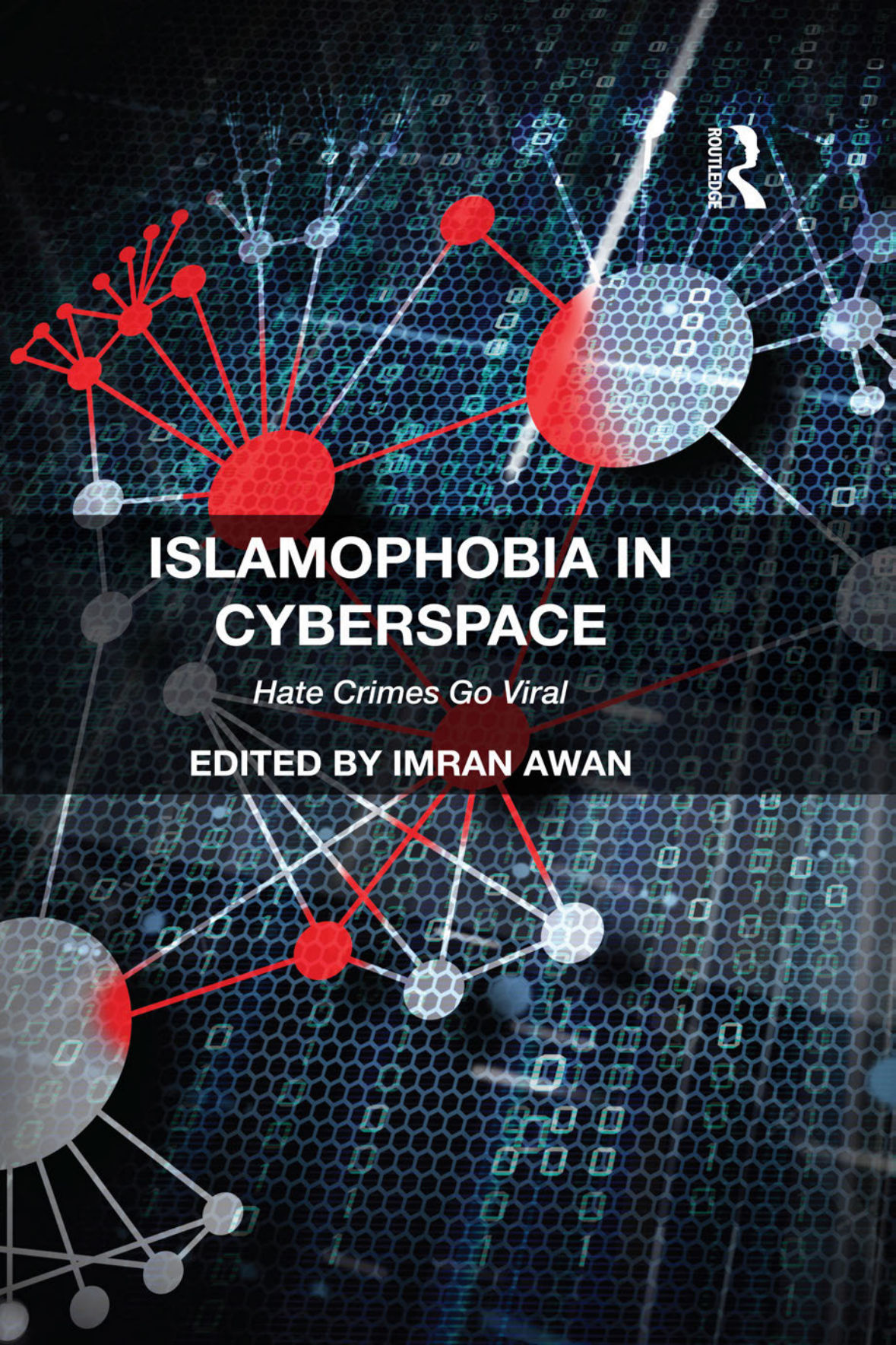
ROUTLEDGE
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CYBERSPACE
Hate Crimes Go Viral
EDITED BY IMRAN AWAN

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CYBERSPACE

For Hiba, Amel, Sobia and Tasvir

Islamophobia in Cyberspace

Hate Crimes Go Viral

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Introduction

> The last few weeks, where he has been specifically targeting me and a few others making reference to my personal life and family, has had a negative impact spiralling from anger to depression and I then resorted to trying to connect with other victims online as to what he will do next. I then had episodes of despair as I was pushed from pillar to post, with the police not taking my concerns seriously. He (the perpetrator), had chosen a few targets and accused them of being paedophiles, also using photographs of victim's relatives and creating fake accounts. When he cloned my own account and sent messages to my followers it made me angry and further depressed. (Tell MAMA 2015)

This is an interview with a victim of targeted online anti-Muslim abuse. This victim's personal account of online abuse is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides us with an insight into the online abuse victims suffer, secondly, it demonstrates that online abuse can have real and direct impact upon an individual's health and wellbeing because of their perceived difference and finally it shows how the convergence of hate crime and technology can lead to cyber hate. In 2013, I was invited to present evidence, as part of my submission regarding online anti-Muslim hate, at the House of Commons (Awan 2013). I attempted to show how hate groups on the internet were using this space to intimidate, cause fear and make direct threats against Muslim communities – particularly after the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich in 2013. Following this, the issue of Islamophobia on social media, was also raised by the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2015, before the Attorney General Jeremy Wright, who stated that companies such as Twitter and Facebook needed to act upon the hate speech espoused online on their platforms (Morris 2015).

According to Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) recent data analysis they found 548 verified incidents (of 729) reported to them concerning anti-Muslim abuse. The majority of incidents took place online (402 out of 548). Almost, a fifth of service users reported repeat offline incidents of anti-Muslim hate with Muslim women suffering more offline incidents than men. Typically, the victim was wearing traditional Islamic clothing at the time of the incident and the perpetrators were overwhelmingly white male (Littler and Feldman 2015). A breakdown of the statistics shows these tend to be mainly from male perpetrators and are marginally more likely to be directed at women.

Digital Hate-speak

It has become easy to indulge in racist hate crimes online and many people take advantage of the anonymity to do so. These messages are then taken up by virtual communities who are quick to amplify their actions by creating webpages, blogs and forums of hate. Online anti-Muslim hate therefore intensifies, as has been shown after the Rotherham abuse scandal in the UK (2010), the beheading of journalists James Foley, Steven Sotloff and the humanitarian workers David Haines and Alan Henning by Islamic State in 2014, the Woolwich attacks in 2013 and the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. Indeed, after the attacks in Paris, the hashtag #KillAllMuslims was one of the words trending in the UK on Twitter (see Figure I.1 below of tweets collected).

Abuse is Not a Human Right

Clearly, hate on the internet can have both a direct and indirect effect on the victims and communities being targeted. It can be used to harass and intimidate victims and it can also be used for opportunistic crime. Few of us will forget the moment when Salma Yaqoob appeared on BBC Question Time and tweeted the following comments to her followers: 'Apart from this threat to cut my throat by #EDL supporter (!) overwhelmed by warm response to what I said on #bbcqt' (see Figure I.2 below).

The internet is a powerful tool by which people can be influenced to act in a certain way and manner. This is particularly strong when considering hate speech that aims to threaten and incite violence. This also links into the convergence of emotional distress caused by hate online, the nature of intimidation and harassment and the prejudice that seeks to defame groups through speech intending to injure and intimidate. Some sites which have been relatively successful here include BareNakedIslam[1] and IslamExposed[2] which has a daily forum and chatroom about issues to do with Muslims and Islam. The strong anti-Muslim tone begins with initial discussion about a particular issue – such as banning halal meat – before turning into abuse using provocative language.

Most of this anti-Muslim hate speech hides behind a fake banner of English patriotism, but is instead used to demonise and dehumanise Muslim communities. It goes without saying that the internet is just a digital realisation of the world itself – all shades of opinion are represented, including those Muslims whose

1 See http://www.barenakedislam.com/2012/09/30/yes-we-hate-islam-yes-we-will-mock-your-paedophile-prophet-mohammed-as-much-as-we-want-no-we-dont-care-what-you-think-or-how-offended-you-are-we-are-americans-and-we-are-free-to-say-what-we-w/..

2 See http://www.islamexposed.com/.

Figure I.1 Selection of tweets after Paris attacks and the hashtag #KillAllMuslims

Figure I.2 Threats made against Salma Yaqoob on social media

hatred of the West prompts them to preach jihad and contempt for 'dirty kuffar'. Clearly, freedom of speech is a fundamental right that everyone should enjoy, but when that converges with incitement, harassment, threats of violence and cyber-bullying then we as a society must act before it's too late. There is an urgent need to provide advice for those who are suffering online abuse. It is also important to keep monitoring sites where this sort of thing regularly crops up; this can help inform not only policy but also help us get a better understanding of the relationships forming online. This would require a detailed examination of the various websites, blogs and social networking sites by monitoring the various URLs of those sites regarded as having links to anti-Muslim hate.

It is also important that we begin a process of consultation with victims of online anti-Muslim abuse – and reformed offenders – who could work together highlighting the issues they think are important when examining online Islamophobia. The internet offers an easy and accessible way of reporting online abuse, but an often difficult relationship between the police and Muslim communities in some areas means much more could be done. This could have a positive impact on the overall reporting of online abuse. The improved rate of prosecutions which might culminate as a result could also help identify the issues around online anti-Muslim abuse.

Cyber hate can take many forms from online material which can lead to actual offline abuse and violence, secondly cyber violence, thirdly cyber stalking and finally online harassment with the use of visual images, videos and text which are intended to cause harm. This book examines the case for current guidelines dealing with online Islamophobia and concludes that we require a new emphasis that recognises online Islamophobia and the impact it can have on vulnerable communities. The book is unique as it focuses on new technology in the form of social media and explores the challenges the police and other agencies face when confronting hate crime in cyberspace. It also provides a critique of how people are targeted by online offenders and helps us understand online Islamophobia in a much more detailed and comprehensive way.

The growth of the internet has meant there is an urgent need to examine how the online world has been used to commit hate crimes. In particular, the level of anonymity the internet offers means it will be continuously used as a way of committing crime. It also poses major challenges for the security services and the police. Privacy and isolation on the internet allows such offenders to display a willingness to target a specific group for targeted abuse or what is commonly referred to as trolling.

This is the first comprehensive critique of online Islamophobia. It brings together a diverse range of multidisciplinary ideas to explore the extent of online Islamophobia and at how online offenders are targeting communities. It also provides a critical analysis and understanding to how victims are perceived and feel about it. It also explores what measures the police can take to tackle issues of cyber hate and online Islamophobia. The USP of this text is that it is a 'one stop shop' for all aspects of online Islamophobia and similar related issues. The book will look at a wide range of issues that deal with Islamophobia on the internet. This includes providing a definition for the term, the psychology of online offenders, online hate groups promoting Islamophobia such as the EDL and Britain First, and the use of social media sites to perpetuate online anti-Muslim abuse.

The book includes a study of the behaviour and motivations of individuals viewed as online offenders. The policing, legal frameworks and legislation regarding online Islamophobia and its limitations in an international setting

will also be analysed. The public perception and media portrayal of Muslims is also examined, alongside helping us understand the nature of Islamophobia in cyberspace. There has been very little literature in this area and this will be the first book looking at Islamophobia in the virtual world and therefore makes an important contribution to understating of this form of hate crime. The book is multi-faceted as it covers the origins of online hate crime and helps give us a better understanding of government policy and the methods towards tackling online Islamophobia. It gives a practitioner and academic based rationale alongside specific approaches and case studies looking at social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook to discuss how online Islamophobia is formed.

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