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Anti-Muslim Propaganda on Twitter and the Role for the Far-Right

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Following Donald Trump's retweeting of Britain First's anti-Muslim videos, this article shows how the far-right have previously used Twitter as a platform for anti-Muslim propaganda but also to boost the profile and political success of Donald Trump and his political allies.

After the Brussels terrorist attack of 2016, some mainstream media outlets reported on a racist hashtag #StopIslam that had been 'hijacked' by anti-racists to counter the negative publicity being peddled about Muslims in the aftermath of the attack. This inspired us to seek funding from the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust to investigate the dynamics of this campaign. What we found was surprising. We expected to find a preponderance of European far right voices in the debate but we were wrong!

The hashtag, which peaked on the day of the attacks, 22 March 2016, between 4-7 pm, has been circulated following previous attacks such as Paris in 2015. It often contains just the sort of videos retweeted by Donald Trump yesterday and is part of a wider series of hashtags that are used to demonise Islam. It was frequently retweeted with similar hashtags such as #islamistheproblem, #bansharia and #islamkills. More worryingly, these messages are being tweeted in relation to US-based right-wing conservative groups on Twitter such as the Tea Party, CCOT (Conservatives on Twitter), CSPI but also with Trump2018 and wakeupamerica. This anti-Islamic hashtag, therefore, was clearly being used to bolster Donald Trump's campaign in the presidential race. The analysis we did of keywords and related hashtags showed the negativity of the campaign towards Muslims (see below) and further network analysis showed how these far-right groups were interconnected, circulating memes to each other and with some anti-Muslims groups in Europe, such as Geert Wilders and his PVV (Party for Freedom).

Hillary is unfit to lead !! Just like Merkel, she will bring in more terrorists and more blood will spill !! #StopIslam



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An analysis of the bios of those actors prominent in the hashtag further reveals their politics as key phrases around pro-life, pro-guns, pro-America, pro-Israel, pro-Christianity anti-feminism, anti-Hillary (Clinton) abound. The imagery of key accounts coincides with these sentiments, and patriotic symbols of American flags, Eagles, Bibles and crosses dominate. Many of the tweets and memes refer to a central figure in the discourse whose blog Political Islam is used as an authoritative source to support ‘facts’ using statistical methodologies.

So far, you might ask, what else would you expect from a negative # such as #stopislam? However, when we began the project our analysis of the most retweeted tweets demonstrated a different trend: that the majority of tweets were actually using the hashtag to counter anti-muslim hatred. For example, many of the tweets suggested that Islam was a religion of peace. There was also a series of memes designed to contest Islamophobic narratives, which began with the phrase ‘y’all are tweeting #StopIslam when’ that were followed by a variety of memes about white supremacism.

These messages of solidarity were so prominent initially that many mainstream news organisations had picked up on them and were also sharing the counter-narrative, defending Muslims from this online attack (CNN, The Independent, and the Washington Post, for example). For this reason, many have suggested that this use of Twitter demonstrates how grassroots collectivities can change the story of an event that seeks to spread hatred, into something much more positive. The success of the counter-narrative seemed to suggest that due to the particular characteristics of Twitter, people do often stray out of their ‘echo chambers’ to interact and challenge views they dispute and the use of hashtags and re-tweeting features of Twitter provide this functionality.

However, these positive voices seem to be quite dispersed (socially and geographically) and short-lived. In our closer qualitative analysis of debates that surrounded individual tweets, we found that far-right activists frequently trolled the accounts and respond to counter-narratives with a deluge of anti-Islamic memes. The findings indicate that the strength of this far right discourse is due to their tightly bound groups that persistently and aggressively attack and bury any counter-narratives that emerge online.

Another issue is that of longevity, a recent survey of the hashtag showed how it had reverted back to being wholly negative towards Muslims. Ongoing uses of the hashtag were linked to terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, whilst continuing to be US based, and combined patriotic imagery and anti-Muslims memes.



The success of these campaigns, to elevate both Trump and groups like Britain First beyond their core constituencies, showed how integral this identity politics was in Trump's Presidential campaign. Anti-immigration rhetoric has been key to the success of the right across the US and Europe in recent elections, and social media is being used aggressively to this effect, and to undermine any solidarities that arise in response. In re-tweeting Britain First, Trump, as President of the United States, went one step further in legitimising the racism of a far right group.

If Twitter is a battleground, hatred is winning. If nothing else, this demonstrates the importance of these platforms in politically mediated communications. They can no longer be dismissed as trivial and insignificant.**

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