifest target. A single item may be created with two (or more) very different purposes, and with the intention to influence two (or more) very different targets.

There may be a manifest, or surface-level, obvious target – for instance, if it is posted by a group which impersonates Muslims, the initial assumption is that it is intended to target Muslims. Then, there may be a latent, or underlying, less-obvious target – for instance, if it is posted by a group which impersonates Muslims, yet it contains dog-whistles and provocations that are likely to create a reaction in another group, it likely is also intended to target that other group.

The evidence suggests that multi-targeting may exist throughout the content of LGBT United and United Muslims.

5.2. IRA, IRL

In an article in the *Washington Post*, Clinton Watts of the foreign Policy Research Institute stated, "[N]ot only did [the IRA] influence how people viewed Russian policy, they got people to take physical action. That's unprecedented" (Timberg & Dwoskin, 2018). The legitimacy, influence, and cachet gained by these false IRA- created Facebook groups went far beyond influencing ideology (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). LGBT United and United Muslims both, in particular, were part of physical action, orchestrated in Russia but occurring in America (Howard et al., 2019; Seetharaman, 2017; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a). The wielding of the Facebook groups' position and influence to enact physical events may have been done with the hope of creating violence (DiResta et al., 2018b; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018).

One activity enacted by the IRA groups was the creation of protests and rallies, and in particular what Wilson (2020) called duelling protests. This involved deliberately

arranging for two groups of 'enemies' to meet, presumably in hope they would clash (Howard et al., 2019; Lister & Sebastian, 2017; Seetharaman, 2017; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). The most infamous of these events involved the wielding of two separate, and very differently aligned and operated, IRA-created groups.

The IRA created an event on United Muslims, a rally to save Islamic knowledge, taking place on May 21st, 2016. Another IRA Facebook group, Heart of Texas, which was virulently right-wing and Islamophobic, created an event it encouraged its members to attend - a competing rally for the same time and place, with the goal to 'stop Islamization of Texas'. Members of United Muslims were encouraged to bring themselves; members of Heart of Texas, however, were encouraged to bring guns (DiResta et al., 2018a; Seetharaman, 2017).

Suddenly, in real life as opposed to online, people were meeting - scared of each other, angry, and potentially primed for violence (Seetharaman, 2017; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a). If this attempt had been successful, we do not know what might have resulted. Fortunately, though indeed dozens of individuals on both sides showed up at the same place, at the same time, some with weapons, no violence occurred beyond verbal confrontations (Fanelli, 2017; Glenn, 2018; Lister & Sebastian, 2017; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a).

This pattern of dueling protests appears to be a popular IRA tactic, a method of creating physical intersection between groups that the IRA's social media pages have spent time making angry and afraid (Lukito et al., 2020; Miller, 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Stoking fear, and potentially creating conflicts, is a huge part of the overarching strategy behind the online disinformation campaigns worldwide (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Lukito et al., 2020; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019b). For United Muslims, in particular, these events show the ways in which marginalised identities were used to open their communities to potential harm and violence.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that "At least 60 rallies, protests and marches were publicized or financed" by various IRA-run Facebook groups (Seetharaman, 2017). Not all of these events appear to be specifically protest/counter- protest intersections:

some may have had other purposes, perhaps aims such as bolstering a group's perceived legitimacy and position (Seetharaman, 2017; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). For instance, following the Orlando Pulse shooting, LGBT United organized a candlelight vigil (*Online LGBT Community Hosts Memorial Rally, Vigil for Pulse Victims*, 2016; Seetharaman, 2017). Events such as this generated media coverage, and community recognition (Seetharaman, 2017). It may have also served to give the groups the appearance of legitimacy - proof of their activism.

Their claims to legitimacy through large numbers of followers, use of group conversations and terminology, and finally these events, could all have served to make them look like trustworthy members of the community they had impersonated (DiResta et al., 2018b; Fraser, 2015; Howard et al., 2019). They used this reputation to reach out to real community groups, and real activists and organizations. IRA operatives, posing as real American activists, contacted many real American groups, requesting partnership for events. In some cases, the groups declined. In other cases, after looking at the group's online profile and assuming legitimacy, they agreed (A. Campbell, 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018).

In the 60+ rallies and events the IRA executed, many real Americans participated, doing everything from purchasing signs to giving speeches to contacting networks and spreading the message (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Many people also simply attended. For marginalised people, attending an event where another group may unexpectedly show up - potentially primed to hate you, likely inflamed with fear and anger, and sometimes wielding guns – seems likely to have the potential to be dangerous. The IRA's deliberate creation of such situations suggests the possibility that part of their strategy was to set up marginalised communities not simply as equal opposition, but as victims for violence.

DiResta et al. (2018) showed a meme in the form of an image macro, which was once posted to LGBT United. It reads:

> If any gay/lesbian/transgender teenagers need anyone to talk to I'm here and I'll listen. I'm not looking for a hook up or anything. I won't even give out my gender or name. Times are hard and no one deserves to feel alone (p. 40).

Messages inviting personal sharing and disclosure may, DiResta et al. (2018) went on to suggest, be part of an effort to recruit assets. By taking advantage of the atmosphere of trust and the expectation of social media communities as places of support, the IRA could encourage people to divulge personal secrets (Jenzen, 2017; Lucero, 2017). If they so desired, they could use this secret as a tool for blackmail, to get people to do what they want (DiResta et al., 2018b). The queer community may be especially vulnerable. For instance, unfortunately, mere existence can be dangerous for many transgender individuals, and some people know they could be hurt or even killed if their gender identity was revealed (Bender-Baird, 2016; Patel, 2017).

As a whole, it is apparent that the actions and impact of both United Muslims and LGBT United reach beyond the internet, and beyond simply affecting ideology or voting. They attempted to use, position, and potentially endanger marginalised individuals, by cultivating and then completely betraying these communities' trust and desire to do good.

5.3. Enmity: Potential futures

With understanding of the IRA's methods, consideration of societal prejudices, and knowledge of historical and current leveraging of marginalised identities against each other, it may be possible to make predictions. Looking at present-day conflicts, as well as past patterns, suggests potential future sources of deliberate interference and attempts to create discord. These primarily involve playing marginalised groups against one another, fragmenting their solidarity, as well as relying on a familiar refrain: protecting women and children (Blumell et al., 2019; Stones, 2017; Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017).

5.3.1. Queer vs. Muslim

Russia is already very familiar with deliberately using a marginalised identity to promote an agenda, to make opposition of that identity a rallying point, a part of national identity, and an outgroup to unite against (L. Jones, 2016; T. Jones, 2019; Suchland, 2018). A marginalised community can even serve as a representation of a looming foreign threat (Meyer, 2020; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). They have ably used issues such as homophobia to divide, and continue to adeptly control a unique, stealthy

Islamophobia (Müller, 2019; Ragozina, 2020; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015; Suchland, 2018).

Research has shown that the wider Western public – including the queer community – tend to view Islam as inherently homophobic and Muslims as inherently opposed to queer rights (L. Jones, 2016; Meyer, 2020; Rahman, 2014; Rahman & Valliani, 2016). Queer rights are used to justify Islamophobia, anti-immigration sentiments, and nationalism, worldwide (Kuruvilla, 2017; Meyer, 2020; Rahman & Valliani, 2016; Suchland, 2018; Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017). On the flip side, religious and cultural freedom (more specifically, queer rights as a symbol of Western imperialism/colonialism), including Muslim rights, may be used as justification for homophobia (Rahman, 2014; Rahman & Valliani, 2016; Suchland, 2018).

Right-wing political groups often claim Muslims are homophobic, and point to Muslims as the main threat facing queer people, when, in reality, American Muslims are far more accepting of homosexuality than conservative white evangelicals (Kuruvilla, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). While the queer community is generally considered to be leftist, liberal, and tolerant, the queer community's attitudes and stereotypes about Muslims reflect and reinforce Islamophobic – conservative – beliefs (L. Jones, 2016; Meyer, 2020; Rahman & Valliani, 2016; Ramirez et al., 2018). This speaks to the potential for pitting these two groups against each other, and the necessity of instead maintaining and truly achieving solidarity, as well as recognising the existence of people who belong to both of these communities (Rahman, 2014; Shah, 2016; Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017).

These identities are often weaponised by their common oppressors, including politicians, limiting community members' abilities to actually discuss community issues without their words being taken and used to create harm (Rahman & Valliani, 2016; Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017). This positioning erodes the solidarity which should exist between these two communities which are under attack (L. Jones, 2016; Kuruvilla, 2017). As Suhonic said, "I didn't realise, at all, just how valuable my identity [as a queer Muslim], or my position was to existing political frames" (Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017, p. 107).

Such strategies are most commonly used by right wing conservative politicians, and by right wing conservative groups, especially Christian groups (L. Jones, 2016; Kuruvilla, 2017; Rahman & Valliani, 2016; Tamimi Arab & Suhonic, 2017). In the present West, use of queer rights to justify Islamophobia is a recurrent strategy (Ekman, 2015). Donald Trump, for instance, used the Pulse shooting in Orlando, Florida to argue for the Muslim Ban (Kuruvilla, 2017; Meyer, 2020).

Islamophobia, and general racism, within the Western queer community is a large and pressing issue. The Western queer community tends to view itself as just that: Western, and often, specifically, white (El-Tayeb, 2012; L. Jones, 2016). This creates an unwelcoming and unsafe community for racialised queer people, allows vulnerability to the potential for being used against other marginalised communities, and, by implicitly identifying queer rights with Western exceptionalism and supposed superiority, results in queer rights potentially becoming dangerously intertwined with colonialism (El-Tayeb, 2012; Freude & Vergés Bosch, 2020; Kehl, 2020; Meyer, 2020; Rahman, 2014; Rahman & Valliani, 2016). Rahman (2014), describes this as homocolonialism: "the deployment of LGBTIQ rights and visibility to stigmatize non-Western cultures and conversely reassert the supremacy of the Western nations and civilization" (pp. 6-7). One community becomes a tool to actively continue the oppression of another.

5.3.2. Feminists vs. Everyone

There is also a possibility that another community is especially vulnerable to propaganda that centres on Muslims and transgender people: feminists. People (and laws) which discriminate against marginalised groups, especially Muslims and transgender people, frequently claim to be motivated by the need to protect women and children from assault (Crosby, 2014; Blumell et al., 2019; Stones, 2017). This justification can drive, or at least provide an excuse for, conservatives' prejudices; it could do the same for feminists (Colpean, 2020; Crosby, 2014; C. Jones & Slater, 2020).

The same alleged cause, protecting women and children, could be wielded to enflame prejudice from both conservative Christians and radical feminists. Recent times have seen the surge of TERFs, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (who refer to themselves as gender-critical feminists), who are virulently opposed to transgender individuals. Indeed, conservative right wing groups and radical feminist groups have

begun working together to fight against transgender rights (Carrera-Fernández & DePalma, 2020; C. Jones & Slater, 2020; Zanghellini, 2020).

Similarly, the societal assumptions and stereotypes about Islam as oppressive and Muslim women as oppressed have resulted in Islamophobia from feminists, and the imposition of imperial feminism (Colpean, 2020; Crosby, 2014). Imperial feminism, outlined by Amos & Parmar (1984), features imposition of Western (white) ideals of feminism upon all women, and "uses Western social and economic systems to judge and make pronouncements about how Third World women can become emancipated" (p. 7). Imperial feminism ignores women's agency, as well as the intersectional nature of women's identities and the context of women's cultures and experiences (Amos & Parmar, 1984; Coloma, 2012; Colpean, 2020).

Imperial feminism harms the very women it paternalistically claims to defend, and white feminists have used the excuse of defending Muslim women's freedom to support racist legislation and restriction of Muslim women's individual rights (Brayson, 2019; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Crosby, 2014). As stated by Mondon & Winter (2017), "calls to ban the hijab, burka or burkini…present themselves as attempts to emancipate women from an oppressive patriarchal culture, but really only target and punish women with charges and penalties by demonizing a particular garment, without ever considering the agency of the bearer" (p. 2167).

Feminists may be vulnerable to Islamophobic appeals which focus on portraying Muslim women as oppressed, and Islam itself as inherently oppressive and therefore potentially dangerous (Brayson, 2019; Crosby, 2014; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). This could create division between groups which might otherwise work together to support one another.

5.4. Is it still fearmongering when the danger is real?

When writing posts targeting and impersonating conservatives, the IRA targets, inflames, and leverages demonstrably inaccurate beliefs and longstanding prejudices, amplifying fear and anger (Badawy et al., 2019; Bastos & Farkas, 2019; DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019). While they often used already existing beliefs, stereotypes, and hatreds, such as Islamophobia, homophobia, anti-immigration, and racism, they still

appeared to need to work to embroider, exaggerate, and even outright generate conspiracies (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Guess et al., 2019; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a). They had to create – or repeat – falsehoods, convincing people of a danger that likely did not exist (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; DiResta et al., 2018b; Zannettou et al., 2020).

Their methods in targeting marginalised people appear to have a vital difference, which is important to acknowledge, in order to be able to respond to it. The issues the IRA emphasises and uses when targeting marginalised groups are often, at heart, legitimate (DiResta et al., 2018a; Howard et al., 2019; Kim, 2018). Posts and content on LGBT United and United Muslims often focus on real events, and experiences these marginalised groups already recognise as common (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019; Lukito et al., 2020). To target the right wing, the IRA often makes up conspiracies and creates an illusory image of constant threat; to target marginalised people, they usually do not need to.

Labelling posts about these legitimate issues 'fake news' risks doing a disservice to marginalised communities, for whom these things are in fact true. A post such as one described by DiResta et al (2019), which claims that Obama is an illegal immigrant and secret Muslim encouraging people to commit voter fraud, for example, takes advantage of existing prejudices (racism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigration) to create a false fear, by means of an outright, disprovable lie. A United Muslims post, on the other hand, referring to the 2015 Chapel Hill shooting, implying that white mass shooters are rarely labelled terrorists, but Muslims regularly *are* labelled terrorists … well, that's a fair point, demonstrably provable, addressing the reality of Western Islamophobia, which is an ever-present danger to Muslims' everyday lives (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Elmasry & El-Nawawy, 2020; Neff & Dewan, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2017). It is a legitimate fear, and an ongoing injustice.

In the same way, queer people face homophobia and transphobia, and, while some of the IRA's posts may be dramatically phrased, concerns about facing violence, discrimination, or even death are, unfortunately, once again legitimate (Belknap, 2015; Patel, 2017). LGBT United discussed the Pulse shooting, transphobic assaults, queer individual's stories of being disowned by their parents – these are likely to be topics and

events that queer people are intimately aware of (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen & Karl, 2014; Lucero, 2017; Meyer, 2020).

That is the big point: for marginalised groups, the fears the IRA touts are not illogical. Therefore, when it comes to marginalised communities, it seems likely that fighting disinformation may have difficulty succeeding if undertaken using the same methods deployed elsewhere. For instance, campaigns against disinformation often encourage people to "check the facts" – in marginalised communities, people are likely to find that these facts are quite accurate (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Information campaigns face another serious problem: why should marginalised groups believe it? The IRA is already focused on breeding distrust of media, and the right wing is prone to disbelieving scientists and those they deem elites, and full of conspiracy theories (DiResta et al., 2018b; Lukito, 2020; Simpson & Rios, 2019; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). However, the left wing's distrust of media may also be due to legitimate harm the media has committed, and prejudices and stereotypes the media continues to perpetuate (Ekman, 2015; von Sikorski et al., 2017). For instance, when Muslims United exclaimed, "You'll never see this on Fox News!", such a statement is probably true – Fox News is recognised as unlikely to provide positive comments about Muslims (Winnick, 2019).

Marginalised groups also may feel they have good reason to distrust the government, as well as academics: both have a long history of mistreating and misrepresenting these communities (Ball, 2016; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Zempi, 2016). So, within marginalised communities, campaigns to combat political interference may be more likely to be successful when coming from people they can trust: members of their community. However, this also indicates a larger issue, in terms of the need to not only seek to correct disinformation, but to reconceptualize responses to foreign interference efforts within marginalised communities. Successfully combatting the IRA's influence within marginalised communities will require different approaches, and different methods. Recommendations to address these issues, and suggestions to improve effectiveness, will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations and Future Research

This chapter briefly details the overarching content and use of marginalised identities in LGBT United and United Muslims, as well as the messages this content contained. Subsequently, the chapter addresses limitations of the current study. Discussion then moves to recommendations for future research and policy, including analytical methods, creating community partnerships, taking away the IRA's 'ammunition' (via working to decrease the prejudice and violence that marginalised communities frequently face), proactively identifying potential targets and tools, and overall broadening the use of theory, perspective, and scope. The chapter ends by addressing the marginalised communities themselves, with suggestions to maintain solidarity and safety.

The IRA appropriated queer and Muslim identities to deploy impersonated propaganda through LGBT United and United Muslims. By impersonating these communities, the IRA claimed legitimacy in order to emphasise feelings of anger and fear, not just in the marginalised communities whose identities they wore, but potentially also in those who view these communities as a threat (DiResta et al., 2018b; Farkas & Bastos, 2018; Howard et al., 2019). Specifically, both apparent fulfilling of prejudiced beliefs and repeated focus on dog-whistle topics may have been intended to build anger in conservatives, especially conservative evangelical Christians (Gorski, 2017; Kanamori et al., 2017; Wolff et al., 2012).

LGBT United and United Muslims emphasised the danger queer and Muslim people face, while also potentially creating greater danger by encouraging hostility against them. The IRA created feelings of isolation and distrust towards the wider community, as well as the government and media, while positioning themselves as trustworthy members of a safe space, opening the door for use of community members as assets. The IRA used impersonated propaganda to create political passivity within marginalised groups, and to encourage their feelings of vulnerability and fear; however, it may also have wished to create targets for violence.

These marginalised identities were essential, as the IRA appeared to make strategic use of existing prejudices in order to manipulate American democracy and potentially foment violence (Kim et al., 2018; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Marginalised groups which already face prejudices are being exploited for labour, content, and real-world activity, with purposeful invasion of their communities, both online and in the real world. The IRA took advantage of a source of marginalised power – community, solidarity, activism, and coming together to have a voice and create change (Buyantueva, 2018; Jenzen, 2017; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018; Yukich, 2018). Their altruism and action are used against them, placing them in danger.

6.1. Limitations

It is possible that the IRA is not deliberately emphasising dog-whistle topics, or purposefully appealing to white evangelical Christian prejudices and fears. The IRA may simply believe this is really how queer and Muslim people act, and their belief in stereotypes and emphasis on dog-whistle issues is unintentional, a product of ignorance and prejudice.

I believe this is rendered unlikely when considering the evidence of use of these same dog-whistles in right-impersonating groups, and, as discovered by T. Jones (2019), by deliberate use of queer-impersonating ads to target and evoke reactions in right-wing users. It seems likely that Russian intelligence, including the IRA, has experience in mobilising fear and fulfilling stereotypes to stoke feelings of threat, as seen in Ragozina's (2020) discussion of representation of Muslims in state media, and T. Jones' (2019) discussion of double use of LGBT youth in propaganda, as well as Soboleva & Bakhmetjev's (2015) discussion of queer Russians' awareness of how their identity is used for political purposes.

An obvious limitation exists in relation to identity and experiential knowledge. I am a member of the queer community, and therefore had unique insight and appreciation, which aided my analysis and interpretation of LGBT United (Berger, 2015; Zempi, 2016). However, I am not a member of the Muslim community, and though I have sought to thoroughly ground myself in research, and supported my knowledge with

intense use of literature, my analysis of United Muslims is likely to be more superficial than one performed by a Muslim researcher (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Zempi, 2016). It would be incredibly valuable to have more insider researchers, not only to look at the United Muslims group and data set, but throughout research into this information, including at the government level, and within research as a whole.

Lack of research on what Facebook groups for marginalised communities usually look like necessitates some statements that are basically "trust me". That is, I have had to use my experiential knowledge: for instance, knowing that the use of the term "whore" would not be acceptable within the space of an online queer community. In this case, I have attempted to support the trustworthiness of my research, and my own bona fides. This involved demonstrating extensive personal knowledge of the community, along with strong general use of literature and research whenever possible, while showing diligence both in consideration of existing academic research and the methodological rigour employed in this study itself. I believe that this support for my credibility and knowledgebase suggests that my insights into queer online communities are trustworthy: you can probably believe that "whore" is indeed largely not accepted.

The datasets themselves - and their scope - present limitations, as they do not include all of the original context and (often non-textual) content, which may limit analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldana, 2011). This applies to the lack of preserved comments, as well, which might have provided insight into reaction to posts, and therefore into the purpose of said posts, as well as the success in creating dissent and engagement. Additionally, it might have given insight into what type of users were successfully 'taken in' by these groups.

6.2. Recommendations

6.2.1. Analytical methods

Internationally, governments are seeking answers, information, and strategies to combat online disinformation campaigns by foreign actors, Russian and otherwise (Bader, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019). This is especially true as the IRA continues its activities, by networking, sophisticating, and further embedding themselves into online communities. Nations with upcoming elections are especially wary, though - as

demonstrated by the current study - electoral interference is only one facet of this issue (DiResta et al., 2018a; Howard et al., 2019).

While analysis of previous IRA activity can reveal valuable insights, it is also wise to be actively exploring and looking for current activity. Many recommendations for detection and response have suggested use of Artificial Intelligence. While this is likely to prove useful, it has limitations, especially if it is not capable of analysing images (Hacker et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2020). This emphasizes the need to employ people for detection and analysis, to become familiar with what IRA activity looks like, to look through new and controversial hashtags, glance at community groups, and generally use the pattern-recognition ability and experiential knowledge humans possess (Barbour, 2014; Saldana, 2011).

Future analysis should involve insiders - researchers with insight and experience as part of the community is concerned - and continuing use of qualitative methods (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Zempi, 2016). Insider researchers are valuable in order to see nuances. Members of the communities are likely to have the degree of knowledge best situated to recognize uncharacteristic sentiments, suspicious events, and questionable actions and actors.

The findings of this study may be useful in combatting not just the IRA, but other propaganda, and other attempts to influence (or radicalise). The methods the IRA uses are not unique, and the divisions they target, and the prejudices they take advantage of, are there for other groups to exploit as well (DeCook, 2018; Farkas et al., 2018a; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). Political interference by the IRA is recognised as a pressing threat to democracy and safety worldwide, yet other groups, foreign and homegrown, employ similar methods, and also pose a danger, especially to the marginalised communities they often frame as the enemy (DeCook, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Meyer, 2020).

It is also wise to be aware of the potential for multi-targeting. As efforts to stop the IRA continue, and improve, it is likely that their efforts – and the efforts of other groups who may wish to influence the public and create discord – will also continue and improve, becoming more sophisticated and sneaky (Badawy et al., 2018; DiResta et al., 2018b; Kim, 2018; Lukito, 2020). Multi-target propaganda may be a method they use to evade detection and deletion, especially as social media companies have been put

under increasing pressure to identify and remove blatant hate speech and 'fake news' (Acker & Donovan, 2019; Farkas & Neumayer, 2020; Hindman & Barash, 2018). Future research should explore the use of dog-whistles (and also simply discover what various dog-whistles there *are*), and undertake more in-depth analysis of the use of marginalised-impersonating propaganda in general, but also specifically the use of marginalised-impersonating propaganda to target right-wing audiences.

6.2.2. Community partnership

DiResta et al. (2018) state, "…we must promote a multi-stakeholder model in which researchers, tech platforms, and government work together to detect foreign influence operations" (pp. 100-101). Here, members of the marginalised communities being impersonated are not considered 'stakeholders', despite being at such risk, having their identities and voices coopted and spaces invaded, and despite their invaluable insider knowledge (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Zempi, 2016). Authorities must treat these groups as partners. These communities are the people being victimized and targeted.

As an example, during the period shortly after the beginning of the 2020's worldwide Black Lives Matter protests in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, a tweet circulated from an account claiming to represent Vancouver's chapter of Black Lives Matter. The tweet advertised and encouraged attendance at a protest in Vancouver. Also circulating, shortly thereafter, were tweets, from personal accounts of individuals associated with the actual Black Lives Matter Vancouver group - a group that has been active for several years, and involved in several protests during that time. The second series of messages warned that the long-existing Vancouver chapter of Black Lives Matter had not created this post, or this protest, and advised people to be wary. Eventually, a consensus was reached: that, while not organised by Black Lives Matter Vancouver, the protest appeared to have been genuinely created by a community activist, and therefore it was endorsed (with caution) (Black Lives Matter Vancouver, 2020).

The suspicious nature of the incident was identified by community members, who also recognised the potential for danger and investigated the issue via their personal networks, ensuring safety for the rest of their community. Members of the targeted and impersonated communities should be recognized as sources of invaluable information,

instinct, and analytical ability (Berger, 2015; Zempi, 2016). Suspected impersonated propaganda of marginalised communities should be analyzed by people who can delve into, and not buy into, stereotypes, and recognize bad imitations.

Community expertise could be built into existing frameworks. For instance, many social media companies have implemented a feature allowing users to report suspected disinformation or suspicious activity. Nonetheless, so far, social media platforms' efforts to combat influence campaigns have had mixed results; communities' abilities to recognise suspicious impersonations could be a useful tool, if their reports were given weight (Allcott et al., 2019; Hindman & Barash, 2018).

Partnership can extend to addressing IRA propaganda within marginalised communities. As has been discussed, marginalised communities are likely to distrust government, media, and academics: information coming from these sources is likely to have limited effect (Bruckert, 2014). However, information coming from fellow community members may be more likely to successfully correct disinformation, spread information, and warn about potential dangers. It is vital to approach these communities, develop relationships with respected members and organisations within them, and work with them to use the inbuilt mechanisms of trust, relationship, and interpersonal connections that these communities already operate upon (Jenzen, 2017; Lozano-Neira & Marchbank, 2016).

6.2.3. Take away their ammunition

The Internet Research Agency sought to create polarisation, utilizing a focus on specific wedge issues and focal points of controversy (DiResta et al., 2018b; Kim, 2018; Lukito, 2020). They stoke feelings of enmity between left and right, and between various communities, but also between these communities and the government (National Intelligence Council, 2017; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019a). This emphasis on key issues is a major tactic, potentially a means of harnessing marginalised communities' legitimate fear, anger, distress, and experiences of oppression.

Therefore, it would seem reasonable that an effective way to hamper Internet Research Agency activities is to stop giving them material to work with. Police brutality,

Islamophobia, transphobic and homophobic discrimination: if government and other agencies act to make these big issues much smaller issues, and decrease oppression of these communities, the IRA may not have such an easy tool at hand (DiResta et al., 2018b; Howard et al., 2019). Governments could potentially lessen the success of IRA propaganda that focuses on marginalised groups' experiences of discrimination and injustice by *reducing* discrimination and injustice. A tall order, certainly, but an action both logical and moral.

This also speaks to the need to delve deeper into the reasons why the IRA has been effective, why their messaging has been successful, and who has the responsibility – and best chance – to challenge this effectiveness. When so much of the IRA's activities deliberately take advantage of prejudices that already exist within society, it seems logical that society itself (in the form of governments, researchers, and other authorities) must take some action. Discouraging the spread of IRA propaganda online (e.g. by recognising their presence on social media, and by hopefully having social media companies take down their posts) should only be one part of the overall response, and social media companies themselves should only be one of many parties addressing the issue.

6.2.4. Identify emerging targets and tools

Researchers and authorities alike need to be proactive, not reactive. It would be wise to begin searching for emerging areas of division and aggression, which could be evidence of IRA involvement, or merely give us an idea of potential future themes they will target. This may allow us to have an idea where to look for influence campaigns and disinformation; many emerging enmities or even conspiracies can be potentially tracked down to their places of origin. For example, in regard to the recent upswing in radical feminist hostility to transgender individuals, it may be worthwhile to trace some of the origins and history of the build up to this state of affairs, such as looking at a forum, Mumsnet, which is a frequent hotbed of anti-transgender discussion (Carrera-Fernández & DePalma, 2020; C. Jones & Slater, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020).

Consideration of potential areas of discord, or merely of oppression and vulnerability, might suggest communities the IRA may see as useful, and issues they may choose to exploit. It would likely be beneficial to be aware of marginalised groups,

considering the possibility that these communities could become the purposeful target of increasing hate and violence due to incitement of hostility and fear by the Internet Research Agency (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Gorski, 2017).

For instance, this study has previously mentioned the theme of protecting women and children, to which many prejudices and moral panics appeal (Hines, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020). What are moral panics or divisive issues of today, especially those that insist they are for the purpose of protecting women and children, and that have negative impact on a marginalised group? Especially a marginalised group already known to be viewed as dangerous or inappropriate by conservative Christians? A few issues already come to mind, such as the recent increase in fear of - and intense misunderstanding of - human trafficking, as well as concurrent hostility against sex work (Durisin et al., 2018; Millar & O'Doherty, 2020; O'Doherty et al., 2018). To go along with this, what are some 'dog-whistles' associated with these issues, that might appear in multi-targeting propaganda? Recognising patterns in the past divisive issues the IRA has used might help in identifying, and potentially countering, future actions.

6.2.5. Theory, perspective, and scope

Governments and academics would also potentially benefit from widening the scope of their analysis, to move beyond looking at disinformation campaigns and computational warfare, as just propaganda. Instead, it may be beneficial to begin examining these campaigns through frameworks and theoretical lenses of recruitment and incitement to extremism and radicalization (Johnson, 2018; Winter, 2019). It may also be of benefit to begin investigating desistance from IRA-promoted beliefs and conspiracies in those who are radicalized through these groups, to apply techniques previously found useful in desistance (Benkler et al., 2018).

As demonstrated in the current study, thorough consideration of historical, sociological, and cultural context can create new realms of insight (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Saldana, 2011). Discussion of current disinformation campaigns would benefit from more in-depth exploration and incorporation of the nuances revealed by looking at the historical development and cultural situation of issues, groups, enmities, and even propaganda methods.

It may also be useful to take a closer look at a particular community, considering the IRA appears to target its specific prejudices, beliefs, history, and tendencies: white evangelical Christians. While white evangelical Christians are known to have very high levels of hostility towards many marginalised groups, they often appear to be lumped in with the general 'right-wing' when it comes to the IRA, which may be a failure to recognise their political influence and potential importance in foreign influence operations – especially as targets of propaganda that increases hostility towards marginalised communities (Glass, 2019; Gorski, 2017; Johnston, 2016). It would be of particular benefit to examine the process of 'deradicalisation' from such prejudices and hostile beliefs (and even from right-wing extremism), specifically in those who are, or were, white evangelical Christians. Insights could subsequently be applied to more effectively fight against attempts to incite extremism within this population.

Overall, it seems essential that researchers and governments alike question some of their assumptions about what will be most effective to combat foreign influence, disinformation, and propaganda on social media. In general, those attempting to combat online political interference should consider tailoring response strategies, as opposed to enacting 'one size fits all' solutions. Response strategies should be implemented based upon consideration of the nature of the communities targeted, the issues leveraged, the emotions elicited, and the actions it might be intended to instigate.

Recognition of historical and societal context, and the ways in which the IRA's propaganda appeals to highly ingrained prejudices and beliefs, suggest that we must widen our focus from simple correction of disinformation or deletion of 'fake news'. We must look to our society, and the prejudices within it. In addition, we must look to emotion. Logic, and insistence that people believe what authorities, may have limited effect, especially if built-in ways to deny such statements exist (such as distrust of media and government, acceptance of conspiracies, religiously-ingrained resistance to contradictions of existing beliefs, et cetera) (Dahab & Omori, 2018; Glass, 2019; Gorski, 2017; Ladd, 2010; Vilaythong T. et al., 2010). Emotion may be an effective tactic to explore: activating compassion, challenging stereotypical beliefs by providing in-person evidence of their falseness, encouraging empathy and personal connection with communities people may have been taught to hate, and creating more positive and genuine representations of marginalised people (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Flores et al.,

2018; Johnston, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2020; Mizock et al., 2017; Moritz et al., 2017).

6.2.6. The communities: Solidarity and safety

The Internet Research Agency is not just creating, and targeting, online communities and groups. They are also targeting real life groups and activists, and taking actions that affect them in physical space, such as creating potentially-dangerous rallies (Seetharaman, 2017; Timberg & Dwoskin, 2018). Marginalised communities as a whole, and especially community groups need to take actions to protect themselves, both physically and from efforts to weaponise groups against each other. This requires deliberate action to promote solidarity and safety.

Communities should recognise and emphasise the need for solidarity, especially between the queer and Muslim communities (L. Jones, 2016; Kuruvilla, 2017). The queer community, in particular, must challenge both internalised Islamophobia and stereotypical beliefs, as well as beginning to grapple more directly with homocolonialism and imperial feminism (Meyer, 2020; Rahman, 2014; Toor, 2012)

Groups should be wary of new individuals and contacts, taking care to check credentials, not just online but through personal connections. If these people – or groups – have a social media presence, it would be wise to take a close look, checking for unusual or unusually inflammatory statements, especially those focusing on fomenting intra-group division. Trust your gut when something feels "off". Even if the organisation or group has a good reputation, it is advisable to be cautious and check to see that it is not a stolen identity being re-used by a different group. Be suspicious.

It would also benefit communities for trusted groups and individuals to spread awareness, and warn others about the methods these impersonators use, and the dangers the communities face. Encourage people to be cautious, especially if they are approached and asked to perform a task, and to be very careful before disclosing personal information that could result in harm if it were revealed.

Above all, groups, communities, and activists should take special care around in-person rallies, protests, and events. This is not to say communities should stop protesting: activism is necessary, especially in the current world. However, make sure

that the people or groups organising the events are legitimate and well-known, that the contacts are known by personal connections, and beware of counter-protests by potentially violent groups. Unfortunately, once again, marginalised communities are being told to keep in mind the fact that they are in continual danger.

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