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## TRACING MEDIA SOLIDARITIES WITH MUSLIMS: CONTESTING ISLAMOPHOBIA ON TWITTER

Elizabeth Poole  
Keele University

Ed de Quincey  
Keele University

Eva Giraud  
The University of Sheffield

John E. Richardson  
The University of Liverpool

This paper traces the ambivalence of mediated solidarities, by drawing on five years' of data from a project on anti-Islamophobic counter-narratives. Solidarity has been cited as a necessary prerequisite for transformational structural change and therefore contains revolutionary potential (Mohanty, 2003; Featherstone, 2012). In turn, political emotion is a key driver of solidarity and the development of social movements (Bakardjieva, 2020). Debates about the capacity of digital spaces for fostering political emotion that can give rise to solidarity have abounded since early studies of alter-globalisation protestors in the 1990s and early 00s (Juris, 2007; Dean, 2009). This paper examines the role and evolution of mediated solidarities, which have become increasingly central to an analysis of social movements with the advent of participatory technologies. A key scholar of media solidarities Kaarina Nikunen (2019:3) defines them as 'the ways in which media shapes, circulates and takes part in expressions and representations of solidarity' which may take the form of 'media engagements, representations and productions that express or enhance solidarity'. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of affective engagement in driving the formulation of networked counter-publics (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, they also note the limitations of a commercialised digital space and characteristics of an 'impatient' media which generates both 'weak commitment' that can be depoliticising (Chouliaraki, 2006; Nikunen, 2019) and as antagonistic political polarisation (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). This

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paper explores this 'paradox of media solidarity' (Nikunen, 2019) with reference to a big data study examining the potential for media solidarities with Muslims on Twitter.

Online platforms have the affordances to contest Islamophobic hate speech as demonstrated by the dynamics of #stopIslam following the Brussels terror attack, 2016. In this instance, the hashtag gained its prominence through the contestations of users who sought to question, critique and undermine its original message (reference redacted). However, close examination of this hashtag also revealed how some right-wing alliances were better able to harness the affordances of Twitter in the interests of their political agendas. These conflicting engagements with #stopIslam demonstrate the frictions arising in what is both a commercialised and politicised media space.

We sought to further interrogate the dynamics of online attempts to challenge Islamophobia through a large-scale interdisciplinary study (3million plus tweets), #Contesting Islamophobia: Representation and Appropriation in Mediated Activism, that used methods of computational (big data), quantitative, and qualitative content analysis to examine the dynamics of discourse about Islam and Muslims in the case three 'trigger events' (Awan, 2014). These were Britain's exit from the European Union (i.e. 'Brexit'); the 2019 terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, by a white supremacist; and the Covid-19 pandemic, (2020). Adopting a longitudinal, comparative approach, we examine whether the high incidence of solidarity discourses in these datasets are limited to acts of counter-speech (and other acts of 'weak' solidarity) or if they contribute to sustainable counter-narratives that have implications for wider formations related to Islam and Muslims, networked collectivities, and meaningful change. Through our analysis we identify a pattern wherein, as the shock of trigger events event diminishes, support also begins to evaporate and critical voices emerge, raising questions over the longevity of online solidarities in relation to these events. In line with the case of #stopIslam for example, engagement following the Christchurch terror attack was highly supportive initially as people sought to demonstrate solidarity with Muslims following a harrowing attack. Through the production and circulation of hashtags such as #helloworld and #peacefulmosques, the data contributes evidence for the notion of networked counter-publics. However, over time transnational debates about gun laws and the sharing of hateful content online begins to undermine these solidarities and provides evidence of a 'long tail of racism' exploited by a transnational far right.

In turn, our findings raise questions regarding whether the political economy of Twitter (and other commercial social media platforms) limits the ability to act as a communication tool for positive, progressive and structural change. The paper

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explores the technological, social and translocal structures that enable networked collectivities to form and circulate counter-narratives, but also the complexities that arise from being intimately entangled with the narratives they seek to contest. Equally, we question how far a platform underpinned by commercial logic can be an agent of change when Islamophobia is exploited for economic gain. In the case of the Christchurch terror attack, for example, highly visible accounts, dominated by politicians, journalists and celebrities were most likely to be retweeted, revealing a platform with exclusionary tendencies that reinforce the privileges of existing social hierarchies.

This research took place in a particular historical political moment, following the purging of QAnon activists, after the Capitol riots, and before Twitter's acquisition by Elon Musk. We demonstrate how this period of increased moderation of and by the platform also contributed to altering the dynamics of anti-Muslim discourse at this specific moment in time. Through its comparative approach, the research traces the evolution of Islamophobic activity across ethno-geopolitical and temporal spaces. In the case of the Covid data, for example, activity in the US is dwarfed by that of actors from the Indian subcontinent. However, there also remains an abundance of evidence of 'banal' or implicit racism undetected by uneven moderation processes, and procedures that focus on identifying and removing keywords (Siapera, 2019).

We close the paper by suggesting that, despite the limitations of anti-Islamophobic counter-narratives, emerging interview data with anti-racist activists demonstrate the ongoing benefits of Twitter as a platform for meaningful and active mobilisation. Initial analysis of these interviews suggests that a distinction should be made between expressions of solidarity and structural transformation. Based on this data we ultimately argue that Twitter can be a space for significant solidarities to coalesce, and act as a conduit for ongoing collectivities to form, yet meaningful transformation requires additional activities and engagement. While these may operate on a continuum of commitment, rather than reinforce existing binary arguments regarding the potentials and limitations of Twitter as a platform for solidarity, we wish to demonstrate the contradictory dynamics of the solidarities that arise from the logics of Twitter which relies on and produces these entanglements. We also argue that these debates should be contextualised by an examination of the nuances of specific case studies that are further situated through an analysis of wider media ecologies.

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