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Muslims in social media discourse: Combining topic modeling and critical discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article combines topic modeling and critical discourse analysis to examine patterns of representation around the words Muslim and Islam in a 105 million word corpus of a large Swedish Internet forum from 2000 to 2013. Despite the increased importance of social media in the (re)production of discursive power in society, this is the first study of its kind. The analysis shows that Muslims are portrayed in the forum as a homogeneous outgroup that is embroiled in conflict, violence and extremism: characteristics that are described as emanating from Islam as a religion. These patterns are strikingly similar to – but often more extreme versions of – those previously found in analysis of traditional media. This indicates that, in this case, the internet forum seems to serve as an "online amplifier" that reflects and reinforces existing discourses in traditional media, which is likely to result in even stronger polarizing effects on public discourses.

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1. Introduction

In September 2012, the posting of the anti-Islamic film on YouTube entitled "Innocence of Islam" sparked a wildfire of manifestations of indignation all over the world, including both peaceful demonstrations and violent riots. These events were followed by intense discussions on the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in social media. Indeed, this film is only one of innumerable examples of what has been described as a trend toward an increasingly harsh online climate for Muslims, and a general growth of Islamophobic content in social media (Awan, 2016a; Matters, 2015; Oboler, 2013).

While the representation of Muslims and Islam in traditional media, such as newspapers, has been relatively well-studied (Baker et al., 2013a, 2013b; Hafez, 2000; Moore et al., 2008; Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2004), there are significantly less studies that focus on these processes within social media. This does not only apply to Muslims – social media discourse in general constitutes a bit of a blind spot for academic research. And it is a fast-growing blind spot: social media is becoming an important source for the (re)production of discursive power in society, while simultaneously constituting a unique source for studying everyday discourses outside the scope of mass media. A central reason for this striking lack of studies is the methodological difficulties relating to handling and analyzing the large amounts of unstructured textual data that often characterizes social media.

Based on the above, the purpose of this article is to investigate the representation and discursive construction of Muslims and Islam in social media. This article is part of a larger project that focuses on the representation of feminism and Islam in social media. When using "representation" here, we refer to how the meanings of these words are constructed in relation to, for instance, the linguistic context in which they are used. We have previously explored how discourses around Muslims and feminism are constructed, and investigated how these discourses are interrelated, both discursively and through user discursive networks (see Törnberg and Törnberg, 2016). In this particular article we focus on Flashback, which is the largest internet forum in Sweden and has a reputation for right-leaning bias. In the time of writing, the forum has 1 025 264 registered users and about 2.3 million unique visitors per week; figures that put it among one of the largest online forums in the world.[1] Due to its size and

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[1] This can be compared with the population of Sweden, which is currently about 9.5 million.

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scope, this forum is argued to have a function comparable to that of traditional newspapers when it comes to producing and spreading societal discourses. Indeed, according to available figures, Flashback has more unique visitors per week than Sweden's two leading daily press newspapers, even when adding the number of their paper edition subscribers.[2]

By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we investigate how Muslims and Islam are represented in this forum compared with how they are represented in traditional, Western media. To resolve the problems that have so far limited this type of study due to large quantities of data, we complement CDA with topic modeling, which is a type of statistical model using hierarchical probabilistic modeling that was developed within the field of computer science (Blei et al., 2003). By providing an overview or "content map" of the corpus, topic modeling provides an enriching complement to CDA by aiding discovery and adding analytical rigor. This approach enables us to reveal linguistic patterns in extensive corpuses that would be too labor intensive to uncover by hand (Baker, 2006). Thus, beyond the empirical results, this article also has a methodological contribution and explores the mutual benefits of combining CDA and topic modeling.

The analysis shows that Muslims are portrayed in the forum as a homogeneous outgroup, embroiled in conflict, violence and extremism: characteristics that are described as emanating from Islam as a religion. Despite that the language usage tends to be aggressive and conflict-oriented in the forum, these general patterns are strikingly similar to those found in traditional media by previous research. These results contribute to the ongoing academic discussion on the relation between social media and traditional media, concerning whether social media constitutes mainly a "safe haven" for developing and sustaining alternative discourses, or rather as an "online amplifier" that reflects and reinforces existing hegemonic discourses, which may result in even stronger polarizing effects on public discourses.

The disposition of this paper is as follows. We start by positioning our study within existing research on the discursive representation of Muslims and Islam in media. We then assess the relevance of studying online Islamophobia. Following this, we present our methodological approach and explain how topic modeling can allow researchers to inductively structure large quantities of texts. Here, we also describe how we have collected our data and how it was analyzed. This is followed by our analysis in which we identify the discursive landscape surrounding and (re)contextualizing Muslims and Islam.

2. The representation of Islam in media

A vast amount of academic literature and reports show how Muslims and Islam are often reported and represented negatively and stereotypically in Western news media. In a comprehensive book, Baker et al. (2013a) investigated the representation of Muslims and Islam in British press from 1998 to 2009, which shows the presence of both explicit Islamophobic representations, as well as what seems to be more common – a more subtle, implicit and ambivalent picture, which indirectly contributes to negative stereotypes. These representations are manifested in various ways. One example is the high use and concurrence of the words "terrorism" and "extremism" with Muslims and Islam, which places Muslims in a context of conflict. In particular, the word "Islamic" was shown to carry extremely negative discourse prosody, as it was heavily associated with religious and political extremism, militancy and terror. Furthermore, Muslim women are often portrayed as victims and Muslim men as potential aggressors.

Other studies show similar patterns. Moore et al. (2008) used content analysis of 974 articles on Islam in British press from 2000 to 2008, and found a general increase over time of articles that focus on extremism and differences between Islamic culture and "the West". At the same time, stories about attacks against Muslims and other problems that they face decrease in the same period. Poole (2002) analyzed all articles on British Muslims in the *Guardian*/*Observer* and the *Times*/*Sunday Times* from 1993 to 1997, showing that Muslims are frequently represented as irrational and antiquated, threatening to liberal values and democracy, extremists and fanatical. Manan (2008) shows similar results when analyzing the magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, and argues that through the strategy of the negative "other" presentation, the media represented "Islam and its many followers as deviant, volatile, evil, and anti-modern" (p.124). Richardson (2004) finds four argumentative themes consistently associated with Islam in British broadsheets in 1997: military threat, association with terrorists/extremists, a threat to democracy and a sexist/social threat. Hafez (2000) shows that similar negative patterns also go back well before the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001.

However, considerably less scholarly work has focused on anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments in social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and internet forums. As Copsey et al. (2013: 10) and Awan (2016a: 32) explicitly state, online Islamophobia remains under-researched, both on a policy level and an academic level. Most existing research is located within the field of cyber hate, where Islamophobia is generally regarded as only one topic among several types of hate alongside, for example, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia and general racism. Although limited in its scope, the existing academic literature seems to suggest similar tendencies of a general negative bias within social media. Statistics from monitoring organizations, such as Tell Mama, reports of a significant increase in Islamophobic discourses and abuse online, indicating a growing trend of hardening attitudes towards Muslims (Feldman and Littler, 2014; Copsey et al., 2013).

In a newly published book, which according to the authors is "the first comprehensive critique of online Islamophobia" (Awan, 2016a: 5), the authors compile several studies on this topic, and focus on both the victims and the perpetrators of abuse. For instance, Oboler (2016) investigates how Facebook is being used to normalize Islamophobia. Through a qualitative analysis of 349 posts on Facebook, he finds several themes that depict Muslims as a security threat (e.g. represented as terrorists or rapists), as a threat to our way of life and as manipulative and dishonest (see also Oboler, 2013). In another chapter, Awan (2016b) investigates both how Muslims are viewed on Twitter and the characteristics of the offenders. By examining 500 separate tweets between January 2013 and April 2014, he found a common reappearance of words used to describe Muslims, including "terrorist", "pedos", "scum", "Yusrats", and "Pigs". Similarly, Copsey et al. (2013) have studied how far-right groups on social media represent Muslims as a dangerous, untruthful "out group", and commonly refer to them in terms of "dirt" and "filth", along with accusations of rape, pedophilia, incest and terrorism.

3. The relevance of online islamophobia

There are three main reasons for studying online Islamophobia. Firstly, we are currently seeing a trend in which traditional news

[2] This is intended to serve only as a loose approximation, since getting accurate and trustworthy figures on website statistics is close to impossible. The numbers for the two largest daily newspapers (Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet) come from the KIA-index, a website that measures media impact. For offline editions, we rely on the Orvesto Konsument Index. As Flashback is not included by KIA, we are forced to rely on the figures that Flashback have provided themselves.

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