

American-Muslims' E-Jihad: Trumping Islamophobia in the Trump Era

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Abstract:

Islamophobia, or the irrational, exaggerated fear of Islam and Muslims, has been on the rise lately in the United States, especially after President Trump came to office. Some of the worst Islamophobes launched their campaigns online, using the Internet as a platform to spout hatred and fuel anger and discrimination against immigrants and minorities, in general, and Muslims, in particular. In an effort to counter this dangerous new tide of Islamophobia and to overcome its destructive consequences, American-Muslims launched a number of well-orchestrated online campaigns. This essay examines the double role of the Internet, as a platform through which Islamophobia could be both fostered and resisted, simultaneously. It sheds light on some of the Islamophobic posts online, as well as some of the most popular social media campaigns which American-Muslims launched to combat and resist this complex and multifaceted phenomenon of Islamophobia. It discusses how American-Muslims understand, negotiate, challenge, and respond to Islamophobia, and its varied cultural, social, and political manifestations and implications, through a variety of mediated discourses and ongoing social media campaigns. In doing so, it emphasizes the plurality of American-Muslims' voices, identities, realities, and strategies, as exemplified in their responses to Islamophobia.

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Islamophobia: Definitions, Context, and Causes

Islamophobia is a new name for an old phenomenon. The idea of fearing a certain group of people because of their culture, beliefs, values, or religion

is not new. It has been around for centuries, and it is commonly referred to as stereotyping. Islamophobia is simply a branch of a larger tide of hatred and discrimination, which includes racism, sexism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, which became so deeply ingrained in society that it can be present in any type of communication exchange (Schenker and Abu Zayyad 2006).

Islamophobia could be defined as “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (Gallup 2018). It can also be defined as “an increasingly visible ‘backlash’ against Muslims across Europe and the United States” (Tyler 2013:3). The term *backlash* encompasses all negative messages received by Muslims, and all harmful acts against them, whether physical, psychological, or both. This includes the controversial cartoons by Danish artists in 2006, which mocked Prophet Muhammad and ridiculed Islam (Asser 2010), an act that was frowned upon by many Muslims as an unacceptable insult and mere blasphemy.

Moreover, “Islamophobia reflects the largely unexamined and deeply ingrained anxiety many Americans experience when considering Islam and Muslim cultures” (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). It can also be understood as a social construct that “reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended” (Council on American-Islamic Relations 2016), and as an “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and, therefore, fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Conway 1997).

Islamophobic sentiments in the United States heightened in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York, which marked a seismic geopolitical shift in the portrayal of Muslims across the media. It changed people’s perceptions of Islam and made them anxious and fearful of an entire group of people. The attacks made people wonder if all Muslims were extremists, and if they were, when would they attack again? Given that thousands of people died that day, they were right to fear terrorists,

who belong to extremist groups, like *Al-Qaeda*. However, the problem was creating overgeneralized stereotypes that are still widely spread, even though terrorist groups represent only a tiny fringe of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims.

This stigmatization of an entire religion, due to the acts of a few extremists, stems from lack of understanding of the Muslim faith and ignorance about Muslims, which led to spreading stereotypes that are broadly and indiscriminately imposed on an entire population. More recently, the rhetoric that dominated the speeches of some of the candidates in the latest presidential election in the United States, including now President Donald Trump, played an important role in contributing to the rising tide of anti-Muslim sentiments and boosting the spread of Islamophobia on a large and unprecedented scale. Many media outlets started spreading more negative images, distorted stereotypes, and hate speech against Muslims. The wide outreach of these media venues and their immediate, instant transmission, using their online platforms, magnified their impact on many audiences. This, in turn, resulted in an escalation in acts of violence and hatred against Muslims in the United States recently, including attacks on mosques, Islamic centers, and women wearing the *hijab* (Muslim headscarf).

The Internet and Islamophobia: A Double-Edged Sword

The Internet, with its unfiltered content, can sometimes harm Muslims and negatively affect their image. Twitter campaigns, such as #banislam, for example, play on people's fears of so-called "Islamic extremism," and call for banning Islam to avoid this danger. In a new digital world, where information exchange occurs instantly and simultaneously, it is impossible to stop or censor these types of campaigns entirely. In fact, if one Twitter account is closed down, many more replace it. So, the solution is not censoring or blocking. Rather, it is effectively responding to such campaigns.

One good example of successfully responding to an anti-Muslim message was when an issue of *Newsweek* featured a cover with Muslim protestors and the headline "Muslim Rage." When *Newsweek* asked for comments and

responses from the audience, some Muslim Twitter users responded with #MuslimRage, which highlighted the bias and hate Muslims receive on an everyday basis, in the most humorous, witty, and satirical way. This included tweets such as “Cannot say hi to Jack inside a plane. #MuslimRage” and “Lost your kid Jihad at the airport. Can’t yell for him. #MuslimRage” (McFadden 2012). In other words, in contrast to the “Muslim rage” theme, Muslim Twitter users skillfully used humor, and they did not respond with hate, anger, or rage. In fact, they were wise not to, because if they did, this would have further promoted and confirmed the angry, aggressive Muslim stereotype, which would have been harmful and counterproductive.

Another good example of countering Islamophobia online was after Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump insinuated that Ms. Ghazala Khan’s religion might have stopped her from speaking at the Democratic National Convention, when she was standing beside her husband, Mr. Khizr Khan, on stage. Ms. Khan stood up for herself and spoke in a televised interview, explaining that she was silent, only because she saw her martyred son’s photo, which made her very emotional.

In response to this incident, other Muslim women started using #CanYouHearUsNow to show just how often they use their voices, and how powerful, strong, vocal and outspoken they are, in addition to exhibiting clear examples of their successes and achievements in various professional fields. In other words, they effectively, and powerfully, countered the distorted stereotype of the silenced, oppressed, and marginalized Muslim woman by making their “voices” heard, loudly and clearly, through this Twitter campaign.

One more positive and successful example of countering Islamophobia was when presidential candidate Trump answered a question by a Muslim woman during the second presidential debate about the potential danger of Islamophobia by giving an Islamophobic reply, which suggested that Muslims should always “report” anything they see that may seem remotely suspicious. This triggered a social media campaign by many Muslims: #MuslimsReportStuff, that was very witty, sarcastic, and painfully funny.

It included tweets such as “My mom cooks the same soup every single day. I will report her to the authorities. #MuslimsReportStuff” and “My brother refuses to tidy up his room. I am reporting him to the FBI. #Muslims-ReportStuff.” Here again, the strategic use of humor served the purpose and created a strong and powerful impact, making it clear that one of the effective strategies needed to counter Islamophobia is creating a technologically-savvy, witty, humorous, intelligent, and swift reply, and sending the right message through the right medium to the right audience at the right time.

Other examples of positive and effective online efforts to counter Islamophobia include Unity Productions Foundation’s (UPF) YouTube video “American Muslims: Facts vs. Fiction,” which corrects some of the commonly held stereotypes and misconceptions about American Muslims, such as perceiving them as new immigrants to the United States; associating them collectively with extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism; or thinking of Arabs and Muslims as synonymous.

There is also the #MuslimsAreSpeakingOut series of short videos, which provided a platform for different groups of Muslims, such as religious scholars, preachers, intellectuals, professionals, journalists, and laypeople, to express their views on the rise of extremism and to speak up against violence and terrorism, dissociating Islam from them. This is especially important, in response to the false impression that Muslims are not speaking up against terrorism, when, in fact, they have been speaking loudly for a long time, but they haven’t been heard, due to insufficient media coverage.

Another excellent campaign was the #Islamophobin Pill launched by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which was a very hilarious, sarcastic, witty, and tactful campaign, suggesting that those who were diagnosed with Islamophobia, and exhibit severe symptoms, such as excessive, irrational fear of Islam and Muslims, should seek healing, by taking the fictitious Islamophobin pill three times a day until their Islamophobic symptoms fade away and they become fully cured.

It is clear that the Internet acts as a double-edged sword when it comes to Islamophobia. On one hand, with its many applications, and its instant, wide outreach, and multiple uses, it could be considered one of the main factors behind the spread of Islamophobia, not just in the United States, but also internationally. On the other hand, however, it also offers unique opportunities to counter Islamophobia and to provide some of the fastest and most effective tools to fight it, through multiple online platforms. Some of the effective campaigns mentioned above are an excellent illustration of how Muslims launched their *E-Jihad*, or electronic struggle, in the face of anti-Muslim efforts and sentiments.

Countering Islamophobia: Effective Strategies

There is no law that can be passed to limit the disrespect and hostility Muslims face, but fostering better understanding and re-evaluating bias can lead to gradual, positive change. Societies should ideally reach a more nuanced and deep understanding about Muslim populations and learn not to generalize and force their assumptions on people they do not know. Using the Internet as a platform to spread correct knowledge and better awareness, instead of hatred and negativity, is certainly a step in the right direction.

At the same time, Muslims also have a responsibility and an important role to play. “When coming to people who are believers of other faiths, instead of shouting the differences, Muslims are to raise the agreements, similarities, and commonalities conducive to a climate of peaceful coexistence” (Mirhosseini and Rouzbeh 2015:1). Additionally, they should not confront intolerance with anger. It is also important to be proactive, rather than reactive. Building strong relations with “Others” and spreading awareness and correct knowledge, rather than being on the defensive, will help to further engage non-Muslims and lead them away from Islamophobic tendencies. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

In order to be active citizens, Muslims must also try to actively change media perceptions through positive messages. In doing so, they should try

to reach out to mainstream media, and they should certainly keep using new media platforms, such as online forums. This is especially important in the current era of digital communication, where most people get their news, and engage in most communication activities, online. Some of the useful and successful strategies in this regard include the techniques which were deployed by American-Muslims in their online campaigns, such as dispelling myths through spreading facts, as well as effectively using humor to shatter some of the toxic stereotypes and (mis)perceptions about Islam and Muslims.

Concluding Remarks

The online tug of war between those who propagate the toxic new wave of Islamophobia and those who resist it is most likely to continue and to escalate over the coming years. Aided and enabled by the equally strong, parallel wave of *cyberactivism*, defined by Howard (2011) as the attempt to advance a cause digitally, which is difficult to advance offline, this tug of war is likely to take new forms and directions in cyberspace.

The efforts of the new generation of American-Muslims to use a new, creative and innovative set of techniques, including humor, wit, sarcasm, assertiveness, and persistence, to counter this rising wave of Islamophobia, through deploying new communication tools, mark their new wave of resistance. In pursuing this new wave of resistance, both online and offline, it is expected that these young, diasporic, and dynamic Muslims will invent new techniques, strategies, and mechanisms in their struggle to make their voices louder and their identities more visible. In doing so, they should also be looking back to learn from the lessons of the past, in order to build better strategies and more effective techniques, moving forward.

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