



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/245121/>

Version: Published Version

Book:

Poole, E., Giraud, E.H., de Quincey, E. et al. (2026) Contesting Hate: Digital counter-narratives against Islamophobia. Manchester University Press, Manchester. ISBN: 9781526181527.

<https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526181534>

© Elizabeth Poole, Eva Haifa Giraud, Ed de Quincey and John E. Richardson 2026. An electronic version of this book has been made freely available under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND) licence, thanks to the support of UK Research and Innovation, which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the authors and Manchester University Press are fully cited and no modifications or adaptations are made. Details of the licence can be viewed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

ELIZABETH POOLE, EVA HAIFA GIRAUD,
ED DE QUINCEY AND JOHN E. RICHARDSON

CONTESTING
HATE

DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES
AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA

Contesting hate



Manchester University Press

Contesting hate

Digital counter-narratives against Islamophobia

Elizabeth Poole, Eva Haifa Giraud,
Ed de Quincey and John E. Richardson

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Copyright © Elizabeth Poole, Eva Haifa Giraud, Ed de Quincey and John E. Richardson 2026

The right of Elizabeth Poole, Eva Haifa Giraud, Ed de Quincey and John E. Richardson to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

An electronic version of this book has been made freely available under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND) licence, thanks to the support of UK Research and Innovation, which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the authors and Manchester University Press are fully cited and no modifications or adaptations are made. Details of the licence can be viewed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 5261 8152 7 hardback

First published 2026

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate, accessible or appropriate.

EU authorised representative for GPSR:
Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621
Tallinn, Estonia
gpsr.requests@easproject.com

Cover credit: Ed de Quincey

Typeset by Newgen Publishing UK

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>About the authors</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Introduction: circulating and contesting hate	1
2 Platform politics: big data, bigger challenges?	32
3 Triggers and time	61
4 Counter-narratives against Islamophobia	103
5 Actors, networks and affective ecologies	143
6 Death of a platform? Continuity, change and legacies as Twitter becomes X	186
<i>Appendix 1: Coding schedule (Brexit)</i>	211
<i>Appendix 2: Interview questions/discussion points</i>	217
<i>References</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	235

Figures and tables

Figures

2.1	File types generated after data processing	<i>page</i> 37
2.2	Retweet network from our pilot study	45
2.3	Network diagrams from our larger project – all events	46
3.1	Frequency of tweets, election sample	72
3.2	Frequency of tweets, ‘Brexit Day’ sample	73
3.3	Timeline of tweets, Christchurch sample one	86
3.4	Timeline, COVID-19 sample one	94
4.1	Position on Muslims: Brexit 1	108
4.2	Position on Muslims: Brexit 2	109
4.3	Position on Muslims: Christchurch first month	110
4.4	Position on Muslims: Christchurch 2	111
4.5	Position on Muslims: Christchurch 3	112
4.6	#helloworldbrother	113
4.7	COVID-19 sample one	114
4.8	COVID-19: Eid al-Fitr	115
4.9	COVID-19: Eid al-Adha	116
4.10	#Tablighijamaat	117
5.1	Brexit general election: clusters	161
5.2	‘Brexit Day’ network	162
5.3	Network visualisation, Christchurch sample one	164
5.4	Christchurch attack: three months later	165
5.5	#helloworldbrother network	165
5.6	COVID-19 sample one	167
5.7	COVID-19 network: Eid al-Fitr	167
5.8	COVID-19 network: Eid al-Adha	168
5.9	#Tablighijamaat network	168
6.1	Timeline of #stopIslam after the 2016 Brussels bombings	191
6.2	Hourly rate of tweets across the Christchurch dataset	192

Tables

2.1	List of search terms	34
2.2	Sample of tweets generated by keywords	35
3.1	What was the topic of the tweet? (Brexit datasets)	66
3.2	Summary data: Brexit	69
3.3	Sampled emojis, the 'Brexit general election'	70
3.4	Tweet types	73
3.5	Position on Islam/Muslims	74
3.6	Position on Brexit	75
3.7	Position on Islam/Muslims, by position on Brexit (2019)	75
3.8	Chi-Square tests (position on Islam/Muslims * Brexit, 2019)	75
3.9	Position on Islam/Muslims, by position on Brexit (2020)	76
3.10	Chi-Square tests (position on Islam/Muslims * Brexit, 2020)	76
3.11	Topic, by position on Brexit (2019)	77
3.12	Topic, by position on Brexit (2020)	77
3.13	Number of retweets, by position on Islam/Muslims	79
3.14	Number of retweets, by position on Brexit	80
3.15	Agreement/disagreement with quoted tweets, general election	81
3.16	Agreement/disagreement with quoted tweets, 'Brexit Day'	81
3.17	Summary data: Christchurch terror attack	83
3.18	Sampled emojis, Christchurch terrorist attack	84
3.19	National location of tweets, Christchurch terrorist attack	87
3.20	Position on Islam/Muslims, Christchurch terrorist attack	88
3.21	Number of retweets by position on Islam/Muslims	90
3.22	Simplified topics, Christchurch sample one	91
3.23	Simplified topics, Christchurch sample three	92
3.24	Summary data: COVID-19	93
3.25	Position on Muslims, COVID-19	95
3.26	Number of retweets * position on Islam	96
3.27	Simplified topics	97
3.28	Simplified topics * number of retweets	100
4.1	Position on Muslims, all events	107
5.1	Proportion of non-affiliated accounts	146
5.2	Location data	146
5.3	Anti- and pro-Muslim sentiment according to country, Christchurch sample one	148
5.4	Key actors in Brexit 1	149
5.5	Most shared accounts following the Christchurch attack	150

5.6	Most shared users: COVID-19	152
5.7	Religion of the account holders: COVID-19 data	156
5.8	'Typology of solidarity activities through social media'	157
5.9	Affiliations	171

About the authors

Ed de Quincey is Professor of Computer Science at Keele University. Ed has researched and taught in the area of online human behaviour for twenty-one years, looking into the usability and impact of websites as well as uses of the information that they collect. His research on ‘Big Data’ sources like Twitter/X to detect disease outbreaks has received international recognition and he is currently collaborating with medical practitioners on mobile application interface design for clinical guidelines.

Eva Haifa Giraud is Senior Lecturer in Digital Media and Society at the University of Sheffield. Her research interests include frictions in social media activism and the potentials and tensions associated with non-anthropocentric theoretical work. She has drawn these themes together in her books *What Comes After Entanglement?* (Duke University Press, 2019) and *Veganism: Politics, Practice and Theory* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021). Eva is currently on the editorial team of the international journal *Cultural Politics* and associated book series ‘a cultural politics book’ (Duke University Press).

Elizabeth Poole is Professor of Media and Communications at Keele University. Her research interests include media representations of religion, Muslims, news contexts, online hate speech and social media activism. She has addressed these issues in her books *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (I.B. Tauris, 2002), *Muslims and the News Media* (I.B. Tauris, 2006) with John Richardson, and *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred* (Ashgate, 2013), with Kim Knott and Teemu Taira. Her work has had an impact on the public sphere through engagement with advocacy groups and contributions to parliamentary groups/commissions on Islamophobia and religion.

John E. Richardson is Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool. The author of over ninety publications, his recent books include *Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain: Mediation, Rhetoric, Interpellation* (Cambridge Scholars, 2025), *The Politics and Rhetoric*

of *Collective Remembering* (Routledge, 2024, co-edited with Tommaso Milani), the *Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (Routledge, 2018, co-edited with Flowerdew) and *British Fascism: A Discourse-Historic Analysis* (Ibidem Verlag/Columbia University Press, 2017). He is editor of the international journal *Critical Discourse Studies* and co-editor of the book series 'Advances in Critical Discourse Studies' (Bloomsbury Academic).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding this important project (grant award AH/T004460) and Keele University for supporting the application and time/costs invested. Thank you to our advisory group for their advice on various aspects of the project and attending meetings: Faisal Hanif (MCB), Deepa Kumar (Rutgers), Arun Kundnani, Benjamin Lee (St. Andrews), Sanjay Sharma (Warwick), Emiliano Treré (Cardiff) and Kazim Ukka (CPF). Thank you to the various advocacy groups that have shown an interest in this project and engaged in dialogue through our events: Centre for Countering Digital Hate, Community Policy Forum, Hope not Hate, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Media Diversity Institute, MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development), the Muslim Council of Britain and Ofcom. We also want to acknowledge the contribution of the interviewees who gave up their time to talk to us; we hope we have done justice to their concerns. Thanks too to colleagues in our university departments as the project diverted our time from other activities, and for ongoing advice on impact and dissemination. We would like to thank Matt Burke for gathering the data and initial programming, and Ben Jolley for his fantastic programming skills and generating the datasets. Thanks also to the research assistants on our 2016 #stopIslam project (funded by a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Small Research Grant, SG161680), Mohammed Al-Janabi and Charis Gerosideris for their assistance with the quantitative analysis and Wallis Seaton for assistance with the qualitative analysis.

This project began in an unprecedented global pandemic; all of us experienced various personal and professional pressures during this period. We would like to express our gratitude to family and friends that supported us during this challenging time and as the project developed in subsequent years. We couldn't have done it without you!

Finally, a note from the Principal Investigator: I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my amazing colleagues who have been invaluable. The

project and its outputs are definitely a team effort and I am hugely indebted to them for their support and input as both colleagues and friends: Ed de Quincey, Eva Giraud and John Richardson. We hope this book goes some way to supporting a more civil environment for all.

1

Introduction: circulating and contesting hate

A central aim of *Contesting hate* is to provide insight into the online circulation of racism and disinformation, with a specific focus upon Islamophobia. However, perhaps more significantly, this book also charts successes, limitations and ambivalences associated with digital attempts to contest hate. Our analysis is grounded in a unique five-year dataset, which centres on social media data, interviews with digital activists and mainstream media analysis, derived from the project *#ContestingIslamophobia: Representation and Appropriation in Mediated Activism*.¹ Although we offer a series of distinctive insights into the circulation and contestation of hate – from tracing macro-level networks of key actors to examining fraught debates responding to individual social media posts – the book offers few easy answers or solutions. At the same time, by tracing patterns across our data we reveal important, if complex, lessons both for future attempts to contest hate and for future interdisciplinary research that traverses the sociological and data sciences. In doing so, we intervene in broader debates about the evolving relationships between social media platforms, social justice and social divisions.

The book is a response to widespread societal concern that has emerged about the role of social media in fomenting political discontent, consecrating racism and misogyny, and circulating hate speech. Extreme content has historically flourished in more obscure corners of the Internet, such as white supremacist websites and web fora or – more recently – ‘dark platforms’ (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021), particularly encrypted messaging apps that are less regulated than more ‘mainstream’ social media platforms (Urman and Katz, 2022). Over the past decade, however, there has been growing awareness of the vulnerability of so-called ‘mainstream’ or ‘very large’² platforms – such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X and YouTube – to manipulation. Due to their comparatively large size, the affordances of these platforms have been exploited by the far-right to normalise racist content and disinformation (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Siapera, 2019; Krafft and Donovan, 2020).³

Neo-Nazi website the *Daily Stormer*, for instance, has produced a style guide to advise its members on how to make racist narratives palatable to wider social media audiences (Marantz, 2018). The white nationalist Nordic Resistance movement, similarly, encourages members to utilise humour – often in the forms of memes – to normalise racism, with members claiming that humour is a potent weapon due to breaking ‘the first mental barrier in “ordinary people” when it comes to “forbidden topics”’ such as Holocaust denial (Askanius, 2021: 153). Platforms such as Facebook have proven especially vulnerable to disinformation, due to the ease with which users can set up fake pages and accounts, a problem that has arisen in a range of global contexts. In Denmark, for instance, Islamist Facebook pages have been exposed as fabrications designed to stoke ethnic conflict (Farkas *et al.*, 2018); in Myanmar non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have heavily criticised the platform for its role promoting genocidal rhetoric towards Rohingya Muslims (Sablosky, 2021); while in Indonesia users have been employed as Facebook influencers with the aim of manipulating election results through ‘networked disinformation’ (Ong and Cabañes, 2018).

Another social media platform that has featured heavily in both academic research and public discourse about hate speech and disinformation is the micro-blog site formerly known as Twitter (and now rebranded as X). Again, a valuable body of academic research has documented how Twitter has been utilised by a heterogeneous range of right-wing movements: from alt-right groups spreading conspiracy narratives in support of President Donald Trump (de Zeeuw *et al.*, 2020; Packer and Stoneman, 2021) to bots amplifying authoritarian political agendas (Ganesh and Faggiani, 2024) and anti-Muslim propaganda circulated by Hindu nationalists (Farokhi, forthcoming). Despite having a smaller user-base than other ‘very large’ platforms, Twitter’s openness, accessibility and the demographics of its users – which skew towards elites such as journalists, politicians and academics – have afforded it a disproportionately influential role in public discourse. Indeed, even as its user-base has declined, the platform is still routinely (if sometimes problematically) treated as a channel for politicians to engage with publics (Kalsnes *et al.*, 2017), as a news source for journalists that is seen as reflective of public opinion (McGregor, 2019) and as a resource for academics to gain insight into public discourse (Murthy, 2024).

In setting out some of the ways that social media platforms have been manipulated by the far-right, we have opened this book with a fairly bleak picture of the contemporary digital media landscape. This picture, however, is perhaps an over-simplification and it is important to underscore that the same social media platforms that have frequently been used to spread disinformation and digital racism have also been used to contest it. Working in conjunction with other modes of communication in ‘hybrid’

media ecologies, social media platforms have often played an important role in contexts ranging from anti-austerity activism (Gerbaudo, 2012; Treré, 2018) to refugee and migrant solidarity campaigns (Constanza-Chock, 2014; Bakardijeva, 2020). Twitter, again, has held a disproportionately influential role in supporting subaltern counter-publics, groups who – as Nancy Fraser famously defined in her critique of the Habermasian liberal-bourgeois public sphere – ‘emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics’ (1990: 67). Through developing their own ‘terms for describing social reality’, Fraser contends, these groups ‘help expand discursive space’ as ‘assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation now have to be publicly argued out’ (1990: 67).

Building on Fraser’s analysis, a number of thinkers contend that Twitter has played an invaluable role for contemporary subaltern counter-publics, particularly feminist, LGBTQIA*, decolonial and anti-racist movements, to formulate ideas that can reshape public discourse (Rambukkana, 2015a; Brock, 2020; Jackson *et al.*, 2020; Udupa and Dattatreyan, 2023). The value of Twitter for subaltern counter-publics is reflected, for instance, by feminist movements’ use of the platform to label, denaturalise and contest everyday sexism (Antonakis-Nashif, 2015; Mendes *et al.*, 2018, 2019), or anti-racist campaigners enabling formerly radical ideas of defunding the police to gain widespread visibility (Martin, 2021; Gross and Gavin, 2023). More specifically, user-generated hashtags – which unite individuals around particular themes, topics and issues – have been seen as important in enabling publics to construct counter-narratives against hate.

The existence, and functioning, of counter-publics and counter-narratives on Twitter is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. In brief, though, as Jackson *et al.* argue in their influential book *#HashtagActivism*, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have had far-reaching influence, moving debates about identity politics, inequality, violence, and citizenship from the margins to the center and into places as crucial as presidential agendas’ (Jackson *et al.*, 2020: xxxii). What this claim underlines is that the significance of hashtag campaigns against racism and misogyny lies not in their visibility on Twitter itself, but in the capacity of these campaigns to spread across wider media ecologies or permeate media and political discourse. An important aspect of #MeToo, for instance, was that – despite the hashtag originally gaining prominence in the US as a means of drawing attention to sexual violence and harassment – it rapidly gained a transnational life of its own. The campaign was engaged with in complex ways by digital feminist activism in other national contexts, such as India (Pain, 2021; Nanditha, 2022) and China, where it spread across platforms Weibo and WeChat (Zeng, 2020; Yin and Sun, 2021). Our own previous research, likewise, has illustrated how Twitter hashtags have helped to

support transnational solidarity networks against Islamophobia that have fed into (and sometimes challenged) the framing of events by the political establishment and within legacy media (Poole *et al.*, 2019, 2021, 2023; Richardson *et al.*, 2024).

Thus, while there are urgent concerns about the role of social media in circulating and normalising hate speech and disinformation, equally powerful arguments have been put forward about the capacity of platforms to support new forms of anti-racist solidarity and resistance. The potential for social media to contest hate is, in other words, itself a contested topic within academic research. However, in increasingly polarised democracies, it is ever more important to ask which conditions enable counter-narratives against hate to emerge, flourish and make a social difference, as well to as identify conditions that undermine counter-narratives. These ongoing – and often heated – debates set the stage for this book, which is underpinned by our own research into the dynamics of digital Islamophobia and attempts to contest it. Though centring on the aforementioned project *#ContestingIslamophobia*, we also draw on a preceding pilot study that examined the contestation of the hashtag *#stopIslam*. The remainder of this chapter situates our research in relation to wider scholarship that has articulated the socio-political significance of attempts to combat digital hate, clarifying how we define key terms in our research, such as hate, digital racism, counter-narratives and ‘trigger events’, and how we conceptualise the role of social media platforms. After establishing this wider social and academic context, the chapter outlines the projects that underpin our analysis, before culminating with an overview of the book’s arguments, data and contents.

Before discussing our research context and own projects in more detail, however, we wanted to make one final point. Amidst growing controversies about the relationship between digital platforms, disinformation and hate, the governance of platforms has recently been subject to a number of pressures. There have, for instance, been calls for greater external regulation of platforms by regional governments, as encapsulated by Brazil banning X in August 2024 and the European Commission accusing the platform of breaching its Digital Services Act (the EU’s flagship legislation to ward against disinformation) in July of the same year (European Commission, 2024; Santos, 2024). While greater regulation may prove important for mitigating the problems of digital platforms, it is perhaps also important to avoid uncritically cheerleading state intervention. After all, as noted previously, digital media have also held an important role in challenging censorship and served as platforms for marginal perspectives to gain wider visibility (even if these potentials have themselves been celebrated a little uncritically at times).

As we edit the final draft this introduction, for instance, complexities about state-led social media regulation are being thrown into relief by responses to the 2025 Online Safety Act in the UK, which – in the wake of its launch on 25 July 2025 – has generated both praise and alarm across the political spectrum. While some see the Act as an important intervention in protecting young people from online harms and combating extremism, others worry that it signals a tightening of freedom of expression (Lorenz, 2025). Responses to the Act, therefore, crystallise how top-down approaches to contesting hate are often entangled with uneasy questions about online freedom. The book's contribution to debates about digital hate thus comes at a critical juncture, where the digital media landscape is changing rapidly and there are growing question marks over the governance and legislation of platforms.

Perhaps nothing better epitomises the current state of flux than the 2022 purchase of Twitter by billionaire tech entrepreneur Elon Musk,⁴ which precipitated its renaming as X. Due to our own data being gathered prior to this point we predominantly refer to the platform as Twitter throughout this book. The exception to this is when we refer to events post-Musk's purchase (as with the bans and warnings outlined in the previous paragraphs), where we use the platform's current name of X for accuracy and clarity. Twitter's transformation into X, however, is not reducible to a name change and, as we discuss throughout this book, speaks to wider shifts in the media landscape in which digital hate is circulated and contested. The political forces unleashed by these broader changes, we argue, make it especially important to identify what lessons can be learned from a longitudinal perspective on the circulation and contestation of hate.

Part I: debating digital hate

Circulating hate: hate speech, digital racism and Islamophobia

We use the term 'hate' as a broad category in reference to discourse that stigmatises and Others minoritised groups of people (encompassing misogynist, racist and anti-LGBTQIA* social media content, as well as Islamophobia). We frame the book in relation to the more expansive term 'hate', as opposed to the specific terminology of hate *speech*, in response to a range of criticisms that have been levelled at digital scholarship for treating hate as a linguistic problem. Twitter is a language-oriented platform – centring around short user-generated posts, or 'tweets', of 280 characters⁵ – and the corporation has, historically, enabled researchers to search for, download and analyse tweets related to topics of interest (though

this again has changed with Musk's takeover). As we discuss in more depth later in the book (see [Chapter 2](#)), the platform's relative accessibility for academic researchers has led to a vast body of research that examines patterns and trends in language-use on Twitter as a means of understanding broader social trends.

For instance, from 2016, in the wake of concerns about social media's use in contexts such as Brexit and the US presidential election, there was a dramatic spike in data science research that gathered large datasets from Twitter and analysed them using computational methods ([Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021](#)). The purpose of this research was often to utilise Twitter content as training datasets and develop automated tools that were capable of detecting problems such as racism and disinformation (for a critical overview, see [Nikunen, 2021](#)). Similar automated detection methods have been adopted by social media companies themselves for the purpose of content moderation ([Laaksonen et al., 2020](#): 4). There are, however, several dangers in focusing on hate speech as a discreet problem, or in conflating hate speech with digital racism (see also [Giraud et al., 2025](#)).

Firstly, a focus on the linguistic content of social media posts can neglect visual disinformation – including memes – which play an equally important role in racist discourse and fail to situate narratives in relation to wider far-right media practices ([Askanius, 2021](#); [Weikmann and Lecheler, 2023](#)). Secondly, and more fundamentally, conflating complex sociological phenomena such as racism with hate speech that can be tracked via keywords 'tends to reduce racism to just overt abusive expression to be quantified and removed' ([Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021](#): 216). Hate speech detection often relies on 'binary' categorisation of content – that is, either it breaches a platform's terms and conditions or it does not – which has resulted in gendered and racialised identity markers being treated as though they have equivalent connotations ([Thylstrup and Talat, 2020](#)). Due to abstracting terminology from the social contexts that give it meaning, binary logics often lead to phrases such as 'men are trash' or 'white men' being censored by social media platforms while banal or 'ambient' racism has been allowed to remain ([Siapera, 2019](#): 12; [Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021](#): 112). This is a particular problem because digital racism is often not expressed through direct slurs, but assumes subtle ambient forms, such as framing xenophobic sentiment towards migration as concern about crime or cultural difference ([Siapera, 2019](#): 9; see also [Titley, 2019](#)). These discourses are implicitly racist in reiterating associations between migration, race, violence and difference, and – in so doing – reproducing a 'white social frame' that centres whiteness as the norm and legitimates racism ([Feagin, 2020](#)). Yet, by avoiding explicit language and positioning their arguments as 'commonsensical' debate, users who engage with these

modes of reiterative racism are able to circumvent moderation. To capture these complexities, our analysis of representations of race is informed by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's (1997) work that argues race is actively constructed through language, imagery and socio-cultural narratives. In dominant media and political discourse, racial inequalities are frequently framed through narratives of individual failure or cultural deficiency, distorting systemic oppression and reinforcing a symbolic order in which whiteness is normalised and rendered invisible. Framing race in this way conceals the structural dimensions of racism, presenting it as resolved or the work of a few individuals or extremists.

To avoid a more reductive emphasis on hate speech, and the problems that come with it, the conception of hate that underpins this book is instead informed by Sharma and Brooker's (2016) understanding of digital racism as something that is not reducible to language alone. The emphasis of their definition is on the relationality of digital racism, depicting it as an assemblage of 'the human (social media users), social phenomena (race and racism), and the nonhuman (digital technologies and devices)' (2016: 3–4). Applied to Twitter, this definition means that racism is not intrinsic to the content or language of individual tweets, but that 'modes of racialization emerge within and across tweets' (Sharma and Brooker, 2016: 30). Thus – even if there are no explicit markers of racism in the wording of tweets – user practices and technical relations (such as shared jokes, hashtags that situate posts within wider contexts or quote-tweets) can imbue tweets with racist meanings. It is these more complex, situated and relational dimensions of digital racism – which are materialised through the entanglement of social relations with the technical affordances of platforms – that are not fully captured by using the terminology of hate *speech* (see also Brock, 2016).

Sharma and Brooker's relational, assemblage-based approach informs our understanding of digital Islamophobia, a phenomenon that has affinities with, but is also distinctive from, other modes of racism. In 2018, the UK All Party Parliamentary Group defined Islamophobia as 'rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness', a definition that was adopted by the UK's Labour Party.⁶ The term Islamophobia recognises the racialisation of Muslims in the current political context and therefore functions in the same way as racism, as a systematic form of discrimination. It is widely recognised that there was a shift from biological forms of racism to cultural racism in the late twentieth century as scientific definitions of race were challenged (Giroux, 1993; Rattansi, 2007). Subsequently, cultural differences are more likely to be used as a way of defining groups as inferior and to justify discrimination. Anti-Islamophobic advocacy groups have thus argued for the importance of operationalising a formal definition of Islamophobia

in order to be able to identify and combat it both legally and through hegemonic processes (Community Policy Forum, MEND, Muslim Council of Britain, 2021).

In the current historical period, Islamophobia has shifted beyond the domain of the extreme right and been legitimised through statecraft in a range of national contexts (Kumar, 2021). The consolidation of state-sanctioned Islamophobia is reflected, for instance, in world events ranging from US-based white supremacists celebrating President Donald Trump's 'Muslim ban', to the violent persecution of Muslim minorities by Hindutva activists in India (Ghasiya and Sasahara, 2022). What makes Islamophobic narratives especially difficult to combat is that, despite Islamophobia having a long history of being racialised (Poole and Williamson, 2021), the distinction between 'race' and religion is often leveraged to deny that anti-Muslim statements are racist (Hafez, 2014). In contexts such as the UK, for instance, everything from violent bordering practices to mainstream media narratives that 'Other' Muslims have been defended as legitimate concern about 'cultural difference' rather than racism (Kundnani, 2014).

In light of the mainstreaming of Islamophobia, racism and anti-immigration narratives, we have chosen to use the term 'far-right' to encompass a range of perspectives that endorse these sentiments. This decision is, in part, a political choice, in light of the way that alternative nomenclature (such as 'alt-right') has been deliberately used by white supremacist movements to render racism more palatable (Hill, 2024).⁷ Our usage of far-right follows other scholars who have utilised the term to describe a broad range of communities and perspectives who present themselves as 'anti-establishment in their reaction against multiculturalism and globalism, while promoting racist, anti-feminist, and anti-Semitic ideologies ... *though many of these communities resist identification with the term*' (Marwick and Lewis, 2017: 3, emphasis added). Applying a label to communities who might not identify with it carries a fraught politics, but this approach is important in contexts where such movements have sought to normalise these arguments as mainstream opinion rather than fringe or extremist. When such arguments are framed as normative, and accepted by the political establishment, it often has the effect of shifting political discourse to the right. Though potentially contentious, therefore, our broad use of far-right is in response to these contexts. That said, as noted later on in this chapter, while we describe certain narratives and user-clusters as espousing or consolidating far-right perspectives, we avoid labelling individuals as such unless they explicitly identify in this way (for example, via user bios or within tweets). This approach, therefore, balances ethical concerns about how to engage with social media data with political

commitment to identifying how digital racism and Islamophobia operate as structural phenomena.

Although Islamophobia has, arguably, intensified in recent years, it is important to underline that Islamophobic narratives are not new. Racialised Islamophobia is entangled with imperial legacies and has been normalised by the mainstream media throughout the past three decades (Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2004; Kumar, 2021). Yet while social media might not bring Islamophobia into being, digital platforms can amplify it in significant ways. As we elucidate throughout this book, one of the most commonplace ways social media intensify Islamophobia is via what we describe as ‘reiterative racism’ wherein stigmatising tropes are perpetuated with unprecedented speed and intensity by the coordinated activities of the far-right and fellow travellers. This phenomenon underscores the importance of understanding digital Islamophobia in relational terms, rather than assuming it can be identified through static linguistic markers, by foregrounding how meaning is materialised through the entanglement of user practices with the affordances of particular platforms (see Brock, 2016).

While a relational conception of digital Islamophobia, as something materialised through situated socio-technical relations, is pivotal to the book we also continue to engage with ‘hate’ as a wider category (even as we avoid a narrower focus on hate speech). This decision is, again, for several reasons. Although Islamophobia has distinctive attributes, throughout the book our analysis elucidates how it is increasingly imbricated with other modes of (digital) hate, particularly racism, xenophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric. Indeed, slippage across these categories is often precisely what enables the far-right to disguise Islamophobia as ‘legitimate’ debate about cultural difference or state resources. This slippage simultaneously racialises Islam while allowing plausible deniability of racism, by framing criticisms of Islam not as racially motivated but derived from ‘genuine concern’ over particular religious values or cultural practices (see Goldberg, 2015). Conversely, we found that resistance to Islamophobia often did not occur in isolation. Instead, contestation was often part of wider articulations of counter-hegemonic narratives against the far-right, echoing Ruiz’s (2014) characterisation of contemporary leftist politics as increasingly ‘polyvocal’ in its attempts to articulate the relations between different social issues.

Our decision to utilise the term ‘hate’, therefore, is in reference to the importance of relationships between Islamophobia and other social justice issues, in terms of how they are articulated by key actors involved in the narratives that are central to this book. More broadly, however, the term hate points to the more expansive implications of the arguments we make, which speak to wider concerns about the relationship between digital media

and variegated forms of oppression. In addition, and conversely, continuing to use the term ‘hate’ underscores how our findings advance wider debates about mediated activism in which subaltern counter-publics have used social media to contest inequality and discrimination. It is this, more hopeful, potential of digital platforms that we turn to now.

Contesting hate: counter-public activism and counter-narratives

As touched on at the beginning of this chapter, a rich tradition of academic scholarship has underlined the utility of social media for counter-publics, particularly in supporting feminist, LGBTQIA* and anti-racist movements. This body of literature often has roots in early scholarship about the capacity of the Internet to support activism, through scaling-up – and sustaining – anti-capitalist activist networks, particularly those associated with the Global Justice Movement (Pickerill, 2002; Juris, 2008; Hands, 2010). There are, however, several important distinctions between earlier scholarship on mediated activism and more recent research about activist uses of social media.

Firstly, there has been a shift in the tenor of analysis; from nuanced but broadly positive narratives about the Internet’s value for social justice movements, to a far more divided field of research between those emphasising the potentials of digital media for activism and those underlining their pitfalls. Secondly, there has been a shift in methods and focus; as DIY-publishing and activist-produced websites have declined – and often been displaced by social media – ethnographic research into social movements has frequently been replaced by data analytics that focus on social media content. Finally, and relatedly, there has been a change in emphasis away from the back-stage of activism (that is, how activists use technologies in practice) to the front-stage, as represented by public-facing social media narratives.

Divides in contemporary research are illustrated by some of the most valuable texts about contemporary activism expressing diametrically opposing arguments. Take Jackson *et al.*’s aforementioned *#HashtagActivism* (2020) and Jen Schradie’s *The Revolution that Wasn’t* (2019), for instance. *#HashtagActivism* argues that Twitter campaigns can support counter-publics who are not represented by the mainstream public sphere. To elucidate their arguments, the authors draw on a range of case studies from feminist, queer and anti-racist movements: from prominent examples such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter to trans-inclusive hashtags and earlier examples of digital feminist activism. Building on their previous work, the book offers a powerful illustration of the way Twitter can enable counter-publics to ‘challenge mainstream narratives’ through enabling them to

‘reframe and retell’ existing depictions of an issue in media and political discourse (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015: 4–5). In contrast, the equally persuasive arguments made in *The Revolution That Wasn’t* suggest that – far from levelling the playing field and giving activists increased agency – social media favour well-funded conservative movements. Right-leaning movements, Schradie argues, can more easily marshal money and resources to amplify their arguments than progressivist and leftist groups (as broadly construed).

Not all research, however, makes such starkly opposing arguments and other scholars argue that social media are not intrinsically positive or detrimental for social justice movements, as their affordances are contingent on their context of use. Research from a media-ecological tradition in particular, has illustrated how the affordances of social media platforms are co-constituted by user practices, their relationship with other media, and wider discursive contexts (Feigenbaum *et al.*, 2013; Barassi, 2015; Mattoni, 2016; Treré, 2018). Importantly, this body of work has also elucidated how different conclusions about the potentials of platforms are often intimately bound up with the methods used to research them.

For instance, one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding Twitter activism has been W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg’s concept of ‘connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013). Grounded in an analysis of online narratives disseminated by anti-capitalist movements such as Occupy and the *indignados*/15M, Bennett and Segerberg describe connective action as ‘networks that self-organize largely without central or “lead” organizational actors, using technologies as important organizational agent’ (2012: 755). The relationship between social media and these movements is thus portrayed as one in which

participation becomes self-motivating as personally expressive content is shared with, and recognized by, others who, in turn, repeat these networked sharing activities. When these interpersonal networks are enabled by technology platforms of various designs that coordinate and scale the networks, the resulting actions can resemble collective action, yet without the same role played by formal organizations. (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012: 752)

However, Bennett and Segerberg’s characterisation of movements such as the *indignados* as ‘self-motivating’ – due to social media enabling their narratives to assume a life of their own – has been complicated by scholars who have used other methods (such as interviews and ethnographic research) to understand the ‘back-stage’ of activism. Anastasia Kavada’s (2015) work on Occupy, for instance, elucidates how much work was required to consolidate a collective identity in order to present a unified message on social media: from email list discussions, to social media direct messages,

to public meetings. Emiliano [Treré's \(2020\)](#) work on 15M, likewise, shows that – far from spontaneously trending on Twitter – activists' messages gained prominence after they used WhatsApp to coordinate the posting of tweets.

Recognition of the need to situate and contextualise social media narratives, as offered by media ecological scholarship, was a key influence on our own research design and understanding of activist engagements with Twitter (as discussed in more depth later in this and the [next chapter](#)). The other key influence on our work relates more to our analysis, in terms of how we interpreted attempts to contest hate, which was informed by contemporary research about online counter-narratives.

In general terms, counter-narratives have a deconstructive function that challenges the original narrative that they are responding to ([De Latour et al., 2017](#)). There are, however, different types of counter-narratives, which exist along a 'counter-narrative spectrum' ([Ernst et al., 2017](#): 7; [Ganeth, 2019](#): 89). On one end of this spectrum is counter-speech, which has been described by [Fielitz and Marcks \(2021: n.p.\)](#) as 'any form of communication directed against far-right propaganda in general and hate speech in particular'. Some of the more simplistic and reactive practices of counter-speech (such as posting an angry emoji, expressing dislike, calling out a post as racist, or even declaring solidarity with those affected by racism) have been accused of being 'slacktivism' ([Engles, 2017](#)), 'non-performative' speech acts that do not do what they promise to do ([Ahmed, 2004](#)). At the other end of the spectrum, as noted above, [Jackson and Foucault Welles \(2015: 4–5\)](#) focus on sustained counter-narratives produced by subaltern counter-publics which they characterise as 'outward-looking attempt to challenge mainstream narratives'.

Jackson and Foucault Welles argue that Twitter has played an important role in 'legitimising and sustaining' the 'parallel discursive arenas' that enable publics 'to formulate and circulate counter-discourses in opposition to a dominant superordinate "public at large"' ([2015](#): 3). For instance, the appropriation of a 2014 New York Police Department publicity campaign (#myNYPD), which was 'hijacked' to contest its original meaning, illustrates how racial justice activists were able to use the platform to construct a parallel narrative that foregrounded police violence towards African American communities. In doing so, these activists were able to 'explicitly and strategically seek to challenge the "dominant knowledge" inherent to the mainstream public sphere' ([Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015](#): 3).

However, some activists and academics express preference for the term 'alternative narrative' due to raising concerns that *any* form of counter-narrative can risk amplifying hegemonic norms and hate speech. This is

because, in order to overtly contest the content of particular narratives, counter-narratives necessarily engage directly with this content. Alternative narratives, in contrast, are essentially approaches that tell ‘a different story, focusing on what society is “for” rather than “against”, whilst remaining completely distinct from the “discourse and influence” of a dominant, problematic narrative’ (Carthy, 2021: 4). These narratives, in other words, promote different values or representations without engaging directly with the original narrative (Ernst *et al.*, 2017: 7). In our previous work, however, we have suggested that it is not always possible to draw sharp, hierarchical distinctions between different narratives that seek to contest hate (Poole *et al.*, 2023). Sometimes even ‘alternative narratives’ can become magnets for the far-right and inadvertently amplify reiterative racism (Poole *et al.*, 2021), while, conversely, seemingly superficial expressions of solidarity can lay the foundation for sustained critique of political institutions and policies (Richardson *et al.*, 2024). Attempts to counter hate, therefore, often resist neat categorisation and are instead forged through ‘contentious’ politics (Kavada and Poell, 2021), that reflects the fluid and entangled character and conditions in which narratives form (discussed further in Chapter 4).

Thus, while we recognise that different types of narratives have different socio-political potentials, like digital racism these potentials do not lie solely in the linguistic content or construction of narratives themselves. Instead, the potentials of narratives need to be situated in relation to entanglements between users, platforms and events. Events, we argue, play a particularly important role in generating meaning, as they often serve as discursive flashpoints for the formation of narratives and counter-narratives through contentious politics.

The role of ‘trigger events’

Whether hate is contested by subaltern counter-publics who compose counter-narratives with sustained demands, or loose-knit ‘ad hoc’ publics who come together temporarily around events to offer expressions of solidarity (Bruns and Burgess, 2015), a trait shared by different modes of contestation is the role of affective engagement. Zizi Papacharissi, for instance, describes communities who coalesce in response to events on social media as ‘affective publics’: ‘networked publics [who] come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment’ (2014: 2). Indeed, one of the most distinctive characteristics of counter-narratives that arise on social media is the speed at which affectively charged narratives can spread as publics take to social media in response to events. In such contexts, Papacharissi argues, features of platforms such as hashtags ‘serve as framing devices that allow crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell

their story collaboratively and on their own terms’ (2014: 2). In the context of digital Islamophobia, for instance, our previous research found that hashtags such as #stopIslam enabled publics to rapidly coalesce and create counter-narratives that not only disrupted the dominance of online hate, but offered alternative frames that were adopted by legacy media (Poole *et al.*, 2019, 2021).

As the case of #stopIslam illustrates, ad hoc, affective and contentious publics who emerge around hashtags are often brought into being through responding to specific events. More specifically, in the case of counter-narratives, publics often take shape through reacting *against* existing framing of these events. In our work, for instance, the counter-narratives that we unearthed emerged in response to digital Islamophobia that had arisen in the wake of particular events. Incidents that generate Islamophobic narratives are defined by Imran Awan and Irene Zempi as ‘trigger events’ (2017: 364), which they describe as events that generate anti-Muslim hate speech which often blurs into hate crime ‘ranging from incitement, harassment, cyber threats to actual physical violence’ (364). Typical ‘trigger’ events, for example, are ‘terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who choose to identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam’ (364), which are then leveraged by the far-right to construct Muslims as a ‘threat’ to national security and cultural identity.

Our research on #stopIslam elucidates the appropriation of trigger events to spread overt disinformation and Islamophobic rhetoric. We found, for instance, that the hashtag was utilised to circulate disinformation that ranged from fabricated statistics about the number of Islamist attacks perpetuated annually in Europe and the United States, to memes including imagery of the crusades captioned ‘all unite against Islam’ (Poole *et al.*, 2021). However, even aside from overt disinformation, racism and hate speech, in providing fuel for narratives that construct Muslims as a threat, trigger events play a particularly important role in normalising anti-Muslim sentiment through legitimating ‘ambient’ racism. Eugenia Siapera, for instance, defines trigger events as ‘topics or themes that tend to elicit reactions including racially-loaded toxic comments’ (Siapera *et al.*, 2018: 46). In more recent work, Siapera (2019) elucidates how one such ‘trigger’ – a fatal stabbing in the small town of Dundalk, in Ireland – illustrates how the far-right utilised the event in order to portray alleged links between migration and violence as ‘common sense’. After the stabbing there were unsubstantiated rumours, which appeared in local news, alleging that the perpetrator was a Syrian asylum seeker. Users on the controversial message forum 4chan then posted comments that urged ‘others to go on boards. i.e. the most popular Irish discussion forum, and Reddit to use this event to “red pill normies” ... to make them see “reality”’ (2019: 19). As we outline in the final chapter of

this book, this appropriation of trigger events to legitimate Islamophobia is not the exception but a far-right media tactic that is routinely deployed. Significantly, [Siapera et al. \(2018\)](#) noted that it is often media coverage of these events that is the trigger rather than the events themselves.

It is important to underline that while trigger events can play an important role in generating both far-right narratives and counter-narratives that promote social justice, the texture of the publics that underpin different poles on the political spectrum should be conceptualised differently. [Sarah Jackson and Daniel Kreiss \(2023\)](#), for instance, argue for the importance of distinguishing between subaltern counter-publics – whose counter-narratives aspire, *qua* Fraser, to describe reality differently with the purpose of creating institutional change – with what they term ‘defensive publics’. Unlike counter-publics, Jackson and Kreiss contend that defensive publics

stand in alignment with (rather than counter to) and seek to preserve the ordering of systems of inequality. These systems can encompass unequal social and political relations across many dimensions of power, to be determined through analysis, including but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and class. ([Jackson and Kreiss, 2023](#): 103)

This distinction is apparent, for instance, in the way that far-right defensive publics leverage trigger events to promote nostalgic visions of empire and xenophobic nationalism, while depicting multiculturalism as a failed project that needs to be redressed through regressive migration policies.

In light of the importance of triggers in anchoring different narratives and publics, the research that underpins this book examines how the dynamics of Islamophobia unfolded in relation to three key events: the Christchurch terrorist attacks, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Before explaining our rationale behind choosing these events, however, it is necessary to flesh out how we understand the final key element of our project: the role of social media platforms.

Platform affordances: some notes on terminology

The stakes of understanding the precise way that platforms mediate user activity are underlined by Tartleton Gillespie’s observation that social media play an active role in constituting public discourse ([2018](#): 199). This observation builds upon [Gillespie’s \(2010\)](#) earlier influential analysis of what it means for social media companies to brand themselves as ‘platforms’. Working across the various dictionary definitions of ‘platform’ that existed at the time – encompassing architectural, figurative, political and computational uses – Gillespie contends that the term ‘suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon

it' (2010: 350). The term platform, then, infers that social media companies are simply neutral intermediaries that host others' media content, an egalitarian forum that 'raises up' user generated content. As Gillespie points out, however, framing social media as intermediaries obscures the processes through which platforms actively mediate their content, which range from content moderation policies that shape and delimit what is posted, to affordances that lend themselves to certain forms of communication.

Rather than intermediaries, then, in our own research we conceive of platforms as 'mediators', using this term in reference to Bruno Latour's classic distinction between an intermediary that 'transports meaning or force without transformation' and mediators that 'transform, translate, distort and modify the elements they are supposed to carry' (2007: 35). As research about digital infrastructures highlights, the specific form that platform mediation takes is often bound up with modes of governmentality that do not operate through preventing action, but by encouraging users to 'act according to a specific scheme' (Badouard *et al.*, 2016: 9). Social media platforms, therefore, are not neutral repositories that simply host or transport data. Instead, they are actively constitutive of data and mediate their social dynamics, which, by extension, has implications for how these data can be analysed and interpreted. Indeed, as we describe in more depth shortly, we selected our case studies – Brexit, the Christchurch terror attack and the COVID-19 pandemic – on the basis that they offered particular insight into the situated ways Twitter mediates Islamophobia.

In practical terms, this means that our research conceived of Twitter as a mediator that actively transformed the Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives that we were examining. When looking at the platform, in other words, we were aware that it did not simply offer a transparent window onto dynamics of Islamophobia that were somehow 'naturally occurring' in society. Instead, Twitter was co-constituting Islamophobic narratives in significant ways. As we elaborate later in the book, throughout our case studies, controversial issues and events were amplified by the platform and novel connections were forged between users that gave rise to distinctive discursive formations. During the COVID-19 pandemic routine phrases such as 'social distancing' and 'cultural difference' were articulated as part of new transnational assemblages of Islamophobia, as shared narratives emerged between UK far-right and Hindutva activists in India (Chapter 5). Conversely, in the wake of the Christchurch attacks, Twitter enabled Muslim counter-publics (and their would-be allies) to coalesce and contest prominent mainstream media tropes, through the appropriation of hashtags such as #peacefulmosques that enabled the sharing of everyday experience (see Chapter 4). To an extent, therefore, these findings seem to echo wider scholarship that has underscored the value of Twitter for

anti-racist awareness-raising by counter-publics (Rambukkana, 2015a; Jackson *et al.*, 2020).

There is a risk, however, in over-emphasising Twitter's active role in mediating cultural narratives and giving a sense that platform affordances, such as connectivity or its role as a transnational information node, are somehow predetermined and rigid. In digital media studies, 'the concept of affordance is generally used to describe what material artifacts such as media technologies allow people to do' (Bucher and Helmond, 2017: 3). This has led to slightly deterministic or 'unidirectional' understandings of technological affordances, which over-emphasise 'what technology does to users', as opposed to how social and cultural factors shape technology (Bucher and Helmond, 2017: 17).

It is important to underline, therefore, that we do not conceive of affordances as rigid properties of social media platforms that shape behaviour in predetermined ways. Instead, we draw on longer histories of the term that have insisted on affordances as being relational properties (Hutchby, 2001, 2003; Rice *et al.*, 2017). In other words, while acknowledging that Twitter's affordances do have a role in mediating discourse, we understand these affordances as themselves shaped through how people use the medium in practice, as well as by the wider media ecologies and cultural contexts that frame this usage (see also Treré, 2018). This is why it is important to describe Twitter as playing a *co-constitutive* (as opposed to just a constitutive) role in public discourse, and to describe mediated relationships as *socio-technical* (as opposed to simply technical).

Thus, while seeking to understand how Twitter informs the circulation and construction of narratives, we are not adopting a naïve stance of technological determinism. We are not, in other words, suggesting that social media platforms are solely responsible for contemporary cultures of hate (or attempts to counter it), due to their intrinsic properties as mediators. While Twitter has certain affordances – such as openness and connectivity – that have enabled it to act both as a conduit for hate and its contestation, these affordances are themselves shaped by social factors. Common features of the platform, such as hashtags and retweets, were originally pioneered by users (Bernard, 2019; Burgess and Baym, 2020) and these features often only gain salience for counter-publics when people are mobilised in the wake of geopolitical incidents (Ruiz, 2024). Our work thus builds upon research in critical data studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS) to understand Twitter as a mediator in a complex series of socio-technical relationships between users and events, rather than adopting a more polarised understanding of the platform as either irrelevant to or entirely determining the dynamics of narratives of broader social discourses.

One of the first questions we had to address in our research design, therefore, was which events we should focus on, to reveal the distinctive role of Twitter as a mediator without offering an overly deterministic understanding of this role. At this juncture, after laying the conceptual groundwork for how we are conceiving of publics, events, and platforms, it is useful to briefly outline our project itself. While the [next chapter](#) offers a more in-depth discussion of our research design and methodology – alongside some of the challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration – here we offer a more descriptive overview of the aims of our work and rationale for focusing on specific events to gather data.

Part II: contesting Islamophobia

As outlined previously, the research underpinning this book is derived from a three-year interdisciplinary project, *#ContestingIslamophobia*, which examined the construction and contestation of Islamophobic narratives in the wake of three key events: the Christchurch white supremacist terrorist attack, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was a collaboration between academics from media and communications studies, computer science, and sociological studies (particularly the branch known as STS). More specifically, team members had expertise that included Islamophobia, media representation of Muslims, far-right media-use, Twitter data analytics and mediated protest movements.

Before providing a brief summary of some of the key elements of *#ContestingIslamophobia*, it is necessary to contextualise it in relation to the pilot study that we have touched on elsewhere in this chapter and which we continue to draw upon at key junctures throughout this book. The pilot examined a single hashtag, *#stopIslam*, which was originally used to circulate an Islamophobic narrative. The hashtag gained prominence following an event in Europe: the 2016 Brussels bombings, a terrorist attack on the Belgium metro and airport that Islamic State claimed responsibility for, which killed thirty-two people. Echoing Awan and Zempi's (2016) arguments about 'trigger events', the bombings were used to propagate both overt hate speech and the more ambient forms of racism described by [Siapera \(2019\)](#), with Muslims repeatedly framed as a threat to European security, identity and culture. In addition, the bombing was appropriated by users based in the United States, who frequently coupled it with white-supremacist content and utilised *#stopIslam* to support the racist bordering policies advocated by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Yet, despite its origins, the reason #stopIslam trended on Twitter was not due to the number of Islamophobic tweets that included it, but because of the volume of attempts to condemn it. In other words, the hashtag was transformed into a counter-narrative *against* Islamophobia that was ultimately more prominent than the original narrative it was reacting against. The majority of the most shared tweets, for instance, were critical of Islamophobic sentiment and debunked claims made by the far-right about the relationship between Islam and terrorism. The appropriation of #stopIslam, therefore, seemed to hint at the potential of social media to offer a platform for voices, perspectives and potentially self-representation, which could offer a counterpoint to long-standing media frames that stereotype and Other Muslims (Poole and Richardson, 2006).

To an extent, our findings bore out these hopeful potentials: our quantitative data (derived from computational and content analysis), for instance, illustrated that the proportion of tweets articulating counter-narrative content was significantly higher than the proportion that maintained its original Islamophobic sentiment. In addition, critiques of Islamophobia went beyond Twitter to gain purchase in legacy media, with prominent news outlets – including Al Jazeera, CNN, Nigeria Newdesk, *The Independent* and *The Washington Post* – focusing on the counter-narrative against Islamophobia as opposed to the original meaning of the hashtag.

However, some of our findings tempered these hopeful conclusions about the capacity of social media to combat hate. In our qualitative analysis of individual tweets and debates beneath them, for instance, we found that users critical of Islamophobia were bombarded with racist and Islamophobic memes and disinformation. The relationships between counter-narrative users, moreover, turned out to be more ephemeral than those involved in propagating the original narrative. These dynamics resulted in the counter-narrative rapidly dropping away, while a ‘long tail’ of digital hate persisted for months after the bombing. The initial visibility of counter-narrative tweets also created new opportunities for the far-right to amplify Islamophobia as they exploited the comments of these posts to circulate their own narratives. What #stopIslam revealed, in other words, was a complex interplay of appropriation and re-appropriation by those seeking to circulate and contest Islamophobia.

As with wider debates about the relationship between social media and racism, therefore, our pilot did not provide easy answers and underscored the need for further research about the conditions that can enable digital contestations of hate to gain purchase. Our findings motivated us to design the more expansive project, #ContestingIslamophobia, which covered a

wider range of complex events, to encompass shifting cultural contexts that were mediated in different ways as Twitter's socio-political role itself evolved. To this end, we asked: what are the dynamics of online counter-narratives against Islamophobia and what political potentials and/or limitations do they offer for mediated activism? This overarching question was broken down into the following more specific objectives:

1. To examine the construction and contestation of representations of Islam on Twitter, following three major political incidents.
2. To identify the actors operating in these discursive events and the interactions between them with particular attention to transnational dynamics and examples of appropriation.
3. To analyse the symbiotic relationship between Twitter and the mainstream media.
4. To interview significant actors in the debates (activists, journalists, etc.) and their strategies and role in disseminating related content.
5. To develop a conceptual and methodological framework for assessing the political significance of tensions between counter-publics and digital technologies.
6. To assist anti-racist groups in the development of strategies for both analysing and combating online hate speech.

This book, *Contesting hate*, is an attempt to develop a more sustained response to the question(s) that underpinned our research, by drawing on the comparative, longitudinal datasets from *#ContestingIslamophobia*. The heart of this data is a corpus of 3,852,811 tweets related to Christchurch, Brexit and COVID-19, which we analyse using a range of interdisciplinary methods.

Our research used a combination of digital methods to identify keywords and map user-networks; quantitative content analysis to examine tweet content; and in-depth qualitative analysis of the content and debates surrounding our data. These methods enabled us to identify the key actors and networks involved with different narratives, and foreground successful (and less successful) tactics for contesting Islamophobia. Our analysis also draws upon data from fifteen interviews with Twitter activists, journalists and other users, alongside an examination of the way that narratives related to prominent hashtags in our datasets were taken up as stories in print media.

Our choice of the three events that ultimately oriented our data-gathering was, at least in part, guided by the pilot study, which suggested that three characteristics were especially significant for grasping the distinctive ways Twitter mediated Islamophobia in the wake of *#stopIslam*. In brief, the three characteristics that animated our pilot analysis were the entanglement of Islamophobic narratives with the counter-narratives that sought to combat them; the transnational dynamics of these narratives; and flows

of information between Twitter, other social media platforms, print and broadcast media. Our final case studies were selected because they enabled deeper understanding of these characteristics and their socio-political implications.

Firstly, the pilot elucidated the material-semiotic entanglement between anti-Islamophobic counter-narratives and the hate speech they were seeking to contest, i.e. these narratives were impossible to separate from one another at the level of meaning, in technical terms, and in terms of user relations.

Some of the most prominent features of Twitter that we identified users as engaging with during the pilot were hashtags and quote-tweets, each of which had characteristics that lent themselves to rapid narrative formation. The use of the hashtag #stopIslam, for instance, allowed a community of far-right actors to coalesce rapidly to spread Islamophobic hate speech and disinformation. In contrast, the openness of hashtags and Twitter's policy of listing trending hashtags prominently on its user interface, meant that an even larger community of users became aware of #stopIslam's existence and used the tactic of hashtag 'hijacking' to contest its original meaning (resonating with Jackson and Foucault Welles' account of #myNYPD). These affordances meant that counter-narratives did not just have a semantic relationship to the hate speech that they were countering, but that this relationship was also materialised on the screen due to the features of the platform. In addition, these entanglements of matter and meaning also implicated users as new relationships emerged between individuals and communities who were committed to divergent political ideals.

The second characteristic foregrounded by the pilot were the transnational dynamics of (counter-)narratives, which often manifested as a politics of appropriation wherein events in one national context were utilised by users from another context for political point-scoring. In the context of our case studies, events in Europe were often leveraged to support far-right anti-immigration agendas in the United States (with Muslims routinely cast as racialised migrants, regardless of their nationality and citizenship status). The Brussels bombings themselves, for instance, were evoked by Trump supporters in the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections to argue for the importance of his anti-immigration agenda. What emerged, in other words, were novel articulations of Islamophobia wherein the affordances of Twitter in conjunction with prominent 'trigger events' worked to consolidate transnational far-right narratives.

A third notable feature that we identified were flows of content between Twitter and the 'mainstream' media, by which we mean more established press and broadcasting institutions. In the UK, for instance, narratives originating on Twitter were regularly recast as news stories in their own right. As noted previously, the counter-narrative against #stopIslam, for

example, was reported by a number of mainstream news institutions. Conversely, we regularly saw users citing mainstream media as evidence to support xenophobic narratives: from statistics about immigration, to podcast interviews with Members of Parliament that were lauded for ‘speaking the truth’ about who was responsible for the spread of COVID-19 in the UK (see [Chapter 4](#)). Echoing allied research on tactical uses of Twitter by the far-right (e.g. Marwick and Lewis, 2016; [Siapera, 2019](#)), there was also evidence of flows of information between Twitter and other social media platforms, with users sharing stories and deploying tactics associated with extreme web fora.

Building on the pilot, a hypothesis of our subsequent research was that examining and unpacking the three characteristics we had identified during our pilot would enable us to understand the situated role of Twitter within wider assemblages of racialised Islamophobia. It was this conviction that drove the design of our larger project and our decision to focus on events that possessed similar attributes to the relations we uncovered in relation to #stopIslam. Rather than starting with specific hashtags, therefore, we instead used these multifaceted events as the starting point of analysis in order to develop a more holistic sense of the types of discursive formations and user-networks that were coalescing around trigger events. Hashtags were part of this analysis, but were only selected for further study after examining our broader datasets for evidence of how users were using them to frame events.⁸

The decision to focus on events rather than hashtags was in the wake of growing awareness in digital sociology about the limits of research that focuses on platform vernaculars, without considering wider cultural contexts that frame the language used on these platforms. [Stefania Vicari and Danny Kirby \(2023\)](#), for example, highlight the risks in predetermining which keywords or hashtags will capture how issues are mediated. Prior to beginning research, they suggest, it is important to determine the culturally specific terminology that is circulating about a topic, beyond platforms themselves. This approach echoes our own research design. As we outline in the [next chapter](#), to develop event-specific search queries we engaged with specialist advisory boards to discuss keywords that were circulating in particular political communities, rather than orienting our research around hashtags we had already identified as being popular on Twitter itself. This decision offered what Noortje [Marres \(2015\)](#) describes as an ‘affirmative’ approach to social media analysis that foregrounds the role of platforms’ socio-technical features in mediating – or reformatting – social issues, rather than selecting hashtags that have already formatted debates in particular ways.

Thus, in our pilot study we decided in advance to focus on #stopIslam, a hashtag that had already been formatted as a debate with clear contours (consisting of Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives). In contrast, our larger project focused on trigger events without predetermining which hashtags or debates would gain prominence. This more expansive approach enabled us to identify emerging topic clusters and hashtags, to give a clearer sense of the way that Twitter was mediating events. The exception to this approach was #stopIslam itself, which – for the purpose of comparison with the pilot – we still gathered data about, across our three events.

When developing our funding proposal we considered a variety of possible case studies (e.g. the London Bridge attacks) but disregarded them because they lacked one or more of the characteristics that we had identified as salient for further analysis. We ultimately decided that the project would focus on Brexit and the Christchurch attacks, due to possessing the characteristics we were concerned with, but also offering a point of comparison between how Islamist and white supremacist events were framed and engaged with. The proposal also specified that we would decide upon a third case once initial research had begun and we had gained a sense of which other, more recent, events shared these traits. We selected COVID-19 in July 2020 after discovering the spread of the virus was being appropriated in support of Islamophobic narratives that were combated by persistent counter-narratives, had notable transnational dynamics, and were engaged with in mainstream media outlets (see [Giraud et al. \[2025\]](#) for more detail).

Overall, as we unpack our findings throughout this book, we reveal the contrasting ways that Islamophobia is articulated in relation to different trigger events, foregrounding how it is mobilised in the context of white supremacy, Hindu nationalism and polarising ‘culture wars’ debates. We also identify limits and potentials in varied attempts to contest Islamophobia: ranging from hashtag campaigns such as #helloworldbrother and counter-narratives by Muslim-led non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to (sometimes counter-productive) attempts by would-be allies to call out racism and political hypocrisy. In the process, we develop an interdisciplinary approach, that works across media studies, computer science, sociology and cultural theory, to set out a new theoretical and methodological framework for understanding digital hate and attempts to contest it.

In addition to deepening understanding of counter-narratives themselves, therefore, *Contesting hate* extends understanding of the challenges and potentials of interdisciplinary digital research for researching complex social issues such as Islamophobia. The book is animated by a series of questions about how to do interdisciplinary digital research, in a context

where social media platforms are increasingly opaque and accessibility to data is increasingly constrained, as typified by the evolution of Twitter itself. As noted previously, despite Twitter's relatively small user-base, over the past decade it has had an outsized influence in both public and scholarly imaginaries, due to its widespread use by journalists, politicians, activists, and academics (with users often referred to as the 'commentariat'). Debates about whether Twitter's influence has been exaggerated abound, but, as our own interview data and engagements with NGO stakeholders underline, for all of its problems, activists continue to assert its importance as a political tool. In light of the platform's (apparent) decline, in the wake of its purchase by Musk, it is an important moment to step back and offer a long view to ask what lessons can be learned for the future of mediated activism.

The [next chapter](#) provides more in-depth methodological explanation of our research design and datasets, against the backdrop of wider debates about the challenges of interdisciplinary research. At this juncture, however, we do want to briefly highlight two methodological points that help to clarify our general approach in the book as a whole. Firstly, when discussing individual accounts or tweets, we endeavour to describe users in accordance with how they self-identify and describe themselves (either in their posts, or more commonly, via information on their user bios). In practice, this means that while we often describe tweets as containing – for instance – white supremacist or left-wing content, we avoid describing users in these terms unless they explicitly label themselves as such. Likewise, we avoid making assumptions about users' religious or cultural identity unless they make this explicit. We also recognise that labels such as 'far-right' or 'leftist' can cover a range of different perspectives and so aim to be as precise as possible in situating the narratives we engage with in relation to specific political constellations rather than generalising. In part, our labelling choices were ethical decisions but our approach was also in recognition of the way that users can sometimes resist neat categorisation along political lines.

Another decision that shapes how we present our findings relates to questions of anonymity. Some digital research historically – and in some fields continues to – treated social media data as public through virtue of being shared online, often quoting social media posts in full or even including usernames. More recent ethical guidance, however, warns against assuming that social media posts are publicly available to gather, analyse and discuss in publications ([Bonilla and Rosa, 2015](#); [Townsend and Wallace, 2016](#); [franzke et al., 2019](#)). Even if platform terms and conditions make clear that users' posts are public and should be treated as such, this does not mean that individuals fully understand the ramifications of these policies ([Conley, 2021](#)). Treating social media posts as public property to quote verbatim if

this is permitted by platforms is also ethically dubious, due to delegating ethical responsibility to commercial actors who often have vested interests in the circulation of data (Giraud and Wright, 2024). Relying on platform terms and conditions, in other words, risks circumventing researchers' own responsibilities to reflect on the ethics of storing, documenting and potentially amplifying users' posts.

At the same time, the volume of posts in large datasets makes it impractical – if not impossible – to seek formal consent from every user whose data might contribute to published analysis (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). In addition, researchers must grapple with a competing set of ethical imperatives, regarding the importance of holding influential public figures to account when they are using social media to further their political aims. In this book, therefore, we navigate social media ethics by adhering to what has now become standard practice in protecting the identity of individual users. We do not share usernames related to the posts that we draw upon and we paraphrase – rather than directly quote – full tweets, or use extracts that cannot easily be located through search engines. At the same time, we do name especially prominent users whose fame derives from pre-existing public roles, such as politicians and journalists. One of the most difficult questions we had was whether to treat any user who had a blue tick (i.e. a verified account) at the point when we gathered data, as a figure in the public interest.⁹ We ultimately decided against this, in light of the complexities of context collapse wherein even though users might have a blue tick their imagined audience might not be academic researchers. We also had concerns about further amplifying the accounts of particular users who had gained celebrity on Twitter for circulating extremist content and were highly visible in our datasets but were not otherwise well-known.

Now we have established the broad contours of the academic debates that have informed our work, and provided a brief sketch of the research that underpins the book as a whole, we will provide a brief overview of the specific ways our argument unfold throughout the book.

Part III: structure of the book

Chapter 2 contextualises how our research was produced, via a discussion of the methodological challenges that we faced over the course of the project. These challenges are set against the backdrop of wider debates about methods and ethics within social media research. Disciplines such as STS and fields such as critical data studies, for instance, have warned that data gathered from commercial platforms do not offer neutral, transparent insight into sociological phenomena (Marres, 2017; Milan and Tréré, 2019;

D'Ignazio and Klein, 2023). Rather than using data to draw positivist conclusions about society, therefore, a more complex and critical approach is needed, which situates social media data – and the platform that generates them – in relation to their co-constitutive social, cultural and political contexts. A situated approach is especially important when studying issues such as of racism, in order to avoid perpetuating exclusions and reinforcing prejudices that are sometimes embedded into analytic techniques and tools for processing or analysing data (Nikunen, 2021).

To capture the complexity of our methodological approach, in the chapter we focus on three ‘frictions’ (or tensions) experienced through the research process: interdisciplinary frictions, platform frictions and data frictions, which are illustrated with reference to concrete examples from our project. Given the shifting technical landscape of platforms and their interaction with wider media ecologies, as well as changing political economic contexts and user interactions, social media research is a constant challenge. Throughout the course of the project we were forced to negotiate ethical dilemmas related to platform–researcher relations, difficulties pertaining to methodological design and principles – how best to ensure transparency and reproducibility, for example – and the challenges of interdisciplinary work. Recognising the complexity of interdisciplinary social media research, we argue, is important not just because it offers a means of situating and contextualising the research to develop more reflexive approaches. In addition, understanding platform affordances not as rigid technical characteristics but emergent properties, has profound effects for how hate speech is conceptualised, categorised and ultimately contested. Analysing Twitter in relation to these changing contexts thus allows us build up a more nuanced picture of how we conceive of its role in mediating hate.

After establishing the complexity of platforms, the [next chapter](#) moves to the second element of our analysis: events. [Chapter 3](#) examines the role of key ‘trigger’ events in constructing a discourse about Islam and Muslims. As we describe in the chapter, our selected events had different temporal qualities in themselves. For instance, the triggers we engage with include a singular event (the Christchurch terrorist attacks) with unfolding repercussions; a rolling news story (the COVID-19 pandemic) and a build-up to two significant forecast events relating to Brexit (the UK general election 2019, and the EU exit date, 31 January 2020). However, we also consider how each event played out over specific periods of time (six weeks per event).

The chapter examines how the structure of these events engages users in specific ways. Focusing predominantly on quantitative data, analysed through manual content analysis, we demonstrate event-specific patterns in the articulation and contestation of Islamophobia. By focusing on specific

variables such as key actors' affiliations, topics, locations and position on Islam/Muslims, we were able to show how both Islamophobic hate speech and solidarities with Muslims took shape across time and in particular cultural contexts. What emerges through our analysis is the distinctive affective dynamics of each event, in relation to the user interactions generated by the events' contrasting temporalities. The singularity of Christchurch, for example, generated the largest set of anti-Islamophobic tweets in our sample as people responded with empathy, but positive counter-narratives against hate dissipated over time. In contrast, our initial sample of COVID-19 data illustrated how events were appropriated by various interest groups to circulate Islamophobic mis/disinformation to suggest that Muslims were transgressing rules, and responsible for contagion. However, later COVID-19 samples showed that the level of support or hate towards Muslims was sometimes dependent on lower-level incidents related to the larger events, that gained traction at any given moment, and which users were able to capitalise upon. Similar patterns were observed across all datasets and so our findings illustrate the kind of narratives enabled by the affective dynamics of specific events. As such, the chapter is the first step in our argument that to understand the circulation and contestation of hate speech requires an examination of the relationship between events, their temporalities, users and platforms, as opposed to an analysis of social media platforms or content in isolation.

Chapter 4 builds on the previous chapter by examining the potentials and limitations of counter-narratives against Islamophobia on Twitter in more depth. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, we compare and contrast the type of narratives – and the argumentation about Islam and Muslims – that circulated in relation to the three trigger events over time. Through this comparative approach, we demonstrate the complexity and entanglement of counter-narratives with the narratives they seek to challenge. Our findings initially appeared to demonstrate that counter-narratives exist on a spectrum from more expedient acts of counter-speech to examples of more sustainable activism that related to specific events. This spectrum ranged, for instance, from individual criticisms of Islamophobic statements by politicians in relation to Brexit, to active, sustained information campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, however, our initial neat impression of a spectrum of counter-narratives was troubled through our triangulation of methods, which allowed for the identification of more nuanced patterns. In contrasting findings from computational, quantitative and qualitative analysis we found that responses were complicated by transnational relations, narrative shifts over time and through the evolving affordances of Twitter. Adopting a longitudinal and comparative perspective allowed us to identify the demise and uptake of particular tactics for

contesting hate, as well as point to the conditions in which these tactics could be adapted so that counter-narratives could both emerge and be sustained.

Chapter 5 develops our analysis of the affective dynamics of counter-narratives outlined in Chapter 4, by showing how the socio-technical landscape of Twitter is constituted by the users themselves. Focusing on the actors, or key users, in our datasets, we explore their engagement and networks to understand how narratives are enabled and contested. We develop our arguments through an examination of Twitter content in conjunction with network analysis and interviews with key activists who engaged with and produced social media content. This combination of methods offers a sense of the participants in circulating and contesting hate, their political arguments, geographical distribution and network dynamics. The data shows a shift in the political and geographical distribution of users over time but also distinctive transnational dynamics in the appropriation of international events for local agendas. Combined with an analysis of biographies, the network analysis reveals the key nodes in these debates who often provide a connective function for different groups of users.

Building on Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, we demonstrate the shifting dynamics of networks that encompass both loosely connected, ephemeral clusters of users and more tightly knit collectives invested in mediated activism (whatever their politics). What is also revealed is the extent to which solidarity networks were inclusive or exclusive particularly in relation to the self-representation of Muslims. Or, put differently, whether our findings supported existing literature that has argued for the value of social media in general – and Twitter in particular – in supporting subaltern counter-publics to draw attention to their own narratives. Interviews with activists, journalists and academics who regularly participated in debates on Twitter confirm the value of social media for activism, but also the ambivalent and contradictory emotions felt by operating in a toxic environment. These emotions were brought into sharp relief due to our interviews taking place during a period of change, with the acquisition of the platform by 'free speech' advocate or, framed more critically, enabler of far-right discourse, Elon Musk. The full ramifications of Musk's takeover, however, had not yet unfolded at the time of the interviews. As such, interviewees still felt that Twitter enabled them to carry out a key part of their anti-racist work, which were accompanied with very specific expectations and responsibilities about how they should approach this work. In engaging with users themselves, and underlining their ongoing hopes, the chapter offers an important counterpoint to academic research that dismisses social media entirely as being unproductive for activists.

The final chapter concludes the book, situating our findings within dramatic shifts in the media landscape in order to identify pathways for

future research into the dynamics of digital hate and counter-narratives. We do this by reflecting on the transformation of the platform from Twitter to X and the difficult environment this has created for researchers and activists. Over the past decade and a half, a huge body of work has been produced about Twitter, partly due to the platform's (comparative) accessibility. Yet the decline in this openness, combined with X's growing reputation as a platform that monetises hate, has led to tensions for both users and researchers.

Alongside a reflection on our sociological and methodological approach, our focus in this chapter is to interrogate the implications of the decline of a platform that has been integral to both digital activism and to academic research. Drawing on changes we have witnessed through the period of our own project, we reflect on how shifts in platform-user relations are entangled with changes in ownership, political economy and governance structures that directly impact upon academic research. Platform governance has become an increasing focus for scholars in a context where research has shifted from seeing Twitter as an unmediated source of sociological data that reveals public sentiment, to questioning whether these platforms can be perceived as at all useful in their commercial form (Siapera, 2024).

Situating our findings within wider debates about governance and the renewal of the far-right enables us to revisit our research question on the potentials and limitations of platforms such as Twitter (or X in its current iteration), as a space for counter-public resistance to Islamophobia. Our research ultimately elucidates the difficulty of answering our original question in any straightforward way, as the visibility and durability of counter-narratives was highly situated and context-specific across our datasets. To understand the dynamics and potentials of counter-narratives, therefore, it is inadequate to solely focus on data (particularly big data) or the characteristics of platforms. Our analysis allows us to offer a speculative way forward to a more dynamic understanding of how user-platform relations are entangled with events in an ever-evolving media landscape. Ultimately, we argue that sustained counter-narratives are only able to flourish when users develop collective responses to events, which resonate with the affordances of a platform at a particular moment.

Conclusion

While this is a book about the role of social media in circulating and contesting hate, we are cognisant of the risks of overstating this role, particularly in relation to the platform – Twitter – that is central to our

analysis. Twitter's size and user demographics mean that conflating Twitter with 'the public' is deeply problematic and has often meant its political role has been over-stated in comparison with other platforms (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). However, it is precisely because of Twitter's role as a node between far-right media ecologies, journalists working in legacy media and politicians that it has historically been such an important platform to study. Even if Twitter is not representative of 'the public' in practice, the fact that far-right movements, journalists and activists have treated it as though it *is* somehow representative of public opinion has had performative consequences that require interrogation. With the socio-political role of Twitter now in flux, it is especially timely to look back and take a longitudinal view.

What our corpus of qualitative and quantitative social media data, alongside interviews with activists, underlines is the importance of moving beyond debates about whether social media do or don't support social justice movements, or whether they can or cannot sustain solidarity activism. Instead, we centralise the relationships *between* hate speech and attempts to contest it. In better understanding these relationships, we argue, it is possible to understand both what makes hate speech and digital racism so enduring and the conditions that enable effective counter-narratives for contesting hate.

Our findings thus resist easy answers about the capacity of counter-narratives to contest Islamophobia. Instead, the book elucidates how the potentials of counter-narratives emerge at the interface of cultural events, user activities and the shifting affordances of social media platforms. To grasp how hate speech circulates and can be contested, what is needed, we argue, is a situated understanding of three distinctive elements: events themselves, user-engagement and platform affordances. It is, we suggest, through the entanglement of these three elements that the potentials and constraints of counter-narratives emerge. Overall, our approach complicates any sense that digital hate is something that can be dealt with straightforwardly via platform moderation or automation, due to being a product of more complex socio-technical relationships. At the same time, our findings underline that social media can retain a distinctive role in intensifying and networking both hate speech itself and resistance to it. When engaging in research about the socio-political role of social media, therefore, it is vital to depart from narrow debates about whether platforms do or do not spread digital racism or support social movements, to examine more complex relationships between events, users and platforms.

Notes

- 1 We would like to thank the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant AH/T004460/1) and British Academy/Leverhulme Trust small grant scheme (SG161680) for funding the projects referenced in this book.
- 2 For the sake of simplicity, we are defining ‘larger’ platforms in line with the European Commission’s current list of ‘very large platforms and search engines’. This means that Twitter/X is considered a ‘very large’ platform; see <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/list-designated-vlops-and-vloses>
- 3 We define disinformation as deliberately (as opposed to inadvertently) misleading content (Marwick, 2018).
- 4 And more recently advisor to Donald Trump. It is argued that his management of X has seen it develop into a far-right enabler with Musk as a key actor.
- 5 The character limit was raised from 140 characters to 280 in 2017.
- 6 Meanwhile, the current Labour government have since settled on what some critics argue is a more diluted term: ‘anti-Muslim hostility’, (March 2026). <https://mcb.org.uk/government-proposed-anti-muslim-hostility-definition/>.
- 7 The exception to this is when we adopt a more fine-grained analysis of different groups involved in spreading particular narratives via our quantitative content analysis (see Chapters 3 and 5 in particular), in order to offer a precise sense of who participated in particular narratives and how these users identified.
- 8 See Marres (2015) for a persuasive argument for the value of moving beyond hashtags in understanding the mediation of events.
- 9 The blue tick scheme has been subject to criticism in the wake of Musk’s takeover of Twitter, as X enables users to purchase verification rather than the former process of applying for it (which ensured that public figures were who they claimed to be). Thus, not everyone who currently has a blue tick is currently a user in the public sphere.

Platform politics: big data, bigger challenges?

As outlined in the introduction, our focus in the book is on understanding how the interactions between social media platforms, events and users create a distinctive set of socio-technical relationships that shape the circulation and contestation of Islamophobia. This chapter focuses on the first of these key elements: *platforms*. In other words, here we reflect on the role of Twitter, the social media platform that we primarily gathered data from, as a mediator in social processes of circulating and contesting hate. To explain how we approached researching Twitter the chapter initially sets out our methodology, outlining our rationale behind our case studies, how we gathered data to research them and the steps we took to analyse this data.

However, rather than solely providing methodological details, in the second half of the chapter we complicate any sense of a neat methods narrative by outlining three ‘frictions’ that occurred during the course of the research: interdisciplinary frictions, platform frictions and data frictions. Evoking Anna Tsing (2005), what we mean by frictions in this context are challenges that arise when universalising norms, practices and assumptions (here related to information technologies and methods used to analyse them) bump up against local specificities (such as the situated knowledge of team members, technical problems due to changing social contexts and the particularities of case studies). To reconstruct frictions encountered during the research process, throughout the chapter we draw on meeting records and (challenging) email exchanges, as well as our methods/findings themselves. In explaining how we negotiated these frictions the chapter builds up a picture of how we conceive of Twitter’s role in mediating hate.

In our explanation of the first, and most comprehensive, set of challenges, ‘interdisciplinary frictions’, we outline how our own disciplinary assumptions needed to be negotiated to collaborate with one another: from intra-team differences about what ‘coding’ meant, to the challenge of computer scientists being forced to act as ‘translators’ for big data. This part of the chapter, in other words, explains how team members who were ‘non-experts’ in social media analysis – who came from media studies, sociology

and critical theory – found ways of working collaboratively with computer scientists in our team. These discussions are illuminated through examples of issues we encountered when identifying patterns in large COVID-19 datasets that only partially triangulated with qualitative findings about prominent tweets and users. We also explain the challenges of combining computational analysis (to organise and visualise large datasets) with social science methods, such as textual analysis of tweets. Through providing an accessible overview of this iterative process of learning together, we show how members of the research team were enabled to navigate their initial confusion and make sense of the relationships between datasets.

The next section of the chapter focuses on ‘platform frictions’. Here, we offer insight into some of the difficulties of gathering social media data, when the guidelines, processes and restrictions imposed by commercial platforms are constantly changing. These debates are especially timely in the wake of Twitter making its data less accessible for academic research after its purchase by Elon Musk and being rebranded as X. Though specific to the platform, these changes elucidate wider challenges and vulnerabilities when relying on less-than-transparent commercial entities for research (see [Chapter 6](#)). We offer a particular focus on the issues created by not fully knowing the quality of datasets until we had paid for them and frustrations in the wake of being forced to change how we accessed data halfway through the project.

Finally, we close the chapter with a discussion of ‘data frictions’, which charts how we developed interdisciplinary ways of working, acquiring datasets that – from a social science perspective – seemed vast.¹ Again, drawing on concrete examples from our case studies, this part of the chapter explains how seemingly mundane technical decisions – related to file types, software and what to do about bots – can have huge ramifications for how data is made sense of.

Rather than mere technical concerns, we show throughout the chapter how methodological frictions can be used to shed light on the complexity of platforms. This complexity, we argue, is important, because it underlines that platform affordances are not rigid technical characteristics but emergent properties. As we elucidate in subsequent chapters, this understanding has profound effects for how hate speech is conceptualised, categorised and ultimately contested. Before examining the frictions that we encountered during the project, however, we sketch out the type of data we gathered and how we gathered it, before adopting an in-depth focus on frictions that informed these processes. Throughout these discussions, we contextualise our project in relation to wider debates about using data analytics to research complex social issues, due to the risk of these techniques sliding into ‘white methods’ that are inadequate for researching topics such as xenophobia, racism and racialisation ([Nikunen, 2021](#); [Giraud *et al.*, 2025](#)).

Gathering data about our case studies

Deciding our search terms

As outlined in the introduction, we combined computational, quantitative and qualitative methods to develop and analyse datasets from Twitter. In addition, we undertook a smaller analysis of how stories originating on Twitter had been taken up by legacy media and conducted a series of interviews with prominent users who participated in counter-narratives. While we discuss the interviews and media analysis in more depth within subsequent chapters, here we focus primarily on the challenges of developing datasets from Twitter.

The first stage of the data gathering process involved developing a set of search terms to locate tweets relevant to our project, which initially included more general terminology related to Islam (Islam, Muslim, mosque). We then refined our list of search terms after discussion with our stakeholder committee, which contained members of NGOs who were conducting research into media representation of Muslims as well as academics working on allied topics such as Islamophobia, digital racism, white supremacism and activism. Following advisory board discussions, we added alternative spellings that are frequently used by the far-right, such as ‘religion of peace’ and terms such as ‘Moslem’ (the outdated spelling of Muslim). These more general keywords related to Islam were combined with event-specific terminology, to capture data relevant to our case studies (Table 2.1). We also requested tweets including two prominent hashtags that we identified as being used to circulate Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives: #hellowbrother (related to the Christchurch attacks) and #Tablighijamat/#Tablighijamaat (related to COVID-19). Alongside these more event-specific keywords, as noted in the [previous chapter](#), we also requested data related to #stopIslam to see if the hashtag was still being utilised (and, if so, in what ways).

Table 2.1 List of search terms

Core search terms: Islam* OR Muslim* OR Moslem* OR ‘Religion of Peace’ OR mosque

AND

Event-specific terms: Brexit; Christchurch OR New Zealand AND terrorist OR terrorism; Coronavirus OR Covid; Eid

Hashtags: Christchurch OR New Zealand AND #Hellowbrother; Coronavirus OR Covid and #Tablighijamat OR #Tablighijamaat; #stopIslam

We purchased a data license for six weeks of tweets for each event directly from Twitter, dividing the time periods into date ranges that captured a sense of the longitudinal significance of the narratives, rather than gathering data in entire six-week blocks. For Christchurch, we requested data from the month following the attacks, plus an additional two weeks of data taken at the three- and six-month anniversaries of the attacks. For COVID-19, we gathered a month of data from the peak of the pandemic and a week of data after both Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha, celebrated on the last day of the Hajj. In relation to Brexit, we sampled the three-week period surrounding the 2019 UK general election and three weeks surrounding the official Brexit date (31 January 2020). The purpose of using varying date ranges was to gain insight into what happened after short-lived trending topics had peaked and whether the initial user networks around them had evolved. In total, our queries generated 3,772,811 tweets across all three events (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Sample of tweets generated by keywords

Event	Date ranges	No. of tweets	Total no. of tweets	Quantitative sample
Brexit	28 November to 19 December 2019	26,473 16,061	42,534	1000 1000
	17 January to 7 February 2020			
Christchurch terror attack	15 March to 15 April 2019	3,099,138 8072	3,110,080	1000 500
	15–21 June 2019	2,870		500
	15–21 September 2019			
	As above	25,084		1000
Coronavirus	19 March to 19 April 2020	433,574 119,700	581,371	1000 500
	19–25 May 2020	28,097		500
	29 July to 4 August 2020			
	As above	13,742		1000
#Tablighijamat/ #Tablighijamaat	As above	13,742	13,742	1000
Total			3,772,811	8000

The lead computer scientist in our team, de Quincey, then worked with two research associates, Matthew Burke and Benjamin Jolley, to transform the files provided to us by Twitter into more easily legible formats for social scientific research (spreadsheets, charts, word clouds, network diagrams; see [Figure 2.1](#)).

This process involved writing Python code, in Jupyter Notebooks, to reformat the data and apply an analytical process that identified features including: which tweets had the highest number of retweets and shares; commonly used words, emojis, collocations (words that frequently occurred together) and hashtags; biographical details about users; and most active users in the datasets. Primarily, the results of this analysis were exported as Excel files. In addition, Jolley created a series of retweet/quote-tweet network diagrams, which revealed which users had engaged with one another during each event, developing bespoke code based on [Asturiano's \(2022\)](#) force graphs application.

The Excel files also formed the basis for our second core method: quantitative content analysis that was conducted by one team member, Richardson, for consistency. These files included the text of tweets we purchased, contextual detail gathered from the computational analysis, and links to the original tweets. As depicted in [Table 2.2](#), a sample of these tweets (8000 in total) was selected for further manual analysis. As we were concerned with the most prominent narratives related to each event, the quantitative sample consisted of the posts with the highest number of retweets from each dataset (coding 1000 from our larger datasets and 500 from our smaller datasets).² These posts were then categorised according to subject matter, using a coding schedule (see [Appendix 1](#)). In addition to generating more nuanced information about recurring themes, the quantitative coding enabled us to make broader assessments about whether tweets contained Islamophobic content or offered counter-narratives. As such, this element of the analysis provided a sense of how the ratio between hate speech and attempts to contest it varied across our datasets (see [Chapter 3](#) for more detail).

Our approach to coding necessitated a slight reduction in sample size for one of the hashtags: #Tablighijamat/#Tablighijamaat. To ensure that we were coding tweets consistently and were not missing linguistic nuances, we focused on English-language tweets. During the process of examining this hashtag, however, we found that there were only 854 *original* tweets in English. Thus, although we examined additional retweets in the file (up to 1000), for the sake of consistency they were not included in statistics about the final coding sample. Any percentages that we provide about the quantitative analysis, therefore, are based on the 854 English-language tweets that we coded, rather than the full sample of 1000.

Documents > General > Ben's uploads > christchurch_analysis > all



optimised_nodes
September 20, 2021



contextual_collocated...
September 20, 2021



contextual_collocated...
September 20, 2021



frequency_collocation...
September 20, 2021



frequency_collocation...
September 20, 2021



frequency_hashtag.csv
September 20, 2021



frequency_language.csv
September 20, 2021



frequency_location.csv
September 20, 2021



network_edges.csv
September 20, 2021



network_nodes.csv
September 20, 2021



timeline-daily.csv
September 20, 2021



timeline-daily-graph.pdf
September 20, 2021



timeline-hourly.csv
September 20, 2021



timeline-hourly-graph...
September 20, 2021



top_retweets.csv
September 20, 2021



top_retweets.xlsx
May 25



top_users_via_followe...
May 25



top_users_via_retweet...
May 25



top_users_via_tweet...
May 25



tweet_stats.txt
September 20, 2021



word_cloud.png
September 20, 2021



word_frequency_in_bi...
September 20, 2021



word_frequency_in_tw...
September 20, 2021

Figure 2.1 File types generated after data processing

The final step consisted of qualitative analysis of a still smaller sample of tweets from each dataset. In this stage of analysis, we selected the fifty most retweeted posts from each of the datasets (500 in total) and analysed both the original posts and associated comment threads in depth, paying close attention to semantic meaning, language use and interactions between users. Again, the Excel files played a key role in this process, as we were able to use hyperlinks embedded in the files to view each tweet in context and to grasp its co-constitutive relations with wider narratives and user interactions. This process was conducted by three team members (Poole, Giraud, Richardson) who met at regular intervals to ensure consistency between how tweets were being interpreted.

As argued by [Sharma and Brooker \(2016\)](#), outlined in the introductory chapter, digital racism is often difficult to detect as – akin to the affordances of social media platforms – it is relational. Racism, in other words, cannot always be detected by keywords alone, but often assumes meaning via its relation to images, other tweets and wider cultural discourses. Through allowing us to view tweets in context, the qualitative stage of analysis proved particularly important in gaining a sense of the relations that gave individual tweets meaning. On a basic level, for example, it became easier to determine whether a tweet was sarcastic, or grasp the multimodal connotations created by text and images in tweets interacting. This stage of analysis was also invaluable for detecting more subtle processes of racialisation and Othering, such as when communities of users began to use ‘social distancing’ to stigmatise minoritised people in the UK and India during the COVID-19 pandemic. These trends often only became apparent upon examining how users interacted with tweets and understanding how text associated with individual tweets was articulated in relation to broader discourses.

The above account of our data, we hope, offers a clear narrative about what we gathered, how we gathered it and our reasons for doing so. There is, however, a risk in constructing this narrative, in that it could give the impression of a straightforward, neutral and transparent process. This is an especial risk in relation to Twitter datasets, as portraying an overly neat process of data-gathering neglects Twitter’s complex role in mediating data: not just at the level of the narratives contained within this data, but in terms of the challenges of accessing and reconstructing these narratives. In the second half of the chapter, therefore, we dwell on three frictions we encountered that – we hope – trouble any conception of Twitter as a neutral repository of data that can be straightforwardly gathered and analysed. The purpose in highlighting these frictions is not just to offer a more complex methodological discussion, but because adding this layer of complexity is important in conveying the potentials and limitations of attempts to contest Islamophobia on platforms such as Twitter.

Interdisciplinary frictions

Terminology and design

Notes from the first formal meeting for our pilot project, Autumn 2016:

Liz (primary investigator): after you've gathered the #stopIslam data from Twitter and analysed it, we'll code it for meaning.

[Ed (co-investigator) and Mohammed (research associate) look at each other in confusion.]

Ed: I'm not sure I understand what you mean by doing coding after gathering data, and I'm also not sure if you'd be able to develop code to find the sorts of meanings you're interested in ...

[Liz and Eva (co-investigator) also look at each other in confusion.]

Eva: Oh! We don't mean coding as in writing computer code, we mean coding as a technique of media analysis!

Ed: Ah, so more like labelling?

The above exchange crystallises the types of misunderstanding that sometimes arose during our project meetings. While interdisciplinarity is often valorised – at least on the surface (as we describe below, institutional mechanisms to support this sort of research often lag behind ideals) – everyday exchanges like this elucidate tensions that often emerge when bringing disciplines together, and the work that is necessary to navigate these tensions. Coding offers a simple example of everyday confusion: in computer science, coding relates to computer programming whereas in media sociology coding refers to a quantitative process of data labelling that is usually conducted manually.

Confusion around the meaning of 'coding', of course, was an issue that could be addressed easily: despite having a specialised meaning in media studies contexts, the computer science definition of coding is well-understood by non-specialists. Thus, after clarifying what we meant in the first meeting, our initial confusion did not cause fundamental issues in project planning related to who would be doing what and which methods would be used when. Other terminology, in contrast, offered more profound challenges and, as our project developed, we began to organically develop a shorthand of key terms and concepts to maintain shared coordinates within the team. However, while our interdisciplinary shorthand was useful for practical purposes, it generated new challenges as it did not always reflect the evolution of this terminology within our individual disciplines.

For instance, we used the term 'big data' repeatedly, owing to its routine use in both computer science and social science where, unlike coding, it evokes broadly similar ideas. In the early 2000s, there were calls by prominent sociologists for the field to embrace big datasets gathered by private institutions in order to develop new ways of knowing the social ([Savage and](#)

Burrows, 2007). Even though more hyperbolic claims about big data were tempered over the next decade, arguments that the social sciences needed to incorporate data analytics only increased (Halford and Savage, 2017). At the same time, social media companies – particularly Twitter – were seen as prime institutions from which to acquire these large datasets, with social scientists foregrounding the value of engaging with techniques from computer science in order to do so, due to their ‘capacity to apprehend Big Data and analyse network structures, and to measure the volume of data and the flow of information and relations between actors’ (Tinati *et al.*, 2014: 667).

These developments often led to a conflation between the more expansive concept of ‘big data’ and computational analytics, to the point that social scientific approaches to digital media often use the term to describe using automated methods to process ‘large datasets extracted from different social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook’ (Nikunen, 2021: 1). Indeed, this tended to be the meaning evoked by our own shorthand-use of ‘big data’ to describe using computational methods to process social media datasets that were too large to be analysed manually. While this usage of the term is colloquially commonplace in both disciplines, within computer science the technical – more formal – meaning of ‘big data’ is in reference to ‘data sets [that] are so voluminous that traditional data processing software just can’t manage them’ (Tiao, 2024: np).³ In other words, here big data refers to data that doesn’t fit in traditional ‘containers’, such as a single laptop or server, and sometimes lack structure that would be found in more conventional datasets stored in databases. This definition, however, does not strictly apply to our own datasets that – while too big to process manually – were still able to fit on a server.

The problem with our more generic usage of ‘big data’, to simply mean larger-scale computational analytics, is that this usage carries significant baggage due to a history of valorisation as a means of adding some sort of quantitative validity to qualitative social science and humanities research. As Nikunen points out, this positioning of big data risks constructing it as ‘an automated process that supposedly produces “neutral” data for public institutions, policy makers or markets, without questioning the composition of the data and its contexts, invisibilities and origins’ (2021: 3). We revisit Nikunen’s critique in more depth below, but for now we wish to note that assuming big data straightforwardly adds authority to analysis does not just mask socio-cultural and ideological processes that inform the production of data but poses more mundane complications. Namely, using ‘big data’ as shorthand for social media analytics means that it requires (re-)translation when writing or presenting in ‘home’ disciplines in which the term has evolved and our usage is no longer technically accurate.

Disciplinary differences also impacted our practical experiences undertaking the research. In methodological terms, in-depth project planning was complicated by us being awarded funding in February 2020, just over a month prior to the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. While the impact of the pandemic was less critical for our research than projects that relied on in-person fieldwork, communicating about everything online made it more of a challenge to dispel concerns in as straightforward a way as we had managed during the in-person discussion outlined above.

There was, for instance, initial anxiety on the part of social science and humanities researchers on the team, in the wake of waiting several months for initial data purchased from Twitter to be processed. Computer scientists on the team, conversely, were not aware that further reassurance about timings was required as they understood that although developing code would take time, once created and tested the analysis of any data would be relatively quick and rapidly repeatable. Once initial code is developed, it is straightforward to adjust the input after examining the initial output, which allows for relatively rapid iteration, feedback and change. In other words, the length of time required for the different tasks involved in computational analysis was inversely proportioned in comparison with other methods used on the project. By means of contrast, for quantitative content analysis it is the analysis that takes time. For instance, the (arduous) process of manually coding tweets according to the coding schedule took seven months and it was not possible to go back and make changes without repeating the entire process. Thus, confidence from the computing side about how long analysis would take caused anxiety on the media sociology side, with several months of feeling as though little progress had been made.

As with issues around terminology, confusion about practicalities were ultimately relatively minor issues that could be clarified without derailing the project. Other differences in understanding, however, had far more epistemological freight in terms of how they impacted upon research design and process.

Epistemic cultures

It's almost as though there's a fractal relationship between our qualitative and quantitative data; the qualitative data is a microcosm of the patterns identified in the big data analysis. (Notes from project meeting, 25 May 2022)

Karin [Knorr Cetina's \(1999\)](#) now classic work on epistemic cultures – or normative ways of knowing which orient research in particular scientific communities – assumes renewed pertinence in light of the contemporary push for interdisciplinary research. In our projects, for instance, underpinning

practical difficulties were challenges about how to bring together knowledges that were themselves underpinned by norms and assumptions. Particular epistemic cultures were often foundational to the disciplines that we brought together during the project, thus difficulties arose when these cultures clashed.

One of the central epistemological concerns that recurred throughout our research was the relationship between ‘big’ social media datasets, which were analysed using techniques from computer science, and the use of quantitative and qualitative methods from media studies to analyse smaller samples. On one level, these methods straightforwardly complemented one another through offering a means of triangulation. Indeed, this was the rationale between combining methods when we began our research. The computational analysis enabled us to sift through and identify trends across millions of tweets, which would not have been possible with manual methods alone. Conversely, quantitative and qualitative content analysis offered a means of verifying the accuracy of how computational techniques had categorised data, as well as adding nuance by situating tweets within specific socio-cultural contexts and relations.

It was this sense that our datasets were complementary that was being evoked in the project notes that opened this section, where our methods were described as having a fractal relationship with one another. What the fractal metaphor evoked, in other words, was a sense that our datasets said broadly the same thing, but provided increasingly fine-grained detail about the narratives that were being circulated.

Yet, as we progressed in the project, we realised that there were important epistemological differences between our different methods of analysis. Researchers on the team who usually worked in a data science paradigm were familiar with analytic techniques that often carried an implicit positivist assumption that it is possible to unearth an overall ‘truth’ based on trends and patterns from large datasets ([Institute of Data, 2023](#)). In contrast, team members from social science and humanities backgrounds approached digital knowledge production from a constructivist paradigm and emphasised the situated and relational dynamics of social phenomenon (see [Marres, 2017](#)). If these methods are combined without carefully considering the relationship between their different epistemological commitments, there is a risk of inferring that it is possible to produce objective knowledge about complex topics such as race, racism and racialisation through simply analysing social media data.

Recognising epistemological tensions is especially important in light of the sharp rise in the number of articles using data science techniques to research topics that have formerly been understood as lying within the domain of qualitative social science. [Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández and Johan Farkas](#)

(2021), for instance, conducted a systematic review of literature about racism and hate speech published between 2014 and 2018. They found several notable findings, including bias towards research about Twitter as opposed to other social media platforms (a point we revisit in later chapters), a lack of mixed-methods research and ‘overrepresentation of text-based forms of analysis’ as opposed to methods such as ethnography, interviews or network analysis (2021: 211). Perhaps most significantly, they detected a conceptual rift between qualitative research, which was often grounded in critical race studies, and uses of large-scale computational analysis in data science to detect hate speech via techniques such as automated keyword analysis. This finding, they suggest, is especially significant as it

points to a terminological divide in the field, indicating a lack of scholarly exchange between the humanities/social sciences and computer science/data science. Our findings point to the latter group placing less emphasis on structural, ideological, and historical dimensions of racial oppression (associated with the term ‘racism’) than the former group and more emphasis on text level identification and the legality of content (associated with the term ‘hate speech’). (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021: 212)

Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas argue, moreover, that this methodological and disciplinary division between computer and social science has high stakes, because ‘a focus on illegal hate speech risks conceptualising racism on social media as something external to platforms that can be simply fought through technical fixes such as machine learning’ (2021: 218). Indeed, the uptake of keyword-based approaches as a means of moderation – both by social media companies themselves (see Gerrard, 2018; Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021) and by academic–platform collaborations (X Developer Platform, n.d.a) – underscores the urgency of this critique.

Other scholars working on digital racism and xenophobia have developed similar lines of argument, further problematising the assumption that data analytics are the key to providing a more objective picture of digital racism. Kaarina Nikunen, for instance, likens uncritical uses of data analytics to ‘white methods’, in reference to Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva’s (2008) use of the term to describe social scientific methodologies that present themselves as neutral data collection methods while masking racial biases that underpin the origins of these methods. For Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, if biases are not recognised then they will inevitably be reproduced in the gathering, analysis and framing of data.

These critiques are just two examples of a growing range of commentaries that suggest data analytics that are based on keywords alone – and focus on detecting hate speech – are inadequate in capturing the relational properties of digital racism (Sharma, 2013; Sharma and Brooker, 2016).

Firstly, a focus on detecting hate speech risks depicting racism as a problem that can be solved through simply removing text or banning users on a social media platform, thus neglecting the wider contexts that co-constitute processes of racialisation and racism (Thylstrup and Talat, 2020). Keyword-based approaches are, secondly, dangerous in focusing on overt racism, at the expense of more banal or everyday racism that is often context-specific (Siapera, 2019) or visual disinformation where meaning is created multimodally in the relation between image and text (Askanius, 2021).

In our research, for instance, one of the most persistent Islamophobic narratives consisted of accusations that Muslims were responsible for spreading COVID-19, with various factors feeding into this narrative. In the UK, terminology such as ‘social distancing’ had become ubiquitous as part of a wider set of government guidance that was designed to reduce the number of people – and number of households – who were permitted to meet and socialise at a particular time. At the same time, socio-economic conditions – related to racial capitalism, which had led to the racialisation of jobs such as gig-work and garment manufacturing and unequal housing provision – meant that cities with large Black and South Asian populations were suffering from disproportionately high mortality rates and extended lockdown periods (Meghji and Niang, 2022). These issues coalesced as a discursive formation wherein COVID-19 itself became racialised as a problem that predominantly affected particular demographics of people (Farrimond, 2023).

In the wake of a regional lockdown in northern England the day before Eid al-Adha, the danger of COVID-19’s racialisation came to the fore after a politician from the ruling Conservative Party blamed ‘Muslims’ and ‘BAME⁴ communities’ for spreading the virus due to ‘cultural difference’ and a lack of social distancing (see Giraud *et al.*, 2025). In other words, socio-economic factors had been displaced by an emphasis on irreducible cultural difference as the root cause of COVID-19 in particular regions. Despite being condemned by opposition politicians, this narrative offered a new vocabulary for the far-right in enabling coded forms of racism – such as blaming Muslims for COVID-19’s spread due to a lack of ‘social distancing’ and ‘cultural difference’. As we discuss in more depth in the [next chapter](#), a typical example of COVID-19 disinformation was illustrated by two tweets posted on 31 July 2020, which included the same foreshortened image of a group of Muslim men on a street corner, which gave the impression of a social gathering. The first tweet read ‘Today in Oldham’, while the second claimed ‘Rochdale this afternoon’. However, coded references to distancing is precisely the type of language that is difficult to detect via automated analysis, because it is relational – emerging through the dialogue between users and across quote-tweets, words/images and hashtags on the platform (Sharma and Brooker, 2016) – and avoids the use of overt slurs and hate speech.

The disciplinary frictions we encountered, moreover, were not solely limited to problems identified in existing, well-established critiques of keyword-based analytics. A broader issue we encountered was the relationship between ‘big data’, how these data were visualised, and temporality. Data visualisation can be a powerful means of making statistics legible, accessible (Feigenbaum and Alamalhodaie, 2020) and even emotive (Frątczak, 2022) to publics who might lack understanding of what data mean on their own terms. At the same time, as with big data more broadly (boyd and Crawford, 2012; Milan and Treré, 2019; D’Ignazio and Klein, 2020), visualisations must also be understood as value-laden rhetorical devices. The data that are depicted in visualisations are shaped by choices and decisions about *which* data to represent, before even addressing questions of *how* to present these data compellingly. Yet, as Helen Kennedy and colleagues argue, despite the ‘persuasive work’ that visualisations accomplish, there is often the sense ‘that visualisations are showing the facts, telling it like it is, offering windows onto data’ (Kennedy *et al.*, 2016: 716).

The risk of assuming that visualisations offer a neutral window onto data is underlined by our network analysis stage of research. In both our pilot (Figure 2.2) and larger project (Figure 2.3) we produced a series of images to

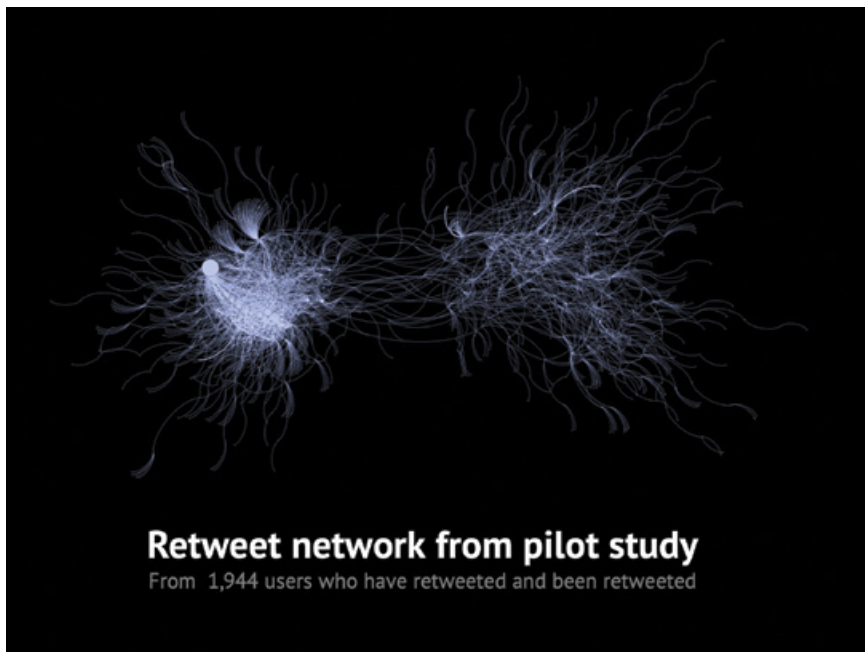


Figure 2.2 Retweet network from our pilot study

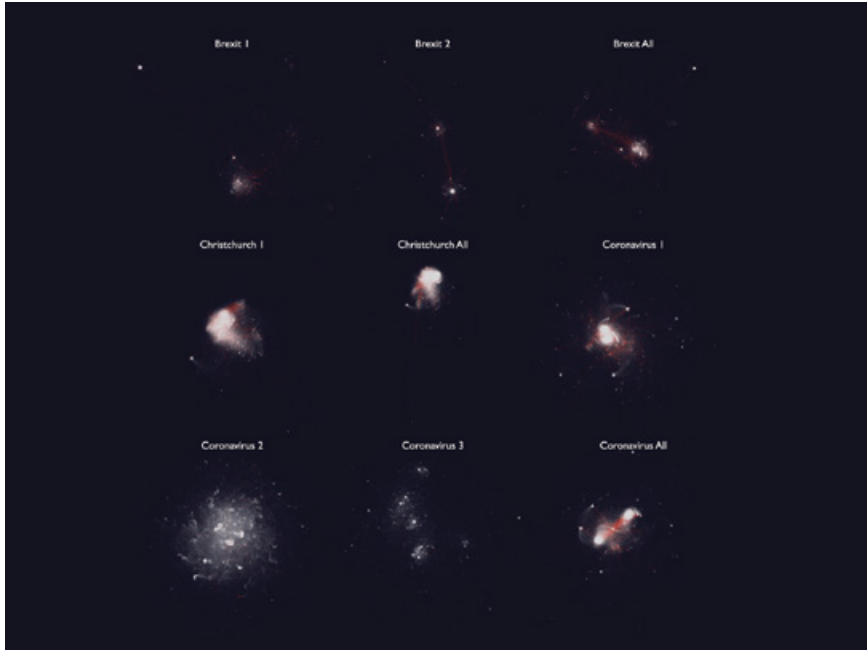


Figure 2.3 Network diagrams from our larger project – all events

visualise networks of Twitter users who were engaged with each event. Read straightforwardly, Figure 2.2 gives the impression of a stereotypical echo chamber, which depicts a tightly bounded network of individuals retweeting each other repeatedly to circulate hate speech (depicted on the left) and a more dispersed network of users attempting to contest it (on the right). This picture was partially dispelled when we combined the network analysis with other methods, particularly qualitative examination of comments beneath prominent tweets. Far from a lack of interaction between users of different political persuasions, the qualitative analysis revealed that counter-narrative tweets often fostered heated exchanges between progressivist and far-right narratives (Poole *et al.*, 2021).

Some of the visualisations from our subsequent research (Figure 2.3) offered a more complex set of clusters, but many of these images – likewise – told a story of discreet communities of users who were predominantly engaging with one another. The impression of echo chambers is especially the case with the ‘all’ visualisations in the right-hand column, which depict all of the data associated with a given event.

Drawing hasty conclusions about echo chambers, however, neglects temporality and how narratives unfold in practice. By visualising the whole time period associated with a given dataset, there is a risk of creating static

snapshots of events that do not capture the dynamic, evolving relationships between users. The ‘all’ diagram for coronavirus, for instance, again looks like a typical echo chamber, but if this visualisation is broken down into different time segments (as depicted in the individual visualisations of coronavirus 1 to 3) they offer a very different impression. Coronavirus 1, for instance, depicts one main topic cluster, while coronavirus 2 and 3 offer a far more fragmented and dispersed picture of exchanges in relation to COVID-19.

In sum: it is only when the coronavirus segments are combined into one diagram that they give the impression of a clear-cut echo chamber; in contrast, if events are broken down into smaller datasets based on time segments, the data can tell a different story. The overall effect over the duration of the data-gathering period might be two clear clusters, but how narratives develop and change over time is important to analyse to get the full picture: as with coronavirus, obvious clusters may not even be there simultaneously. Thus, without combining network analysis with other methods that examine the nuances of narratives, as with our manual quantitative and qualitative analysis, it would be easy to just see self-contained topic clusters in the network diagrams and construct a narrative of fragmented, polarised, user communities.

This issue is not restricted to network diagrams; by creating visualisations that focus repeatedly on the largest numbers within our datasets, for example, tables of most retweeted posts, word clouds with the most prominent text or accounts with the highest number of followers, there is a risk of reproducing a macro-level view of what happened which ignores more subtle/less popular posts/users and interactions. In other words, without combining these visualisations with other methods, they are likely to miss precisely the interactions and exchanges between user communities, which fuelled Islamophobic narratives around social distancing.

Yet problems do not just arise due to focusing on the macro at the expense of nuance. Qualitative social science has itself been accused of focusing too much on the micro-level of social media data – such as the text of individual posts – without giving a sense of whether these posts are representative of wider platform trends. As Ramine Tinati and colleagues put it in their early call for social scientists to embrace social media data:

Big Data has commonly been approached with small-scale content analysis – looking at small numbers of users – or larger scale random or purposive samples of tweets. Rendering Big Data manageable in this way overrides its nature as ‘big’ data, bypassing the scale of the data for its availability or imposing an external structure by sampling users or tweets according to a priori criteria, external to the data themselves. Furthermore, most previous social science studies are snapshots, categorising content and user-types rather than

following the data as it emerges dynamically or exploring the nature of the social networks that constitute Twitter. (Tinati *et al.*, 2014: 665)

While this comment was made a decade ago, the methodological divide described by Tinati and colleagues has persisted in subsequent years, with scant mixed methods work on digital racism in comparison with research that is divided along methodological lines (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). In a sense, these challenges rearticulate a long-standing tension between Foucauldian understandings of discursive formations as being significant on their own terms (even if they are not representative of social trends as a whole), due to these formations reflecting the historical conditions of something being possible to say at a given juncture. This perspective lies in contradistinction with the requirement for something to be statistically verifiable as a social trend, which often persists in both data science and quantitative social science.

This is not to say, however, that mixed methods approaches such as ours can resolve all problems associated with individual methodologies, through somehow providing the nuance that computer science lacks or the broader trends that are difficult to capture with qualitative analysis alone. Indeed, despite being aware of the risks of assuming big data offered a window onto the social, at times we were vulnerable to the allure of objectivity offered by *combining* methods: as with our initial sense that these methods straightforwardly complemented one another when describing them as fractal.

As we began to put our datasets together, however, these conclusions were troubled. As outlined above, the difference between the network analysis and quantitative content analysis, for example, helped to complicate assumptions about echo chambers that could have been perpetuated when looking at big data alone (see Chapter 3). Likewise, interactions in comments that were only revealed through qualitative analysis challenged assumptions about whether counter-narratives had been successful in contesting hate.

What these challenges speak to is a relatively simple point: the vast amounts of data and levels of analysis in a large, multi-year project such as this can become overwhelming. This is especially the case when combining techniques that carry epistemological assumptions that might be the norm in certain disciplines but less so in others (such as challenges about how to resist the positivist baggage of big data when utilising it in social science, while still valuing the insights it could provide). Perhaps the biggest lesson we learned from our own research was that tactics for negotiating these tensions might only become apparent at the end of projects when data is meaningfully being integrated for the first time.

Platform frictions

Hello,

We are now filtering and analysing the tweets we have purchased and this is bringing up a number of questions we have about how the search actually works we would like clarifying please:

Can you confirm, when performing the searches that returns the tweets we purchased, do you search all text/hashtag fields or just some? For instance in the case of a retweet quote retweet – will the `retweeted_status.text` field be searched as well as a `retweeted_status.quoted_status.text` field?

Can you confirm the linguistic rules which you implement when carrying out searches? For instance, do all search results return which contain the substring of the word searched if double quotation marks are not used? E.g., does searching for Islam also return tweets with Islamic?

We appreciate that this may be covered in the API documentation but we have tried to interpret it and struggling to determine the answers to above questions. Any help greatly appreciated.

Best wishes,

Ed

When outlining our methods earlier in this chapter, we stated that: ‘We purchased six weeks of tweets related to each event directly from Twitter, dividing the time periods into date ranges that captured a sense of the longitudinal significance of the narratives, rather than gathering data in entire six-week blocks.’ The problem with this sentence is that, though technically accurate, it masks the messiness that had to be navigated in order to obtain the data that we needed. In practice, acquiring appropriate data for our research required extensive exchanges with Twitter – as encapsulated by the email at the start of this section – and complex processes of coding by computer scientists in the team, to ensure our datasets were comparable. This section of the chapter thus unpicks what lies beneath seemingly innocuous-sounding words such as ‘purchased’ and ‘longitudinal’, processes that are complicated by need to engage with platforms that often function as black-boxes.

Platforms as black-boxes

Whereas the reliability and validity of established social scientific methods depend on their transparency, big social data are almost universally produced within closed, commercial organizations. In other words, the stewardship of

this unprecedented record of public discourse depends on an infrastructure that is both privately owned and operationally opaque. (Driscoll and Walker, 2014: 1746)

To characterise the opacity of social media companies, Driscoll and Walker use the language of ‘black-boxes’: a term derived from Science and Technology Studies (STS) that is derived from an image ‘used by cyberneticians whenever a set of commands is too complex’ (Latour, 1987: 2–3). Rather than describing or representing this complexity systems scientists ‘draw a little box about which they need to know nothing but its input and output’ (Latour, 1987: 3), and the term black-box continues to be used in contemporary computer science to characterise software testing that does not examine the inner workings of the application being tested (Gao *et al.*, 2003).

For Latour, and other STS scholars, black-boxing designates a wider tendency within scientific and technological development wherein complex processes are represented in simple, neutral terms, in ways that obscure their internal dynamics. Thus, ‘no matter how controversial their history, how complex their inner workings, how large the commercial or academic networks that hold them in place, only their input and output count’ (Latour, 1987: 3). References to ‘black-boxes’ and ‘black-boxing’ has since seen broad uptake in digital sociology and media studies, with a large body of research seeking to open black-boxes associated with social media platforms by reverse-engineering opaque technical processes such as Facebook spam algorithms (Carmi, 2020), Google rankings (Noble, 2018) and YouTube recommendation systems (Pearce *et al.*, 2020). A particularly challenging black-box to unpack has been Twitter Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), tools that – historically – the platform has enabled researchers to use to gather data. Simply put, an API is a process, or bridge, through which different types of software can communicate information with one another; that is, the Twitter API enables software used by academic researchers to request data which the platform then provides.

However, Driscoll and Walker (2014: 1748) point out that there is a lack of clarity in precisely how APIs provided by the platform allow academics to gather data. In their words, in the early days of social media research, ‘Twitter’s APIs initially seemed to provide researchers with a unique window into the inner workings of a mass-scale information system. Unfortunately, as many soon discovered, these API methods did not function as clearly or consistently as their research-friendly names suggested’ (Driscoll and Walker, 2014: 1748). At the time of writing their article, for instance, there were three different APIs that were available to researchers who wanted to gather Twitter data, each of which generated slightly different datasets even when fed the same search queries.

In part, these differences were due to Twitter deliberately imposing ‘rate limits’, which were manifested differently across APIs, to prevent users gathering numbers of tweets that the platform deemed excessive. Due to the black-boxed nature of the APIs, however, it was difficult to determine ‘*how exactly*’ these rate limits were shaping any data obtained (Brooker *et al.*, 2016: 37, emphasis in original). When experimenting with the impact of rate limits, for instance, Brooker and colleagues noted that when using particularly popular keywords the rate limit affected some blocks of time more than others. Their observations speak to a key challenge when using digital methods in sociological research; black-boxing of technical processes can be compounded by social scientists using generic terms such as ‘Twitter APIs’ without clarifying which API they were using, or the impact of rate limits: potentially because they themselves lack the expertise to explain the inner workings of these complex technical processes. Without acknowledging these differences, however, researchers risk presenting a distorted picture of the way narratives unfold on the platform.

At the time of our own research, however, it was possible to purchase data directly from Twitter, which did not have rate limits. As such, when we applied for our grant, we budgeted for purchasing data directly to ensure we had datasets that were – in theory – unaffected by opaque limitations, and which we knew would have appropriate licenses and enable us to obtain support directly from the provider. Yet, although purchasing data directly from the platform had worked effectively with our previous research (Poole *et al.*, 2019, 2021), this time we encountered different forms of opacity. The first stage of accessing data involved emailing Twitter our ruleset, that is, the search query we wanted to run to collect the appropriate tweets. Twitter then ran this query, telling us how many tweets were returned and a price, we then paid for the tweets and were emailed a link where we could then download them in bulk (with tweets saved in single JSON (JavaScript Object Notation) files, in ten-minute blocks of time).

However, throughout this process there were a series of miscommunications and misunderstandings, which related to how we needed to specify the ruleset that identified which tweets we wanted. Simply put: after explaining the research, we made an assumption that the people we were communicating with at Twitter understood what we wanted. Conversely, Twitter assumed that we fully understood the documentation they provided (which was continuously referred back to when asking questions about the data-gathering process).

The issue was that the documentation contributed to black-boxing, due to being written by developers who had assumed a tacit knowledge about the platform.⁵ As a result, sometimes even the computer scientists in our

team required clarification to confirm the documentation's finer points. Communication in real time, either via chat or phone, was unsupported and, as such, we exchanged long email chains with employees at the platform and between ourselves, trying to work out what we were asking for and not being allowed to see a sample set of results for what each query would return. The email that opened this section, for instance, illustrates the type of exchange that was commonplace during this stage of the project. More significantly, the email demonstrates some of the very specific questions we had to ask in order to fully understand how the data was collected and the lengths we went to in order to validate the accuracy and completeness of the data we were purchasing.

Initial misunderstandings meant that, for some datasets, we risked purchasing a higher number of tweets than we actually needed. For instance, in response to the request we made for our first Brexit datasets, due to omitting the brackets around Brexit, Twitter provided general tweets about Brexit and Islam in addition to tweets that *connected* discussion of Islam to Brexit. We were informed that we needed to reformat our query as follows to obtain a dataset comprised solely of the tweets we required: (*Brexit OR #brexit*) (*Islam OR Muslim OR Moslem OR 'Religion of Peace' OR Mosque OR #stopIslam*). To avoid the time and expense of submitting a new search query, we instead created code to filter what was required from the larger volume of data we had been provided with. While this process meant that, ultimately, the dataset we collected was comprehensive and matched the terms we wanted, it did require multiple attempts at purchasing and downloading the tweets, checking they contained the terms we wanted, and if not, going back to Twitter to ask why not and tweaking the ruleset or creating bespoke filtering code.

In part these challenges speak to epistemological differences, as well as differences in expertise level and tacit knowledge, between academic liaisons based at Twitter and our own team. As noted in the introductory chapter, our larger project adopted a more expansive focus on events – rather than predetermining which hashtags we would look at in advance – but it was precisely this more open approach that added complexity to our engagements with Twitter. Rather than requesting data about a singular hashtag, taking a sociologically-informed approach meant that we were searching for more general keywords that required carefully formatted queries.

Adopting a more expansive approach, in other words, might have made our research more sociologically salient, but it also increased technical challenges. These tensions became especially apparent after we had used our broader datasets to identify particularly important topics and hashtags (echoing the approach advocated by [Marres \[2015\]](#)). Due to only being able to identify relevant hashtags after gathering and analysing initial data,

we had to submit separate requests to Twitter in order to access this new data. However, in the interim time period Twitter had changed its policy of how academics should access tweets and recommended that we used its new Academic Research API (launched in 2021), which gave free access to ten million tweets per month. This meant that instead of purchasing the tweets directly and downloading them in bulk, we were able to send queries directly to the Twitter API system, and then the tweets were streamed back so that we could then collect and store them. Although freeing us from our previous reliance on Twitter staff, the change in policy meant that we were accessing tweets in a new format (previously the tweets were in the 1.1 version of the API and the new API was returning them in an updated, version 2 format). While the basic information about tweets and users was the same, a change in structure meant that we had to produce bespoke code to translate any new tweets that we collected into the older format so our analysis code could still work. As far as the results of the work are concerned, again, this sort of technical issue seems inconsequential, but it underscores how reliance on a platform over an extended period of time can impact on a research project that is taking a sociologically informed, longitudinal approach to data analysis.

Data frictions

This section of the chapter focuses on technicalities that might seem (even more!) dry. Yet these technicalities, again, serve to open black-boxed descriptions in our methodology by conveying how, exactly, we sifted through circa four million tweets. In media and social scientific journals there is a tendency to curtail discussion of detailed technicalities to methodology sections of articles, to leave space for more expansive discussions of findings. In our own work, for instance, we often describe ourselves as ‘producing Excel sheets’ or ‘using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)’, yet these phrases obscure the complexity of organising data in these formats.

In *Evil media* (2012), Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey turn to all manner of seemingly mundane and ubiquitous technologies that are utilised in information processing. Terming these technologies ‘gray media’, they contend that spreadsheets, databases and word-processing software are as worthy of critical analysis as more dramatic – and well-researched – uses of social media. Despite, and indeed because of, the routine use of information processing technologies, they rationalise, fragment and structure behaviour on an everyday basis, yet the way they do this is often unacknowledged due to the ubiquity of these forms of software. As with other black-boxes, it is

often only when frictions arise between the norms associated with particular technologies and the specific needs of users that the mediating role of these technologies can be surfaced.

Files and formatting

In order to prepare tweets for quantitative and qualitative analysis, for instance, you need to turn the formats provided by Twitter (JSON files) into files that are legible as text that can be analysed. In our case, this involved utilising standard tools used in quantitative and qualitative media studies such as Excel spreadsheets and SPSS. However, certain features of our data made this process problematic, with these problems, again, often stemming from different disciplinary needs of researchers in the team.

In the data provided by Twitter, each tweet has a unique ID (a 64-bit unsigned integer, which is based on time, instead of being sequential), which is used to identify it. However, this system of labelling caused challenges when transforming the data into formats that were standard in quantitative and qualitative media analysis.

John: So, I've finished the first set of coding and this is the output in SPSS.

Ed: Ok, great. So each row here is a tweet and the labels are the coding?

John: Yes.

Ed: Ok, so how do we link each row back to the tweet it relates to?

John: What do you mean?

Ed: Well, when we come to analyse this further, we will need to be able to link your labels back to the original tweet, so we can do things like working out which types of word in the tweet relate to certain labels. Don't you keep the tweet ID or some sort of identifier so you know which row here relates to which tweet?

John: Yes, we add unique identifiers but don't necessarily retain the IDs in Twitter's format ...

Ed: Oh. Well, I do need them in that format ...

John: Oh.

Ed: I am guessing this took a while to do and you can't go back and put in the tweet ID?

Liz: No, that's not possible. John can do it from now on, but we can't go back and recode all of these. It takes weeks.

Ed: Oh.

When using SPSS to manually label/code a subset of tweets in the dataset, an assumption was made on the computing side of the team that the tweet ID would also be kept during this process. This was because retaining the ID meant that a link could be preserved between the original tweets within the full dataset and tweets that appeared in the smaller sample within the

Excel files, which were coded/labelled manually. From a computer science perspective, maintaining these links was essential for realising our original plan of creating a labelled dataset as the foundation for a machine learning model, which could offer an automated means of detecting hate speech and counter-narratives. However, from a social scientific perspective the tweet ID has no obvious utility, so for the first quantitative dataset the tweet ID was not initially added as a variable to the spreadsheets.

After clarifying that the IDs needed to be retained, they were manually imported into SPSS alongside the tweet text. However, on 17 November 2021, Richardson contacted Poole to note a new challenge:

Hi Liz,

I have just noticed something really odd and disappointing – when I copy/paste the tweet ID number into the SPSS data file, it doesn't paste accurately. I cannot work out why. I paste a number – e.g., 1106782575639576577 – and it changes the final digit to a zero. And then to make it weirder, it doesn't allow me to edit, to change it back. See the attached file and you'll see what I mean, you can't change the tweet ID variable.

I have absolutely no idea why it is doing this, but it must mean that all of the pasted numbers are wrong (unless the original number ended in a zero I guess).

Can you advise?

best, John

It was ultimately discovered that SPSS was interpreting tweet IDs as very large numbers, too large – it turns out – to be stored in the software as a numeric value. To overcome this problem IDs were instead stored as string/text variables. Although these issues might, again, seem like minor sources of stress, they highlight how – in any socio-technical infrastructure – norms and standards that might suit some communities of users always exclude others (Star, 1990). In some contexts, the limitations of software can have high stakes; for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, government data about infection rates were stored on Excel software that crashed after numeric values became too high, losing 16,000 infection records (Kelion, 2020). In our case, these issues illustrate that even routine software used for different research tasks within disciplines can complicate – or even undermine – interdisciplinary working. Collaboration, in other words, involves asking critical questions about software that usually fades into the background as gray media.

Bots and spam

The final challenge with data we wish to reflect upon were decisions about how to deal with bots and spam. At the conception stage of the project and in the funding bid, we highlighted the need to filter out malicious or

irrelevant content during the initial data cleaning phase. ‘Cleaning’ datasets is routine in hate speech research, particularly in the content of data science, where ‘meaningless messages, contaminated content, and rumors’ are seen as problematic due to ‘adversely affect[ing] classification algorithm performance’ (Ayo *et al.*, 2020: 2). In other words, as ‘contaminated content’ is not explicitly hate speech, it is unhelpful when using Twitter data to train hate speech detection tools.

However, throughout the course of our research, technical and sociological factors led to us developing a more complicated understanding of bots and their role within our datasets. During our pilot project we had used automated techniques pioneered by one of our research assistants, Mohammed al-Janabi, to detect what appeared to be bot accounts: which was possible at the time, due to the rudimentary characteristics of many of these bots (which tended to have usernames consisting of number strings and no profile pictures). Our suspicions were later confirmed when, in a push for greater transparency to combat platform manipulation, on 17 October 2018 Twitter released data from the Russian Internet Research Agency’s 3,841 accounts and we discovered that one of the hashtags utilised by these accounts was #stopIslam (which was tweeted 1,498 times on the day of the Brussels bombing). As malicious accounts have become more sophisticated, however, and are often run by people rather than being automated, then the process of bot-detection became more difficult on a technical level. Perhaps more significantly, in the context of our research, the importance of retaining bots became increasingly clear on a sociological level.

A prominent body of social science literature has underlined that, while bots that hijack trending hashtags might be unhelpful for refining automated hate speech detection tools, they still play a critical role in mediating narratives (Marres and Moats, 2015). Bots, like other mediators, play a role in translating – or sometimes betraying – meaning. Emiliano Treré’s (2016) work on Twitter’s use in political protest in Mexico, for instance, foregrounds how bots were used to flood high-profile protest hashtags with spam tweets to undermine their strategic use by activists. If bots had been removed from analysis of these hashtags, therefore, it would provide an erroneous picture about the dynamics of the protest narratives they articulated. Capturing the role of bots is especially important in the context of Islamophobia, with more recent research identifying how malicious accounts have deliberately hijacked Islamophobic narratives, due to the visibility these topics afford (Ganesh and Faggiani, 2024).

In our larger project, likewise, we found that seemingly ‘irrelevant’ or ‘contaminated’ content played an important role in mediating the social world. For instance, our COVID-19 dataset from July 2021 contained a large number of tweets used the hashtag #EidatHome to create a counter-narrative

that documented socially-distanced Eid celebrations. During our qualitative analysis we noted that some of the most retweeted and liked posts in our datasets, such as celebratory tweets by high-profile politicians in Nigeria, had been amplified by spam accounts. The most retweeted #EidatHome tweet, for example, had 672 retweets, 16.7k likes and 230 comments. However, 50 per cent of these comments were spam tweets from users who were using the visibility afforded by these tweets to promote their own businesses. Even though these posts did not contribute on a semantic level to counter-narratives, therefore, #EidatHome was nonetheless amplified by these tweets. Thus, as we argue in previous work ([Giraud *et al.*, 2025](#)), bots might be unhelpful for machine learning, but are nonetheless sociologically important phenomena to examine due to their role in wider assemblages that constitute digital racism and attempts to contest it.

Conclusion: and a final note on disciplinary identity

Liz,

I am just starting to create some notes for Eva for the Chapters we are working on together and I was wondering if there was a term that described your joint discipline area? Does Media Studies cover you both or is there something more broad you prefer to use?

Best wishes,

Ed

Hi Ed

Media Sociology would probably cover it.

Liz

Interdisciplinary mixed methods research is often celebrated as a means of verifying data (through triangulation) and overcoming the limitations of techniques that originate in particular fields. Techniques from computer science are invaluable for gathering data in ways that are more reflective of the vast quantities of content circulating on social media platforms and for finding patterns, trends and issues that can ground subsequent qualitative study. Conversely, qualitative analysis is invaluable for adding social context and resisting the sense of digital racism as a static entity that can be straightforwardly identified and removed. However, it is important not to valorise mixed-methods research and to recognise the complex processes of decision-making and negotiation that underpin interdisciplinary scholarship.

Norms within particular disciplines – from the software that is routinely used to distinctive epistemic cultures within fields – create constant challenges. Rather than understanding these challenges solely as problems to overcome, in this chapter we have suggested that recognising tensions is productive in a myriad of ways. Firstly, deepening understanding of the factors that shape data collection and processing is important in resisting deterministic accounts of social media's role in constituting wider social relations. Secondly, bringing frictions to the fore is important in avoiding the black-boxing of digital platforms, as well as the tools and techniques used to analyse these platforms. And, thirdly, foregrounding frictions is also valuable in unsettling tacit norms and assumptions within disciplines.

Rather than treating the socio-technical factors that shape data gathering and analytics as biases that need to be removed, therefore, building on [Marres \(2015\)](#), we have adopted an affirmative approach, which foregrounds how platforms shape the research process while still insisting valuable insights can be drawn from the data. In the case of researching digital racism, we contend, highlighting – rather than smoothing over – frictions is especially important in avoiding portraying data analytics as neutral tools that can straightforwardly lend authority to qualitative methods. Or, framed in [Nikunen's \(2021\)](#) terms, affirming bias is important in recognising the limitations of data analytics and resisting the tendency for them to become white method. Perhaps most importantly, in the context of our own research, recognising specific ways data are (re)shaped by Twitter is important in avoiding broad-brush generalisations about the way counter-narratives work. This is not to say that the data do not contain rich insights about broad contours of relationships between platforms, users and narratives, but instead that these insights demand careful contextualisation.

Before closing the chapter, however, we wanted to dwell on one especially fraught tension to navigate: disciplinary identity itself. One of the difficulties of working across academic fields, and an issue – that to some extent – persists throughout this book, relates to the question of what it means to produce interdisciplinary research, when coming from disciplines with slightly hazy boundaries. At different points throughout meetings, publications and public events, for example, we have described one another, or indeed ourselves, using shifting terminology. de Quincey has been referred to by other team members as representing 'computing', 'computer science', 'data science' or 'information technology'. In contrast, Poole, Giraud and Richardson have been described by de Quincey interchangeably as 'media', 'media studies', 'humanities' and 'sociology'. The previous email exchange, for instance, illustrates de Quincey's attempt to clarify what was the best term to use, with Poole replying 'media sociology' (a term he was unfamiliar with).

In part, these challenges are due to some of the team members having complex disciplinary biographies on a personal level. Giraud, for instance, has a PhD in critical theory, but specialises in theoretical work from feminist science studies – which focuses on how power and inequalities inform and are perpetuated by socio-technical infrastructures (Law and Singleton, 2000) – a body of work more commonly associated with a different academic field, STS. She then worked in media studies departments, but is currently based in a sociological studies department. Richardson has taken almost the opposite trajectory. He researched and wrote his PhD (in media sociology) in the same School of Sociological Studies, Politics, and International Relations where Eva now works, and now (predominantly) writes critical linguistic analysis of media and political discourse. de Quincey's trajectory is equally complex: his first degree was in biological sciences and he then did a conversion MSc in IT followed by a PhD in computer science, which was focused around knowledge elicitation methods and music categorisations. More specifically, his current research spans both areas of social media analytics and human-centred design as well as human–computer interaction. Poole, in contrast, has long been established within media studies but – as a result – is more precise about the nuances of where her work is situated (at the sociological branch as opposed to the cultural studies and humanities branch of the field). That said, her first degree was in education, followed by an MA in cultural studies and a PhD in mass communication, which meant that – despite now being well-established – it took a long time to speak to media as a discipline. This complexity is hidden by labels that might be less familiar to those working in other fields, who tend to use broader labels such as 'social science', 'humanities' or 'data science' to group together research with very different methods and canons.

As with the different meanings of 'coding' set out at the start of this section, disciplinary distinctions might seem like irrelevant terminological issues. However, they have more serious implications in light of the institutional challenges of producing research in contexts where scholarship is funded, made sense of and assessed according to discipline. In these contexts, decisions about where to publish or how to account for clashing epistemologies assume personal significance that affects the sustainability of interdisciplinary research cultures: aside from any practical challenges in research design and execution. Yet, while some of our experiences might sound like a cautionary tale, we hope that through making the challenges of interdisciplinary research more legible we have offered insights to support future projects that work across methods and intellectual traditions.

Notes

- 1 When we describe our datasets as ‘large’, this claim should be situated in relation to social science research wherein some form of qualitative analysis was required in order to contextualise the data. In comparison with uses of large language models in AI, of course, our datasets would be considered small. As we discuss in more detail later in the chapter, these sort of disciplinary differences create frictions for developing a universalising, trans-disciplinary vocabulary for discussing data.
- 2 We did not include #stopIslam in our quantitative analysis, as there were too few tweets within each dataset that used this hashtag to constitute a meaningful sample.
- 3 Interestingly this definition aligns with earlier social scientific definitions of ‘big data’, with media theorist Lev [Manovich \(2011\)](#) explicitly drawing his use of the term from the data science definition. It is more general uses of big data since these early discussions that have led to divergences.
- 4 During COVID-19, BAME was commonly used to describe Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. It has since dropped out of usage due to criticisms relating to its homogenising effect and the exclusion of other groups.
- 5 An example of Twitter’s API documentation can be found on X Developer Platform (n.d.b.).

3

Triggers and time

Following the previous chapter's discussion of the complexity of platforms, our third chapter moves to the second element of our analysis: events. As outlined in [Chapter 1](#), the term 'trigger event' denotes newsworthy events that lead to the circulation of Islamophobia ([Awan and Zempi, 2015](#)). In recent years, social media have been perceived as an important conduit for the far-right to leverage trigger events, as a means of gaining support for extremist views and, in some instance, actions ([Awan and Khan-Williams, 2020](#); [Poole *et al.*, 2021](#)). Take this tweet, for example, posted during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Muslim foreign nationals found hiding in a Patna Mosque to evade coronavirus testing. (OpIndia_com, Twitter, 23 March 2020, 8.49am, 1736 RTs)

The tweet illustrates the connection that some account users were drawing, between the actions of some Muslims and the spread of the COVID-19. The majority of tweets in the reply thread were incredibly hostile, referring to the men as 'terrorists', arguing 'every mosque is used for jihad and violence' and using the hashtag #coronajihad. In another context, the men 'hiding' might have been described as 'socially distancing' – a praiseworthy action, protecting the lives of others. Here, they are targeted for violence. As we discuss below, this tweet and the hatred that it triggered were not aberrant in our datasets.

However, understanding the relationship between triggers and digital hate is not straightforward. A broad range of phenomena have been labelled as trigger events – from 9/11 to jokes made by politicians – and the very different scales, affordances and temporalities of these events have implications both for how these events are utilised to support Islamophobia and how ensuing Islamophobic discourse can be contested. Through developing our understandings of what trigger events are and how they work, this chapter offers a close examination of how interactions between events and social media platforms constrain and enable opportunities for contesting hate.

The first part of the chapter discusses quantitative content analysis, both in general and how the method was applied in our project. We then move on to present and analyse the principal quantitative findings, for each of the three trigger events we have sampled, and how they unfolded over time: Brexit was a calendar date news story, with coverage building to two days (election day and ‘Brexit Day’); Christchurch was a catastrophic event; and the COVID-19 pandemic was a rolling news story, updated on a daily (and at points an hourly) basis. Our analysis elucidates how the affordances of these different events – orientating to the future, the past and the present – structured the ways that Twitter users variously reacted to and narrativised them.

This chapter focuses predominantly on quantitative data, in conjunction with qualitative examples to contextualise the coding. Our quantitative findings present the results of twenty-four coded variables that we mapped across six weeks of data from each of the three events/news stories. These findings point to event-specific patterns in terms of how Islamophobia was articulated and contested. In particular, we foreground variables that speak to major differences across our datasets, such as key themes, national location, and the stance on Islam and/or Muslims taken in tweets. The quantitative data also points to differential levels of exchange and antagonism across datasets related to each event.

(Yet) more on methods

As detailed in [Chapter 2](#), our project combined computational, quantitative and qualitative methods to develop and analyse datasets from Twitter. This chapter is primarily concerned with discussing the results of the quantitative content analysis of the datasets and so, in order to contextualise this analysis, we feel it is important to elaborate further on this method and how it was operationalised.

The aims of quantitative content analysis are to categorise and then count significant features of a sample of texts (usually quite a few texts). It is used to examine the frequency of textual features – for example, themes, people, places, concepts, words, sentences, arguments, and so on – within a set of texts, and aims to quantify that presence in a systematic manner. Unlike computational research methods, categorisation and quantification are done manually – that is, a researcher (sometimes several, as a team) reads each text and decides on the value of each variable that they are quantifying. A text is defined as a stable unit of recorded communication – such as a tweet, in the case of this project. Once an analyst has data summarising what they have counted, they can go on to make broader points about the

processes and politics of representation. In other words, the *frequency* with which such themes or people or words or places (and so on) occur in a sample of texts is taken to be *significant* in some way. As Krippendorff (2004: xvii) states, ‘content analysis is an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent’.

There are several approaches and accounts of how to go about coding and counting the contents of texts (see the early approaches of Leites and de Sola Pool, 1942; Kaplan, 1943), but Berelson (1952: 263) offers a definition of quantitative content analysis that has subsequently been widely adopted as authoritative. He argued: ‘Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.’ Based on this definition, we can see that quantitative content analysis is meant to have four characteristics:

1. Objectivity. The variables and categories of analysis should be clear and precisely defined, so different analysts could apply them to the same body of content and (in theory) secure the same results.¹
2. It is systematic. All of the texts qualifying for analysis are analysed in terms of all the relevant variables and categories. We do not count the presence of something in one particular text, but then not count it in another text; we code the same variables, in the same way, for all texts in a dataset.
3. Quantification. The point of coding the sampled texts is that you can then provide quantified summaries of their contents and so make inferences about patterns of representation.
4. Quantitative content analysis only codes the manifest content of the sampled texts – that is, their denoted, rather than connoted, meanings. We should only aim to count what is there, not why it is like that, or any potential effects that this may have.

As stated above, the unit of analysis for quantitative content analysis is the text, however, this immediately created a methodological issue for our project: how to identify *a text*, given the interactive, multimodal and hypertextual nature of Twitter? If a tweet includes media content (for example, an image, a GIF or an audio-visual clip), should that be regarded as one text, or should the written and the visual be treated as two texts? If a tweet links to another text (for example, an online article or dataset), should that be treated as one text or two? Should an argument thread, involving two (or more) accounts, offering successive point and counter-point, be treated as a single text (the thread) or several (the tweets that constitute the thread)? How should quote-tweets be treated in general – are they one text or two? And, if the body of the tweet and the quoted tweet both qualify for analysis – that is, they both include the search terms that we used to build the dataset – should we still treat that as one tweet or two? After some

discussion, we settled on an approach: all tweets have a unique number, which is part of a unique URL, and so all materials included as part of that number (words, images, URLs) constitute the text. If a tweet includes any of the search terms we defined for the project (see [Chapter 2](#)), then it was included in the dataset as a text; if a tweet that includes any of the search terms was quote-tweeted, then that (both the retweeted material and any additional material) was treated as another single text, since the quote-tweet will have a new unique number. Individual tweets are texts, meaning that an argument thread is constituted by multiple texts (some of which used our search terms, and so were included in a dataset, and some of which did not). However, any linked material included in a tweet captured by our search terms was treated as separate text – linked material was external to Twitter, and so subsequent to the tweet, even if the URL did form part of the tweet/text.

Variables and the coding manual

The *sine qua non* of quantitative content analysis is the coding manual – the list of variables developed in order to quantify contents (see [Appendix 1](#)). No variable should be coded simply for the sake of it; any quantification of textual content is done in order to answer a research question. With that in mind, we developed the following broad research questions, specific to the quantitative content analysis:

- What are the basic features of the tweet?
- What are the contents of the tweet?
- What are the characteristics of the user/account?

For each of these broad research questions, we then developed more detailed sub-questions, and, from these, the variables that would help provide answers to our research questions:

- What are the basic features of the tweet?
 - What was the date and time of the tweet? How many times was it retweeted? What type of tweet (original tweet, quote-tweet, reply)?
- What are the contents of the tweet?
 - What are the topics (primary and secondary) of the tweet? Does the tweet include any images, emojis or URLs? What hashtags are included? Is the tweet supportive or critical of Muslims?
- What are the characteristics of the user/account?

Is the account suspended? What are the gender and religion of the account? What country are they based? What is their affiliation/job?

Some of these variables were ordinal (for example, date and time) or scalar (for example, number of retweets), however the vast majority were nominal, where we allocated specific values to categories. For example, the variable quantifying the status of the account was a simple binary:

Suspended account?

01 Yes

02 No

Other variables were similarly designed and very straightforward to code – for example, the three variables ‘does the tweet include any images/emojis/URLs’ were all coded 1 = yes and 2 = no.

The variables coding the primary and secondary topics of the tweet were the most elaborate and complex. We deliberately aimed for quite a fine granular approach, where the values for the variables were quite specific, to classify the content of the tweets in greater detail. During analysis, some of these topics were then combined, to produce more general categories and more simplified tables of results. Adopting a practice learned from prior research projects,² the options for topic were organised as clusters of values; organising values in this way improves the clarity of the coding manual, helps the coder identify the relevant value quicker, and so speeds up the coding process.

Some of these variable values were used to code the topic of tweets in all of the databases – these are indicated in bold in [Table 3.1](#).

The emboldened values in [Table 3.1](#) were included in the coding manuals that we used to quantify the contents of every database; the values that are not emboldened only featured in the Brexit coding manuals.

The values coding ‘general’ and ‘specific’ pro- or anti-Muslim topics perhaps require a little elaboration. The ‘general’ values were used when a tweet expressed a positive or negative view about Muslims but provided no detail or rationale. For example, tweets coded as ‘anti-Muslim, general’ were often equivalent to variations of ‘Muslims are awful’, or ‘I hate Muslims’. In contrast, the content of tweets coded as ‘pro-Muslim, general’ often amounted to variations of ‘Muslims are great’ or ‘Muslims are the best people’. The ‘specific’ values were used when a tweet provided detail or explanation, whether in the form of an anti-Muslim trope (for example, religious extremism, radicalisation, anti-Quran, anti-Islamic scripture, and so on) or pro-Muslim example (for example, reference to contribution to society, acts of kindness, personal sacrifice, religion of peace, scientific endeavours, and so on). We decided to have separate and specific values for (Islamist) terrorism and ‘Islamification’ to accurately quantify these two

Table 3.1 What was the topic of the tweet? (Brexit datasets)

01 Anti-Muslim, general	26 Pro-far-right agenda
02 Anti-Muslim, specific	27 Anti-far-right agenda
03 Terrorism	28 Pro-white supremacy
04 'Islamification'/spread of Islam	29 Anti-white supremacy
05 Scapegoating Muslims for Brexit	30 Immigration
06 Islamophobia is denied/exaggerated	31 Community relations/cohesion
	32 Relating Brexit to Indian politics
11 Pro-Muslim, general	33 Relating Brexit to US politics
12 Pro-Muslim, specific	34 Pro-LibDem
13 Muslims are victims/discrimination/ racism/Islamophobia	35 Anti-LibDem
14 Brexit and anti-Muslim politics	41 Left-wing criticism of mainstream media
15 Racism in British politics	42 Right-wing criticism of mainstream media
16 Racism in US politics	43 Tweet disseminates/premised on conspiracy theory
21 Politics, general	44 Tweet identifies/alleges conspiracy theory
22 Pro-Conservative/right agendas	45 accusation of antisemitism
23 Anti-Conservative/right agendas	46 antisemitism in content
24 Pro-Labour/left agendas	99 Other
25 Anti-Labour/left agendas/anti-'woke'	

anti-Muslim tropes given their centrality to contemporary Islamophobic discourse (Pratt and Woodlock, 2016; Elahi and Khan, 2017; All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, 2018).

Some tweets included topics that were specific to each of the three trigger events we analysed, and so the values in the coding manuals reflected those specificities. For example, when coding the Christchurch terrorist attack, we added the following topical code values:

- 32 Condolences to victims
- 33 Political solidarity
- 34 Causes of terrorism
- 35 Process of radicalisation
- 36 Extremism online
- 37 Language and reporting terrorism
- 38 Gun crime/gun ownership

The variable values used to code primary and secondary topics were left open ended, allowing us to add additional values that were unanticipated at the start of analysis. In practice, very few additional topical values were added.

The four variables quantifying the identities of users/account holders (that is, What is the gender and religion of the account? What country are they based in? What is their affiliation/job?) were coded using a combination of

the sampled tweets and the bios/self-descriptions of the account holders. For each sampled tweet we would read the tweet itself, in combination with the account bio, and see if their gender, religion, nationality and job/affiliation could be discerned. The national location of the tweet was sometimes provided in the tweet metadata, sometimes in the bios and sometimes in the body of the tweet. Similarly, religious identification – or disavowal of a religious identity (some accounts identified as agnostic or atheist) – occurred in three ways:

1. Explicit identification: where accounts directly state their religion in the bio ('Devout Christian') or explicitly identify the account holder's religion in the tweet (for example, 'As a Muslim...').
2. Entailed identification: where accounts use a specifically religious symbol in their bio (for example, an emoji cross or Star of David) or include themselves within a religious community (for example, the tweet refers to Muslims as 'we/us').
3. Implied identification: these are all cultural associations, included in either the tweet or the bio. For example, the tweet might mention that they are taking part in a religious celebration (for example, what they are doing this Ramadan), or it might quote from a religious text in a manner that implies agreement, or include prayers (Inshallah, Mashallah, and so on) in their tweet; they might refer to a religious Prophet or religious leader in a way that indicates their faith; or include emojis associated with Islam (for example, the star and crescent) in their bio.³

If an account included information in their bio that (explicitly, logically or implicitly) identified them as Muslim, then all of their sampled tweets could be coded as 'Muslim account'. However, many users don't announce their faith in their bio and so their faith (or not) could only be assessed using the content of each sampled tweet. Identifying the faith of such accounts was done on a tweet-by-tweet basis. What that meant in practice was that if the bio did not (explicitly, logically or implicitly) identify them as religious, and the sampled tweet did not (explicitly, logically or implicitly) identify them as religious, then the tweet would not have been coded as produced by a religious account *even in cases where we knew (from knowledge of the rest of the sample) they had identified themselves as religious in previous tweets*. Some readers may object to that coding strategy, but it was chosen in fidelity to the methodological assumptions of content analysis – specifically, that we objectively code the manifest content of each tweet. If we code a tweet produced by a Muslim account, because 'we knew' it was a Muslim account, then that is drawing on knowledge that someone else might not have; it is coding based on *contextual* understanding, rather than the manifest *textual* meanings, and so undermines the objectivity of the approach. The corollary of this approach is that the actual frequency of tweets from religious accounts is no doubt higher than we could objectively quantify. Similarly, the numbers

of tweets where gender was coded as ‘Unidentified’, the Affiliation was coded as ‘Unidentified’ or the national location was coded as ‘Unidentified’ are also higher than they would have been, if we had coded using contextual knowledge.

The remainder of this chapter will present and discuss the main quantitative findings, for each of the news stories we examined. In turn, the chapter will examine the discussion on Twitter in the build up to the ‘Brexit’ election and ‘Brexit Day’ (two diary events, where we know in advance that something will happen); the Christchurch terrorist attack (a catastrophic event, that has happened); and the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (a rolling news story). In this chapter, we will concentrate on the first two research questions – ‘What are the basic features of the tweet?’ and ‘What are the contents of the tweet?’ – and discuss the results of the third research question (What are the characteristics of the user/account?) in [Chapter 5](#).

At certain points, we will include specific tweets as qualitative exemplars of quantitative patterns. The tweets are presented in quotation marks to ensure that they are properly demarcated, but they are only direct quotes if taken from users/institutions in the public eye (see [Chapter 1](#) for discussion of the ethics of quoting from Twitter). For all other accounts, we have instead paraphrased the original tweets, unless either the tweet or the account has since been deleted and so the user cannot be identified through the words we quote. When paraphrasing the original tweets, we took care to ensure our transformation captured the original meaning. This approach is in line with the ethical guidelines proposed by the Association of Internet Researchers ([franzke et al., 2020](#)).

The ‘Brexit election’ (2019) and ‘Brexit Day’ (2020)

Our first two databases summarise the responses on Twitter to two related news stories, charting stage posts of the UK’s drawn-out road to ‘Brexit’. The 2019 UK general election – held on Thursday 12 December 2019 – was colloquially known as ‘the Brexit election’, due to the way the then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson effectively positioned it as a referendum for his so-called ‘Brexit deal’. We sampled three weeks of tweets, leading up to and then beyond the election (28 November 2019 to 19 December 2019) to capture the ways that the election, Brexit and Islam/Muslims were being discussed. The second news story was the lead up to 31 January 2020 – again, colloquially known as ‘Brexit Day’, at which point Johnson’s ‘Brexit deal’ would come into effect and the UK would leave the EU. We sampled three weeks of tweets, leading up to and then beyond the day (17 January 2020 to 7 February 2020) (see [Table 3.2](#)).

Table 3.2 Summary data: Brexit

	Sample 1: general election, 28 November 2019 to 19 December 2019	Sample 2: ‘Brexit Day’, 17 January 2020 to 7 February 2020
Total tweets	26,473	16,061
Original tweets	6653	3554
Retweets	19,820	12,507
Of which, quote-tweets	2441	1554

Both news stories were what is known as diary events – news events where we know in advance that something is going to happen on a particular day, and news reporting covers the build up to the day, whether as campaigning (in the case of the election) or preparation and reflection (in the case of ‘Brexit Day’). These trigger events are future facing, orientating to the possible consequences (positive and negative) of something that is due to happen. They therefore reveal, in different ways, the political imaginaries of different groups of Twitter users: what they thought and/or hoped would happen. These users coalesced into networks, defined by their relative evaluations of the political possibilities opened up, and closed down, by the election and ‘Brexit Day’.

Sample one

The election sample was dominated by users criticising the beliefs and actions of right-wing political parties, particularly the Conservative Party and the Brexit Party. Much of this amounted to left-wing (some specifically supporting the Labour Party) and Muslim users criticising the Conservative Party for their Islamophobia. Criticism of the Conservative Party particularly surfaced following the leaders’ debate, broadcast on BBC1, during which many users live-tweeted their reactions. In response to a question about Islamophobia in the Conservative Party, the then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson replied that he would ‘Get Brexit done’. Twitter let out a collective howl of disbelief, reflected in the most frequently used emojis in the dataset (see Table 3.3).

The most frequent emoji in Table 3.3, by a large margin, is a (medium skin tone) woman facepalming, which is usually used to display frustration or embarrassment about a person or a situation. This emoji was used in a tweet posted by the (then Conservative) Baroness Warsi, expressing her anger at Johnson’s answer, adding ‘The quality of debate on this issue was shameful’.

Table 3.3 Sampled emojis, the ‘Brexit general election’

Description	Emoji	Frequency
Woman facepalming medium skin tone		1156
Face with symbols on mouth		464
Face with tears of joy		359
Check mark		244
Thumbs up		233
Multiply		215
Backhand index pointing down		128
Rose		124
Black medium-small square		120
Face with rolling eyes		118

The tweet was subsequently retweeted 1041 times, the fifth highest in sample one. Her affective response is also similar to the tenth most popular emoji in Table 3.3, the face with rolling eyes, used to express disapproval, frustration or disdain. The second most frequent emoji is the angry-red face with a black bar and white typographical symbols over the mouth (for example, @#\$%&!), which represent swear words. This complex emoji is used to convey a reflexive outburst of anger or frustration, but with a comedic edge; it communicates both an affective state and a sense of ‘*can you believe this crap?*’ All three emojis, then, clearly convey an aboutness (Ahmed, 2004); they are an affective response to Brexit and, more specifically, a stance on how Johnson deflected a question about Islamophobia in the Conservative Party with his *non sequitur* to ‘Get Brexit done’.

Other notable events which trended on Twitter during these three weeks included an argument between two prospective parliamentary candidates, over whether Geoff Seeff (Liberal Democrats) used ‘dog whistle’ Islamophobic comments targeting Faiza Shaheen (Labour). There were also a series of negative stories about Brexit Party candidates and supporters. In one, Channel 4 news covertly filmed Brexit Party councillor David Mincher proudly boasting that he once attempted to bury a pig’s head under a mosque. The Channel 4 report revealed that he complained that Muslims were ‘outbreeding us’ and that they ‘live like animals’.⁴ The Brexit Party founder, Catherine Blaiklock, also resigned from the party after posting a series of anti-Muslim comments. She went on to back the Conservatives in the election, leading to another round of critical (left-wing) tweets about

what that revealed of the Conservative Party and their prejudiced views about Muslims.

Sample two

The sample of tweets from around 'Brexit Day' were more mixed than general election data, with anti-Muslim tropes and arguments featuring far more prominently. The issue of Muslim 'grooming gangs' was tweeted very frequently, reflecting what [Cockbain and Tufail \(2020: 3\)](#) argue is a misleading, sensationalist and racist narrative about Muslim men, which has dominated 'political and public debate around child sexual exploitation'. This fixation on Twitter was sometimes expanded out to criticise the BBC for, apparently, wilfully ignoring the issue. The words 'male', 'Islamic' and 'paedophiles' were collocated in 1873 tweets (11.7 per cent of 'big data' sample), whilst 'France', 'Muslim' and 'grooming' and 'Pakistani', 'Muslim' and 'grooming' were also frequently collocated in tweets (157 and 153 tweets, respectively). These trends were rather baffling since there hadn't been any new cases or developments to substantiate these false associations in January 2020. However, the preoccupation with grooming gangs seemed to be linked with a far-right imagined scenario that, following 'Brexit Day', 'we' will be able to rid the UK of Muslims.

The leading story about Islamophobia in sample two concerned Conservative MP Daniel Kawczynski, who had spoken at a political conference that included far-right anti-Muslim politicians. The Labour MP David Lammy first quote-tweeted the political editor of Bloomberg UK, who broke the story, adding that it is significant that Kawczynski still had the whip, in contrast to the twenty-one Conservative MPs who were ousted from the party for trying to block a no-deal Brexit (2227 retweets). Two days later, Lammy again quote-tweeted the political editor of Bloomberg UK, who reported that Kawczynski had only been 'given a formal warning' rather than removed from the party. Lammy added this was a telling decision, revealing that the party is indifferent about its MPs speaking 'at far-right conferences with Islamophobes and anti-Semites' (1547 retweets).

Quantitative analysis

The distribution of the tweets posted across the two samples provides a clear graphic representation of the temporalities of the news stories, and the ways that they both build to a crescendo around the date of the diary event.

Taking these in reverse order, [Figure 3.2](#) shows a clear cumulative distribution, with the number of daily tweets peaking on 1 February 2020, the day after ‘Brexit Day’ (eighty-eight tweets). Either side of the peak on 1 February 2020, the number of daily tweets is still high – 31 January = eighty-three tweets; 2 February = seventy-three tweets – representing the top three days in the sample, in terms of the number of tweets posted. In contrast, the frequency of general election tweets, in [Figure 3.1](#), is pulled away from a neat cumulative distribution by the sizable spike of tweets on 6 December (160 tweets, 16 per cent of the sample). This significant increase is attributable to the flurry of users live-tweeting the final leaders’ debate, and specifically in response to Johnson dodging the question regarding Islamophobia in his party. Without that spike – if, say, the number of tweets posted on 6 December was similar to days either side (5 December = forty-four tweets; 7 December = thirty-four tweets) – the tweets would have followed a broad trend of building in frequency, to the peak that we see in the days immediately before the general election (10 December = seventy-seven tweets; 11 December = sixty-five tweets). So, whilst ‘lumpier’ than the distribution we observe in sample two (ahead of Brexit Day), both graphs still exhibit a development we would expect of important diary events, with attention and discussion of the significance of the event gradually building and peaking on/near the day itself.

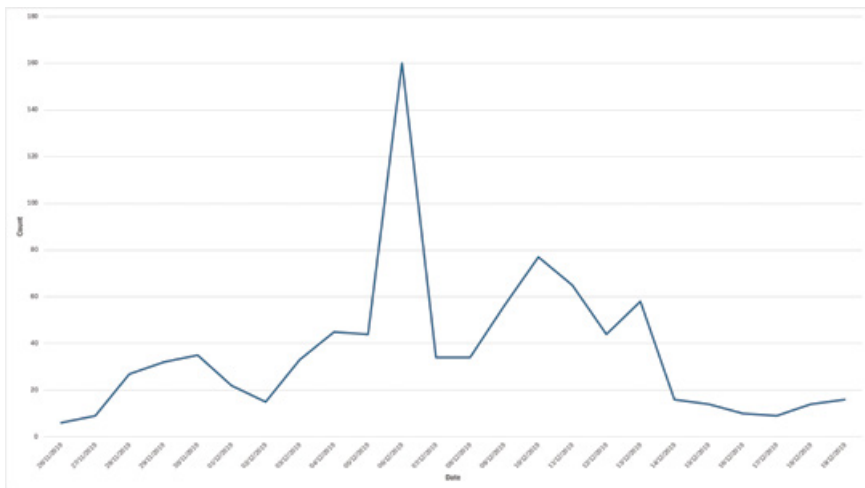


Figure 3.1 Frequency of tweets, election sample

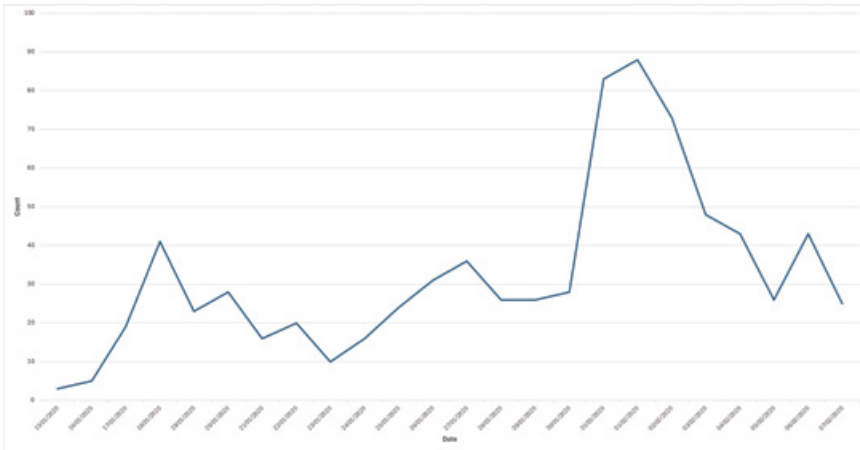


Figure 3.2 Frequency of tweets, 'Brexit Day' sample

Table 3.4 Tweet types

	Sample 1, general election		Sample 2, 'Brexit Day'	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Original tweet	448	44.8	272	27.2
Quote-tweet	377	37.7	452	45.2
Reply	175	17.5	276	27.6
Total	1000	100.0	1000	100.0

Table 3.4 shows that there were considerably more 'original tweets' during the run up to the general election (448, 44.8 per cent) than there were in the run up to 'Brexit Day' at the end of January 2020 (272, 27.2 per cent). Correspondingly, there were more quote-tweets and replies in the later sample period. These differences suggest a greater amount of discursive interaction between accounts in the later sample period – something that we examine in greater depth later in the chapter.

What are the contents of the tweets?

In both samples, there were clear relationships between the partisan politics of the tweets (left-wing versus right-wing) and the position taken regarding both Islam/Muslims and the desirability of Brexit (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5 Position on Islam/Muslims

	Sample 1, general election		Sample 2, 'Brexit Day'	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Anti-Muslim	147	14.7	430	43.0
Supports Muslims	478	47.8	308	30.8
Mixed	250	25.0	204	20.4
Neutral/no view	125	12.5	58	5.8
Total	1000	100.0	1000	100.0

The 2020 sample is both more anti-Muslim (43 per cent of tweets compared to 14.7 per cent) and more polarised than the 2019 sample – in 2019, 62.5 per cent of tweets expressed either support or opposition to Muslims, which rose to 73.8 per cent in 2020. Correspondingly, the percentage of neutral tweets fell from 12.5 per cent to 5.8 per cent.

As Table 3.6 demonstrates, the opinions expressed on Brexit between the two sample periods echo the above findings: there was a significant increase in pro-Brexit sentiment (a 3.7 x increase, from ninety-one tweets to 336), a drop in anti-Brexit tweets and a greater polarisation. In fact, neutral tweets halved, dropping from 253 tweets in 2019 (25.3 per cent) to 115 in 2020 (11.5 per cent). Indeed, the similarity between these patterns – an increase in both pro-Brexit and anti-Muslim sentiment, and a corresponding drop in neutral tweets – made us suspect that there may be a statistically significant relationship between these political positions. Table 3.7 cross-tabulates the two variables.

Table 3.7 shows clustering in three cells – which we have emboldened, for emphasis – showing a high frequency of tweets that were both pro-Brexit and anti-Muslim, anti-Brexit and pro-Muslim, or mixed on both matters. In other words, if a tweet expressed anti-Brexit political views it was also most likely to support Muslims; in contrast, if a tweet expressed pro-Brexit views it was also most likely to be Islamophobic. In order to test whether there was any statistical relationship between the tweets' position on Islam and their position on Brexit, we ran a chi-square test.

A chi-square test is a statistical test used to compare observed results with expected results. The purpose of this test is to determine if a difference between observed data and expected data is due to chance, or if it is due to a relationship between the variables – in this case, if there is a statistical relationship between the variable that recorded the tweets' position on Islam and the variable that recorded its position on Brexit. Table 3.8 shows a significance value of $p < 0.001$ for the Pearson Chi-Square, meaning that

Table 3.6 Position on Brexit

	Sample 1, general election		Sample 2, 'Brexit Day'	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Anti-Brexit	352	35.2	281	28.1
Pro-Brexit	91	9.1	336	33.6
Mixed	304	30.4	268	26.8
Neutral/no view	253	25.3	115	11.5
Total	1000	100.0	1000	100.0

Table 3.7 Position on Islam/Muslims, by position on Brexit (2019)

	Anti-Brexit	Pro-Brexit	Mixed	Neutral/no view	Total
Anti-Muslim	4	71	39	33	147
Supports Muslims	254	5	113	105	477
Mixed	63	7	137	44	251
Neutral/no view	30	8	16	71	125
Total	351	91	305	253	1000

Table 3.8 Chi-Square tests (position on Islam/Muslims * Brexit, 2019)

	Value	df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	520.502 ^a	9	.000
Likelihood ratio	428.550	9	.000
Linear-by-linear Association	21.097	1	.000
N of valid cases	1000		

Note: ^a 0 cells (0.0 per cent) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.38.

there is less than 0.1 per cent probability that the results are down to chance. In other words, there is very strong evidence of an association between opinions on Islam and Brexit in the sample: if a tweet is anti-Muslim it is very likely to be pro-Brexit; conversely, if it is pro-Muslim it is very likely to be anti-Brexit. As [Tables 3.9](#) and [3.10](#) show, this statistical relationship was even more apparent in the 2020 data, during the build up to 'Brexit Day'.

Table 3.9 Position on Islam/Muslims, by position on Brexit (2020)

	Anti-Brexit	Pro-Brexit	Mixed	Neutral/no view	Total
Anti-Muslim	7	284	81	58	430
Supports Muslims	195	13	75	25	308
Mixed	60	31	99	14	204
Neutral/no view	19	8	13	18	58
Total	281	336	268	115	1000

Table 3.10 Chi-Square tests (position on Islam/Muslims * Brexit, 2020)

	Value	df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	559.720 ^a	9	.000
Likelihood ratio	618.508	9	.000
Linear-by-linear Association	1.862	1	.172
N of valid cases	1000		

Note: ^a 0 cells (0.0 per cent) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.67.

The statistical significance was repeated for the 2020 sample of Brexit tweets. [Table 3.10](#) shows a significance value of $p < 0.001$ for the Pearson Chi-Square, meaning that, again, there is less than 0.1 per cent probability that the results are down to chance. Therefore, there is very strong evidence of an association between opinions on Islam and Brexit in the second sample too: in the build up to ‘Brexit Day’, if a tweet was anti-Muslim it was likely to be pro-Brexit; conversely, if it was pro-Muslim it was likely to be anti-Brexit. (The ‘Linear-by-Linear Association’ statistic is used when the variables are ordinal; both of these variables were nominal, so this result can be ignored.)

We also ran chi-square tests to see if there was any statistical relationship between the self-declared gender of account users and their views of Brexit and Muslims. We found that there was no relationship, at all, between either gender and political position on Islam/Muslims ($p = 0.771$) and gender and political position on Brexit ($p = 0.197$). Indeed, 11.1 per cent of tweets from female users were anti-Muslim, almost identical to 11.6 per cent of tweets from male users.

The association between anti-Muslim and pro-Brexit politics is also demonstrated when cross-tabulating the topics of tweets and their position on Brexit.

A number of patterns are observable in [Tables 3.11](#) and [3.12](#). First, there is another clear relationship between anti-Muslim politics and pro-Brexit politics: there were no tweets supporting Muslims in 2019 that were also

Table 3.11 Topic, by position on Brexit (2019)

	Anti-Brexit	Pro-Brexit	Mixed	Neutral/no view	Total
Anti-Muslim	2	26	24	22	74
Supports Muslims	100	0	75	78	253
Anti-right politics	205	6	133	72	416
Anti-left politics	19	38	22	34	113
Terrorism	3	9	10	8	30
Politics (general and international)	13	2	26	28	69
Immigration	2	4	9	1	16
Other	7	6	6	10	29
Total	351	91	305	253	1000

Table 3.12 Topic, by position on Brexit (2020)

	Anti-Brexit	Pro-Brexit	Mixed	Neutral/no view	Total
Anti-Muslim	0	88	42	42	172
Supports Muslims	77	15	59	23	174
Anti-right politics	161	5	35	15	216
Anti-left politics	11	178	31	17	237
Terrorism	4	13	24	5	46
Politics (general and international)	12	10	31	4	57
Immigration	13	14	12	3	42
Other	3	13	34	6	56
Total	281	336	268	115	1000

pro-Brexit, a figure which rose to only 8.8 per cent ($n = 15$) of tweets in 2020. (This small number of tweets were almost entirely posted by a pro-Brexit Muslim organisation, affiliated to the Conservative Party.) In 2019, the position on Brexit within Islamophobic tweets was quite split, with only 35.1 per cent ($n = 26$) of anti-Muslim tweets also supporting Brexit, which was only slightly more than Islamophobic tweets which were neutral on the question ($n = 22$, 29.7 per cent). However, this relationship became much more stark in the build up to 'Brexit Day', where 51.2 per cent ($n = 88$) of tweets sharing anti-Muslim topics also supported Brexit. The tables also suggest a relationship between partisan politics and support for Brexit – there are clusters of tweets that are anti-right and anti-Brexit as well as anti-left and pro-Brexit, a pattern which deepens in 2020, when 74.5 per cent of anti-right tweets were anti-Brexit and 75.1 per cent ($n = 178$) of anti-left tweets were pro-Brexit.

To draw these variables together, then: First, it is very clear that Brexit was primarily a right-wing political project; during the (perhaps surprisingly) less polarised period during the general election (45 per cent of tweets took a position for or against Brexit), there are marked clusters of tweets that were both anti-left-wing and pro-Brexit, and anti-right-wing and anti-Brexit. This pattern of frequencies becomes even more unambiguous in the build up to 'Brexit Day'; 61.7 per cent of tweets now expressed a view for or against Brexit ($n = 617$) which were, in the main, starkly polarised: 75.1 per cent of anti-left-wing tweets were also pro-Brexit ($n = 178$) and 74.5 per cent of anti-right-wing tweets were also anti-Brexit ($n = 161$). For example, a Black woman campaigning 'door-to-door' for Labour tweeted feeling afraid that she was going to be assaulted by a man who opened his door, immediately started yelling about immigrants and tore up her leaflets. Her tweet was quote-retweeted by a Muslim woman (veiled in her user photo) who agreed that she also doesn't feel safe canvassing for Labour, and that the focus on Brexit during the election has been 'incredibly toxic' for minoritised communities. Following the result of the election, one account tweeted sarcastic condolences to 'all left wingers and Islamists' for 'Ayatollah Jeremy Corbyn's' election defeat; he added 'Islamism and Sharia Law are close at hand' and that it is time for the West to 'wake up! [#Brexit](#)'. The tweet tagged nine other users, including Jihad Watch, Ben Shapiro and the right-wing NGO Turning Point, pointing to some of the networking that takes place between these and other like-minded accounts.

Second, Brexit, as a right-wing project, provided the political pretext for the expression of Islamophobic views, particularly regarding immigration and reducing the number of Muslims in the UK. For example, tweeting a link to a news story that suggested British Muslims were preparing to leave Britain if Johnson won the election, one account simply added a cheery 'Bye

bye!'. Another user (account since deleted) shared a Sky News report on the London Bridge terrorist incident, and added 'BREXIT LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT'. Another tweet, retweeted thirty-two times before it was deleted, shared the URL to a Breitbart article reporting an ISIS refugee camp, and argued that it demonstrated that Muslims want to 'Slaughter non-Muslims. And they are being let in all across #EU ... Thank God for #Brexit'.

In addition to examining the topical content of the sampled tweets, we also need to consider their visibility – which we measured in retweets (see [Table 3.13](#)).

The number of retweets during the two sample periods also shows an increase in the prominence of Islamophobic tweets. Anti-Muslim tweets were retweeted 3733 times in the build up to 'Brexit Day', almost three and a half times more frequently than during the build up to the 2019 general election (1077 retweets). Although there were fewer tweets supporting Muslims ($n = 308$) than those opposing Muslims in 2020 ($n = 430$), they were still much more frequently retweeted (6478 retweets). However, the sum total of pro-Muslim retweets was substantially less in 2020 than 2019 (10,353 retweets). Echoing the findings above, the number of retweets also reveals that the 2020 sample was much more polarised than in 2019 – tweets that were neutral about Muslims were only retweeted 108 times (a dramatic reduction from 1487 in 2019).

Even though there were fewer anti-Brexit tweets in 2020 compared to 2019, [Table 3.14](#) shows that the number of anti-Brexit retweets actually increased, suggesting that users who opposed Brexit were engaging in more 'clicktivist' forms of participation, rather than sustained engagement and new narrative construction. The large number of pro-Brexit tweets were on average retweeted less frequently (pro-Brexit mean = 8; anti-Brexit mean = 19), resulting in a lower sum total. The retweeting of neutral tweets showed a particularly marked decrease of more than 80 per cent, down from 4112 retweets during the general election to 782 in the build up to 'Brexit Day'.

Table 3.13 Number of retweets, by position on Islam/Muslims

	Sample 1, general election		Sample 2, 'Brexit Day'	
	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum
Anti-Muslim	7	1077	9	3733
Supports Muslims	22	10,353	21	6478
Mixed	19	4759	4	859
Neutral/no view	12	1487	2	108

Table 3.14 Number of retweets, by position on Brexit

	Sample 1, general election		Sample 2, 'Brexit Day'	
	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum
Anti-Brexit	14	4944	19	5211
Pro-Brexit	8	764	8	2673
Mixed	26	7856	9	2512
Neutral/no view	16	4112	7	782

Quote-tweets represent a particular form of retweet, allowing users to simultaneously share and comment upon the views of other users. In addition to quantifying the number of retweets, we also coded the evaluative position that users adopted with regard to the material shared – specifically, whether they agreed, disagreed, provided mixed or qualified support for the quoted tweet. Cross-tabulating those evaluations with the political views of the tweet (vis-à-vis Brexit and Islam/Muslims) revealed an interesting pattern in the datasets. In Tables 3.15 and 3.16, we focus on whether users agreed or disagreed with the material in the tweet they quoted; the percentages in each table represent the proportion of retweeted tweets (the other options were mixed/qualified support, other and not applicable).

First, it is notable that, regardless of the political position taken regarding Brexit or Islam/Muslims, it is far more likely that users quote-tweeted material that they agreed with, rather than disagreed with. That said, in both samples, tweets characterised by Islamophobic views are both more likely to agree with the material they quote *and* more likely to disagree, compared with tweets that are supportive of Muslims (comparing the percentage of tweets, not the number). The same is true regarding Brexit – tweets characterised by pro-Brexit views are both more likely to agree with the material they quote *and* more likely to disagree, compared with anti-Brexit tweets.

During the general election, tweets characterised by Islamophobic views were over 10 per cent more likely to adopt one of these Manichean positions – for or against – than pro-Muslim tweets; this difference narrowed somewhat in the build up to 'Brexit Day', but Islamophobic tweets were still 7 per cent more likely to straightforwardly argue for or against the material they were sharing. On Brexit, the difference is greater still. During the general election, tweets supporting Brexit were nearly 15 per cent more likely to agree or disagree with quoted material than anti-Brexit tweets, which reduced to around 10 per cent more likely in the build up to 'Brexit Day'.

Table 3.15 Agreement/disagreement with quoted tweets, general election

Politics of the tweet	Agreement/endorsement		Disagreement		
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Cum. %
Anti-Muslim	46	31.3	15	10.2	41.5
Supports Muslims	109	22.9	37	7.8	30.7
Anti-Brexit	71	20.2	16	4.6	24.8
Pro-Brexit	29	31.9	7	7.7	39.6

Table 3.16 Agreement/disagreement with quoted tweets, 'Brexit Day'

Politics of the tweet	Agreement/endorsement		Disagreement		
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Cum. %
Anti-Muslim	135	31.4	39	9.1	40.5
Supports Muslims	88	28.6	15	4.9	33.5
Anti-Brexit	69	24.6	15	5.3	29.9
Pro-Brexit	109	32.4	23	6.8	39.2

What this seems to suggest is that quote-tweets characterised by anti-Brexit and/or pro-Muslim political views are more mixed, and more measured, in their assessment of the material they quote than tweets characterised by pro-Brexit and/or anti-Muslim political views. When quote-tweeting materials, tweets characterised by pro-Brexit and/or anti-Muslim political views are much more likely to offer black/white assessments of their value, eschewing nuance or moderation in favour of strong judgment.

The Christchurch terrorist attack (2019)

On 15 March 2019, an extreme-right, white-supremacist terrorist assaulted two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. He first attacked the Al Noor Mosque at 1:40 pm (local time), and then, after driving at speed to the eastern side of the city, attacked the Linwood Islamic Centre at 1:52 pm. He livestreamed the first seventeen minutes of his crimes on Facebook, until the

New Zealand police contacted Facebook, and the video was taken down. On 27 August 2020, the terrorist – who, following the [Royal Commission \(2020\)⁵](#) and [Tilley and Aji \(2023\)](#), we will not name – pled guilty to fifty-one murders, forty attempted murders and engaging in a terrorist act. He was sentenced to life without parole, the first time a court in New Zealand has sentenced a person to prison for the rest of their life.

The event is in many ways an archetypal negative news story: a large number of innocent people, going about their everyday lives, were unexpectedly killed. [Harcup and O'Neill \(2017\)](#) provide a particularly influential inventory of *news values* – in other words, the qualities that an event needs to possess for it to be considered (and reported) *as news*. By their terms, this event was an example of ‘Bad News’; it possessed ‘Magnitude’ (a very large number of deaths and casualties); ‘Conflict’; ‘Audio-visuals’ (arresting photographs and videos from the scene); ‘Shareability’; and ‘Surprise’ (stochastic terrorism, such as this attack, is statistically probable but whose specifics cannot be predicted; see [Hamm and Spaaij, 2017](#)). All reporting of the attacks, even those summarising any repercussions now (whenever ‘now’ indexed) are a response to the attack. That is, they orientate to the past. Though this may seem an obvious point, we make it in order to draw attention to the type of trigger event that the attack represented: an event that has taken place.

For this dataset we sampled three dates: a month of tweets, which started the day of the attack (15 March 2019 to 15 April 2019); followed by a week of tweets three months later (15 June 2019 to 21 June 2019); and a final week of tweets six months after the day of the attack (15 September 2019 to 21 September 2019).

[Table 3.17](#) shows the scale of the initial response to the attack, and the drop in tweet frequency after three and six months has elapsed. Comparing the ratios of retweet to original tweets reveals some interesting insights into the engagement of users, during these three sample periods. In the first month after the attack, 88.02 per cent of the sampled tweets were retweets (of which 176,440 were quote-tweets, 5.69 per cent of the total) compared to original tweets (11.98 per cent). This percentage was even higher in the #helloworld sub-corpus, where 90.91 per cent of the sampled tweets were retweets and only 9.09 per cent were original tweets. These percentages indicate an event where users were simply sharing information without feeling the need (or the ability) to add material of their own preparation. By sample two, retweets still represented the largest portion of the sample, but the percentage had dropped to 74.67 per cent, the original tweets had risen to 25.33 per cent; the combined original and quote-retweets represented 26.27 per cent of the third sample. So, though much lower in number,

Table 3.17 Summary data: Christchurch terror attack

	Sample 1 15 March to 15 April 2019	Sample 2 15 to 21 June 2019	Sample 3 15 to 21 September 2019	Hashtag #hellobrother
Total tweets	3,099,138	8072	2870	25,084
Original tweets	371,225 (11.98%)	2045 (25.33%)	547 (19.06%)	2281 (9.09%)
Retweets	2,727,913 (88.02%)	6027 (74.67%)	2323 (80.94%)	22,803 (90.91%)
Of which, quote-tweets	176,440 (5.69%)	756 (9.37%)	207 (7.21%)	1,435 (5.72%)

tweets posted in the second and (to a lesser extent) the third sample periods may reflect a broader range of users' views and opinions.

Sample one

The terrorist attack on the two Christchurch mosques was the worst in New Zealand's history. The reaction to the attack on Twitter was immediate and vociferous. We sampled over three million tweets on or about the terrorist attack and its repercussions in the month following the attack, and the vast majority of those tweets were posted in the first forty-eight hours. Celebrities, politicians, sportspeople and other public figures attracted a large number of likes and retweets for their condolences to the victims and the Muslim community. Only forty-seven of the top 1000 tweets criticised or attacked Muslims, a large portion of which were posted after Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern wore a hijab to meet and comfort the relatives of the victims. The number of neutral tweets was also quite low, with many news organisations reporting the story in a way that was sympathetic and supportive to the victims.

The affective tenor of the response to the atrocity is clearly indicated by the emojis used most frequently in the sampled tweets.

The most frequent emoji – loudly crying face – is associated with inconsolable grief; two others show tears and sadness; and the remaining emojis show hearts (one broken heart) and praying hands. Note that Table 3.18 only shows the emojis in tweets captured by our search terms; there were many thousands of other tweets sent in reply to key tweets reporting the event, some containing only emojis ('❤️ 🙏 ❤️'), others

combining emojis with reported affective states ('I'm crying'; 'My heart is broken') or exclamations ('awful'). These tweets index widespread affective responses to the terrorist attack. They not only work as an expression of sympathy and solidarity with the targeted Muslim community but also help constitute an affective community characterised by 'a rapid coming together of a transnational public in opposition to Islamophobia that dissipated equally rapidly' (Poole *et al.*, 2023: 9). One emoji in Table 3.18 stands as an outlier to this heartache and anguish – a laughing face with tears of joy. This could reflect cruel disinhibition that characterises so much online discourse (Suler, 2004; Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017), with users 'laughing' at the event. However, some 'tears of joy' emojis were also posted by opponents of Islamophobia in response to a follow-up event: on 15 March, hours after the attack, a far-right senator for Queensland (Australia) issued a press release, where he claimed 'The real cause of bloodshed on New Zealand streets today is the immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand in the first place ... As we read in Matthew 26:52, "all they that take the sword, shall perish by the sword".' At a televised press conference the following day (16 March 2019), a seventeen-year old called William Connolly struck him on the back of the head with an egg; Anning punched him twice, before Connolly was wrestled into a choke hold. Video clips of the event, identified only as 'Egg boy', were tweeted and retweeted, some adding 'Lo!', 'tears of joy' and other emojis indicating that they welcomed Connolly's actions.

Table 3.18 Sampled emojis, Christchurch terrorist attack

Description	Emoji	Frequency
Loudly crying face		88,530
Crying face		77,896
Red heart		67,873
Broken heart		53,351
Red heart		46,340
Downcast face with sweat		26,588
Purple heart		21,493
Praying hands light skin tone		12,586
Face with tears of joy		12,349
Praying hands		12,027

Sample two

In the second sample, the majority of tweets were still supportive of Muslims and critical of Islamophobia. Reports that the Christchurch terrorist was planning to plead not guilty attracted a large number of tweets from news organisations, as well as from activists and individuals critical of him and his ideology (in the end, he pled guilty to all charges). Tweets critical of Muslims clustered around two news stories – first, that a New Zealand man (labelled a neo-Nazi in some tweets and simply a businessman in others) had been jailed for sharing the terrorist’s video, which many accounts complained was a threat to freedom of speech. Second, following New Zealand’s ban on assault rifles, semi-automatic guns, high-capacity magazines and parts that can be used to build military style-semi automatic weapons, a flurry of tweets from American accounts advocated for the right to bear arms and speculated that a similar ban might be enforced in America.

Sample three

Six months after the terrorist attack, the percentage of anti-Muslim tweets in our quantitative content analysis (the top 500 tweets) had risen to 10.8 per cent of the sample. Articles marking the six-month commemoration of the attack were frequently (re)tweeted, as were articles describing how the Muslim community in Christchurch were responding and rebuilding. Some of the most retweeted tweets used the occasion of an international meeting, attended by world leaders including Jacinda Ardern and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to criticise Modi for his anti-Muslim politics. Tweets criticising New Zealand’s gun control had grown more strident, with some suggesting conspiracy explanations or arguing that, without assault rifles, New Zealand was now ‘defenseless to multiculturalism’. Many such tweets, in effect, recontextualised the ideological rationale of the terrorist.

Quantitative analysis

The first thing to note is the scale of the sample – over three million tweets were sent in the month following the attack, the largest sample of tweets in our study by a significant margin.

Figure 3.3 provides a visual mapping of the response on Twitter to this type of trigger event. The trigger event itself is a singular moment, a disaster that occurred which is then reported and responded to, with the intensity (and frequency) of that response decreasing over time. The second and third date ranges show progressively less public engagement with the story, with a little over 8000 tweets in the second sample and only 2800 in the third.

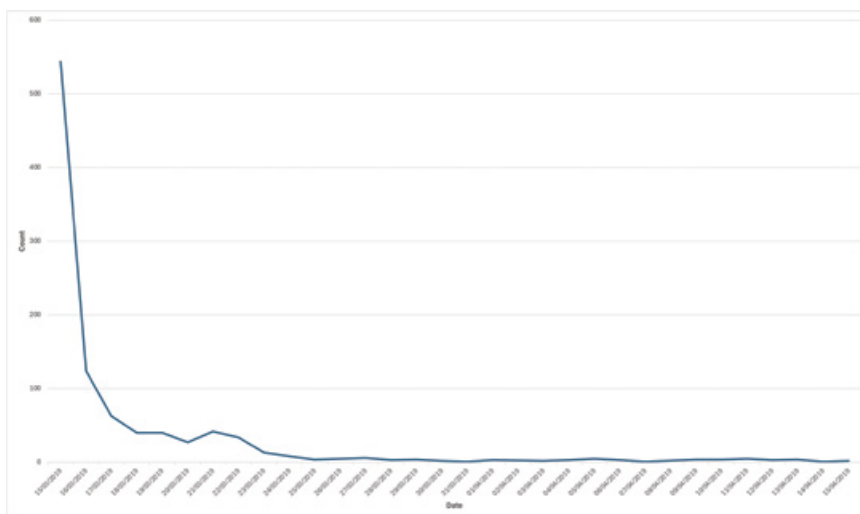


Figure 3.3 Timeline of tweets, Christchurch sample one

Table 3.19 shows the response to the trigger event was markedly international.

Interest in tweeting about the attack was maintained most clearly in the US, where the decision of the New Zealand to ban ownership of assault rifles resonated with activists both in favour of, and against, the US adopting similar measures.

What are the contents of the tweets?

Initially there was outpouring of support for Muslims, both the victims and the wider Muslim community in New Zealand. Table 3.20 shows 73 per cent of tweets were supportive, but 4.7 per cent still managed to respond to the event by criticising or attacking Muslims. The number of neutral tweets was also quite low, with many news organisations reporting the story in a way that was sympathetic and supportive to the victims. The neutral tone, more typically associated with news reporting, returned by the second sample period.

Between sample one and sample three, the percentage of tweets criticising Muslims, or sharing anti-Muslim views, increased. Table 3.20 shows that the percentage of anti-Muslim tweets rose from 4.7 per cent ($n = 47$) to 10.8 per cent ($n = 54$) whilst the percentage of supportive tweets reduced from 73.0 per cent ($n = 730$) to 42.4 per cent ($n = 212$). Therefore, six months after the attack, tweets supporting Muslims were still around four times

Table 3.19 National location of tweets, Christchurch terrorist attack

	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
US/North America	325	32.5	141	28.2	150	30.0
None mentioned	288	28.8	137	27.4	147	29.4
UK	127	12.7	43	8.6	30	6.0
South Asia	100	10.0	27	5.4	53	10.6
Australasia/Oceania	44	4.4	51	10.2	88	17.6
MENA region	29	2.9	22	4.4	9	1.8
Other Asian country	27	2.7	23	4.6	6	1.2
Mixed	19	1.9	11	2.2	3	0.6
Europe	16	1.6	15	3.0	6	1.2
Other African country	12	1.2	14	2.8	4	0.8
Other	12	1.2	14	2.8	2	0.4
Russia	1	0.1	2	0.4	0	0
Total	1000	100.0	500	100.0	500	100.0

more frequent, but the percentage had reduced, and the anti-Muslim voices were much more visible than during the immediate response to the attack.

In sample one, tweets praising Jacinda Ardern and the Labour Party were frequently posted, particularly after Ardern was photographed wearing a hijab, whilst comforting the relatives of the victims. The most retweeted tweet that paid tribute to her response to the attack was posted by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (8341 retweets), the ruler of Dubai and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, thanking Ardern for her ‘sincere empathy and support’. However, the attack prompted some right-wing activists and commentators to provide their interpretations of what took place in Christchurch and its political significance, and these often provoked further anti-Muslim comment in reply threads. For example, the American writer Dinesh D’Sousa’s first response in sample one was to claim that the attack was only being reported by US networks because it fitted with a political agenda to denigrate white men. There were also tweets from the right-wing activists and political commentators, including Ann Coulter, Amy Mek and Andy Ngo.

Table 3.20 Position on Islam/Muslims, Christchurch terrorist attack

	Sample 1: N	Percentage	Sample 2: N	Percentage	Sample 3: N	Percentage	#hello brother N	Percentage
Anti-Muslim	47	4.7	12	2.4	54	10.8	3	.3
Supports Muslims	730	73.0	206	41.2	212	42.4	954	95.4
Mixed	55	5.5	21	4.2	27	5.4	7	.7
Neutral	168	16.8	261	52.2	207	41.4	36	3.6
Total	1000	100.0	500	100.0	500	100.0	1000	100.0

In sample two, positive stories about community solidarity in response to the attack were frequent. The Sikh community in New Zealand gave a cheque of NZ\$60,000 to support the two mosques targeted and the imam at the Linwood Islamic Centre started a campaign ‘combating intolerance with hospitality’. But there were also tweets that instrumentalised developments in the story, in ways that diminished or belittled Muslim suffering. The most significant of these stories reported that a man in New Zealand, called Philip Arps, had been sentenced to twenty-one months in prison for sharing the video of the livestreamed massacre, with thirty of his associates. Most users commenting on the sentencing were very critical of the prosecution, calling it ‘totalitarian’, ‘totally stupid’ (165 retweets) and ‘actual fascism’ (fifty-two retweets). In one quote-tweet (nineteen retweets), a user suggested that the sentencing of Arps for ‘sharing video’ amounted to thought crimes – and used the term ‘doubleplusbadthink’ to reference Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*. However, other tweets provided some contextualisation for Arps’ actions, supporting the decision and supporting the Muslim community. One user added a URL to an article published by ArsTechnica, which claimed that, far from a victim of an overzealous legal system or an innocent who had unwitting shared ‘a video on the internet’, Arps was a ‘neo-Nazi’.⁶ The article alleged that he had a history of anti-Muslim hate crimes, delivering a box of pigs’ heads to the Al Noor Mosque (one of the mosques attacked on 15 March 2019) accompanied by two men who gave Nazi salutes. Further, he didn’t simply share the video; the article revealed that he asked one of his associates ‘to insert crosshairs and include a kill count in order to create an Internet meme’. During his trial, the judge stated that Arps had ‘strong and unrepentant views about the Muslim community and had compared himself to Rudolf Hess’, the Deputy Führer of the Nazi Party. His act of sharing the video was therefore intended to glorify the terrorist and celebrate the mass murder of Muslims.

The #hellowbrother sub-corpus was also almost entirely supportive of Muslims, and the victims of the attack specifically. ‘Hello Brother’ were the words spoken to the white supremacist terrorist as he entered the Al Noor Mosque, by the first victim, Haji Daoud Nabi. The most frequently retweeted tweet in this dataset paid tribute to Nabi, offering a very brief narrative of his life, where he escaped a war only to be killed in what was, until that point, a safe country (see [Richardson et al., 2024](#)). Only three of the top 1000 tweets that included this hashtag were coded as anti-Muslim, seven were mixed and only thirty-six (3.6 per cent) were neutral.

Table 3.21 cross-tabulates the position that a tweet took on Islam/Muslims with the number of retweets – expressed as a mean and the total number of retweets. The table reiterates the scale of the initial response to the attack, with the top 1000 tweets attracting thousands of retweets: the 730 tweets that were supportive of Muslims were retweeted a total of

Table 3.21 Number of retweets by position on Islam/Muslims

	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3		#helloworldbrother	
	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum
Anti-Muslim	1397	65,646	13	156	1	55	2	7
Supports Muslims	2002	1,461,285	7	1535	9	1821	23	22,394
Mixed	1633	89,842	11	221	0	6	15	104
Neutral	1415	237,676	13	3394	2	407	2	65

1,461,285 times, significantly higher than the 65,646 retweets for the forty-seven anti-Muslim tweets. This disparity continues in the second and third sample periods, with pro-Muslim tweets significantly outweighing those that targeted or vilified Muslims. The only partial qualifier to this positive finding is that, during sample two, the average number of retweets for anti-Muslim tweets ($n = 13$) was almost twice as much as pro-Muslim retweets ($n = 7$), but the total number of pro-Muslim tweets was still much higher. This higher average number of anti-Muslim retweets suggests that networks of anti-Muslim accounts on Twitter are more established and reciprocal than those supportive of Muslims.

The topics that Twitter accounts invoked in relation to the attack, and its repercussions, also shifted across the different sample periods.

The first sample was dominated by tweets supporting left-wing politics, offering condolences to the victims and discussion of the politics of right-wing terrorism (the cumulative percentage of these three topics was 83.9 per cent of the sample). The tweets on left-wing politics were mainly praise for Jacinda Ardern and the Labour Party, but also included left-wing criticism of the news media for the way the attack was initially reported (some users objected to initial accounts, which described the terrorist as a ‘gunman’), and tweets opposing the far-right and white supremacy. The tweets on global politics/right-wing terrorism were mainly about and criticising the terrorist, but also related the story to other countries (that is, Christchurch and US politics, Christchurch and Indian politics, and so on).

In the second sample, both condolences and left-wing politics were significantly reduced, and tweets on global politics/right-wing terrorism dominated, but there was also an increase in right-wing tweets. These tweets often advanced pro-Conservative or pro-far-right agendas, but this topic also included tweets on white victimhood, Christian victimhood and anti-Muslim tropes. In the third sample, we see this pattern develop further.

Table 3.22 Simplified topics, Christchurch sample one

Topic	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cum. %
Left-wing politics	320	32.0	32.0	32.0
Condolences/support/ tributes to Muslims	308	30.8	30.8	62.8
Global politics/politics of right-wing terrorism	211	21.1	21.1	83.9
Defending Muslims	78	7.8	7.8	91.7
Right-wing politics	68	6.8	6.8	98.5
Other	12	1.2	1.2	99.7
Accusation of antisemitism	3	0.3	0.3	100.0
Total	1000	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.23 Simplified topics, Christchurch sample three

Topic	Frequency	Percent	Valid %	Cum. %
Global politics/politics of right-wing terrorism	219	43.8	43.8	43.8
Condolences/support/tributes to Muslims	94	18.8	18.8	62.6
Left-wing politics	78	15.6	15.6	78.2
Right-wing politics	69	13.8	13.8	92.0
Defending Muslims	34	6.8	6.8	98.8
Other	5	1.0	1.0	99.8
Accusation of antisemitism	1	.2	.2	100.0
Total	500	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.23 shows that the percentage of tweets discussing global politics and the politics of right-wing terrorism have doubled – up from 21.2 per cent in the immediate month after the attack to 43.8 per cent six months later. The majority of these tweets discuss the parallels between the political agenda of the terrorist and anti-Muslim politics in other countries – particularly in India – or linked gun control in New Zealand to that issue in the US, sometimes in a conspiratorial way. Condolences and support for the Muslim victims of the attack were still high and were frequently connected

to the six-month anniversary of the attack; and support for left-wing politics and parties also remain high. However, support for right-wing politics and causes doubled from 6.8 per cent of sample one to 13.8 per cent of sample three. These tweets advanced pro-Conservative, or occasionally pro-far-right agendas, emphasised Christian victimhood (claiming that Christian victims of Muslim violence were being ignored in the mainstream media) and other anti-Muslim tropes.

Drawing these findings together, it appears that the increase in anti-Muslim tweets across the three sample periods is linked to, and a reflection of, an increase in tweets advocating a right-wing political agenda.

The initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020)

At the end of 2019 a global health crisis started to develop, caused by a new strain of severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS-CoV-2. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020 and, on 11 March 2020, changed the designation to a global pandemic. Our first month-long sample starts soon after the declaration that COVID-19 should be regarded as a pandemic, and a few days before the first national lockdown in the UK.

Table 3.24 reveals some key differences in how users tweeted about COVID-19, during the three sampled periods. The number of sampled daily tweets was very high during the first (13,986 sampled tweets per day) and second samples (17,100 sampled tweets per day), compared with a much lower rate in the final sample (4013 sampled tweets per day). However, the vast majority of tweets in sample one were retweets (90.2 per cent); during the second sample period, although 75.5 per cent of tweets were retweets, almost three times more original tweets were posted per day (4185

Table 3.24 Summary data: COVID-19

	Sample 1 19 March to 19 April 2020	Eid al-Fitr 19 to 25 May 2020	Eid al-Adha 29 July to 4 August 2020	#Tablighijamaat All dates
Total tweets	433,574	119,700	28,097	13,742
Original tweets	43,249	29,301	2253	931
Retweets	391,225	90,399	25,844	12,811
Of which, quote-tweets	2190	951	208	177

original tweets per day) than during sample one (1395 original tweets per day). During the first sample, then, users were far more likely to recirculate material they had read rather than adding anything new.

Sample one

A significant focus of the first COVID-19 dataset was the festival organised by Tablighi Jamaat (a transnational Sunni Islamic movement, whose annual gathering was taking place in Nizamuddin, India) which was subsequently accused of being a superspreader event ([Aschwanden, 2020](#)). This event was attended by international delegates, many of whom became stranded when lockdown rules were imposed, which led to a nationwide search for people who had attended. The event gained significant attention despite the fact there were many other religious gatherings in India at that time ([Tierie and Ranjan, 2023](#)). This sample was dominated by Indian tweets, bloggers, YouTubers, and so on, and some alt-right accounts. Muslims spreading COVID-19 is the dominant topic, with regular updates on events and activities where Muslims tested positive, although there is also a significant pushback on this narrative, with other users calling out discrimination and drawing attention to the positive activities of Muslims.

Sample two

This is an unusually positive dataset as many of the tweets consist of Eid greetings, the changes to Eid al-Fitr during COVID-19 (including social distancing) and information about how to celebrate safely, which, in British tweets, were clustered around hashtags such as #EidatHome. As the least disputatious COVID-19 dataset in the project, there was also less need for pro-Muslim counter-discourse, although there is some discussion around social distancing. Tweets from and about Nigeria feature highly in this dataset, from news sources, individuals and government sources, as well as other Muslim countries. There was some debate around easing up restrictions in the UK (the closest thing to a dispute in this sample), and this was also echoed in the US, with Trump attempting to force places of worship to reopen.

Sample three

The third dataset, around the festival of Eid al-Adha, is much smaller and also mainly positive or information-driven. It contained a mixture of themes and issues that also featured in earlier datasets – discussions of Hajj during COVID-19, Eid greetings, but also a small proportional rise in allegations

that Muslims were spreading COVID-19. In contrast to sample one, these discussions were predominantly located in the UK, due to a Conservative MP suggesting that ‘BAME communities’ (meaning ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’, a term which has taken on a pejorative edge) were spreading COVID-19 and him subsequently being criticised for this wild accusation. Although India continued to be a key location in this dataset, it was geographically more mixed, with Pakistan and Nigeria also featuring noticeably.

Quantitative analysis

The timeline for the first COVID-19 dataset was very different to the two trigger events already discussed in this chapter. In contrast to Brexit tweets (which built to a crescendo) and Christchurch tweets (which started at an incredible peak and quickly diminished), tweets posted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were much more even, reflecting an ongoing preoccupation with the story, interspersed with peaks and troughs of increased or decreased interest (see [Figure 3.4](#)).

The first peak, around 21 March 2020, maps onto the start of the first national lockdown in the UK, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered people to ‘stay at home’. This initial climax receded, before rising to the largest peak in the dataset, from the end of March through to the beginning of April. This significant increase in tweets relates to the spread of COVID-19 in India, and specifically to developments following the Tablighi Jamaat event (discussed below). This distribution of tweets reflects the fact that the pandemic was a rolling story, for the whole world, with new cases,

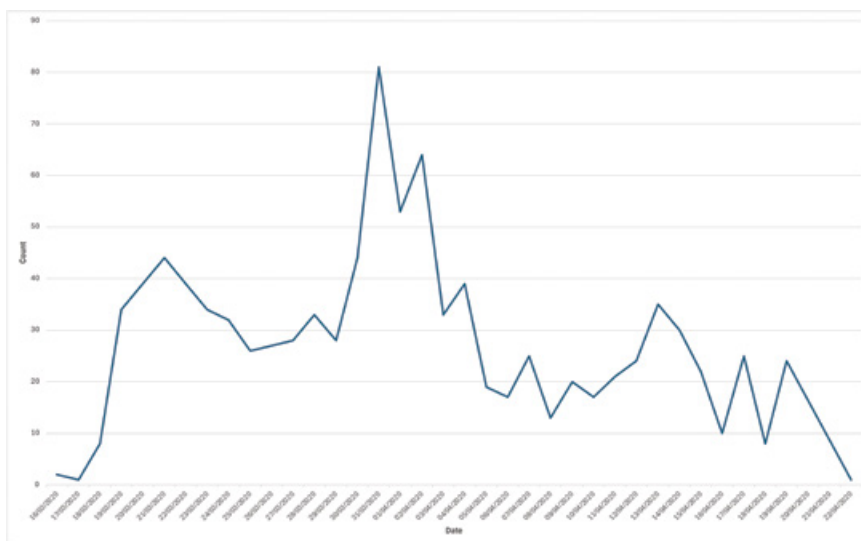


Figure 3.4 Timeline, COVID-19 sample one

developments and official announcements from governments and other agencies reported frequently and recurrently.

What are the contents of the tweets?

Table 3.25 shows that the first sample period was particularly anti-Muslim: 30.7 per cent of the tweets during this first month were anti-Muslim and a further 12 per cent were mixed. Tweets that we coded as ‘mixed’ tended to be tweets from media organisations and bloggers that were neutrally reporting numbers of COVID-19 infections within Muslim communities, but without accusing Muslims of deliberately spreading the virus (which the anti-Muslim tweets tended to do). This Islamophobic content was particularly pronounced in a sub-sample of tweets that used the hashtag #Tablighijamaat. Almost half of the tweets that used that hashtag were anti-Muslim, demonstrating the intimate association between (discourse on/about) that event in India and the triggering of anti-Muslim hatred.

Anti-Muslim tweets dropped down significantly during the second sample, coinciding with Eid al-Fitr, and where a large number of tweets reported how Muslims were celebrating in a socially distanced way. But anti-Muslim tweets increased again in sample three, coinciding with Eid al-Adha, where British Muslims started to be accused of celebrating Eid irresponsibly.

Cross-tabulating the tweets’ position on Islam and/or Muslims with the number of retweets produced a very mixed picture (see Table 3.26).

Even though there were more tweets that supported Muslims ($n = 571$, 51.7 per cent) than Islamophobic tweets ($n = 307$, 30.7 per cent) in sample one, the Islamophobic tweets were retweeted far more frequently. On average, every anti-Muslim tweet in this dataset was retweeted 421 times,

Table 3.25 Position on Muslims, COVID-19

	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3		#Tablighijamaat	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Anti-Muslim	307	30.7	26	5.2	54	10.8	412	48.2
Supports Muslims	517	51.7	302	60.4	288	57.6	184	21.5
Mixed	120	12	39	7.8	21	4.2	231	27
Neutral	56	5.6	133	26.6	137	27.4	27	3.2
Total	1000	100	500	100	500	100	854	100

Table 3.26 Number of retweets * position on Islam

	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3		#Tablighijamaat	
	Sum	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum	Mean	Sum	Mean
Anti-Muslim	129,179	421	1132	44	2446	45	1180	3
Supports Muslims	97,758	189	18,572	61	13,833	48	3023	16
Mixed	40,822	340	10,350	265	184	9	1477	6
Neutral	11,413	204	4335	33	2442	18	6754	250

over twice the average for tweets supporting Muslims (mean 189 retweets). Sample two is far more supportive of Muslims (a total of 18,572 positive retweets), though each Islamophobic tweet was still retweeted on average forty-four times, which suggests an established network of anti-Muslim users. The total of Islamophobic retweets increased between samples two and three (up to a total of 2446 retweets), though tweets that supported Muslims during this second Eid celebration were still more numerous.

The content of the tweets starts to become a little more discernible, when we tabulate their topical contents.

Table 3.27 reiterates our finding that Islamophobic tweets were most frequent in the first sample period. A more granular analysis shows that scapegoating Muslims for COVID-19 was the highest single topic in this sample (n =159, 15.9 per cent), making up the largest portion of the simplified topic ‘Anti-Muslim, both general & specific’, but anti-Muslim propaganda (n = 82, 8.2 per cent) was also quite common.

One anti-Muslim tendency in sample one amounted to reporting the spread of COVID-19 in terms of how many Muslims had tested positively. These tweets – usually from mainstream news sources – were ostensibly ‘objective’ in their sourcing and their use of hard specific numbers. But, through their reiteration and their selectivity (number of Muslim infections, solely and specifically, reported time and again) the reporting foci of mainstream news organisations developed an association between Muslims and the spread of the virus, particularly in India. Amongst many tweets from many news sources: the breaking news app, NDTV, reported ‘24 more test positive for coronavirus after Delhi mosque event’ and, later, ‘95 Delhi mosque-linked #coronavirus positive cases’; the Associated Press tweeted ‘Mosques were allowed to remain open in Pakistan’ contributing to the spread; Reuters reported that ‘many cases’ of COVID-19 in Malaysia were ‘linked to mosque’; and the *New York Times* also reported that

Table 3.27 Simplified topics

Topic	Sample 1		Sample 2		Sample 3	
	No	Percent	No	Percent	No	Percent
Anti-Muslim, both general and specific	311	31.1	30	6.0	51	10.2
Pro-right agendas	20	2.0	10	2.0	9	1.8
General COVID-19 disruption/information	180	18.0	222	44.4	205	41.0
Discrimination against/defending Muslims	341	34.1	161	32.2	149	29.8
Pro-left agendas	20	2.0	10	2.0	43	8.6
Condolence/support	97	9.7	34	6.8	30	6.0
Covid and politics	24	2.4	29	5.8	7	1.4
Other forms of discrimination	7	.7	4	.8	6	1.2
Total	1000	100.0	500	100.0	500	100.0

this Malaysian mosque had helped spread ‘coronavirus to half a dozen countries’. This we refer to as *reiterative racism* – and reading the tweets of sample one felt like we were observing the fabrication of a new anti-Muslim trope, in real time.

News blogs, YouTubers and other ‘alternative news’ outlets were very prominent in the COVID-19 datasets, particularly during sample one. These were often more opinionated than the tweets that worked up reiterative racism, were more explicitly anti-Muslim, and often linked together Muslims testing positive for COVID-19 with forms of criminality. After India imposed its first COVID-19 lockdown, hundreds of Tablighi Jamaat delegates found themselves stranded in the country, and reliant on networks of mosques to provide them with accommodation. However, instead of being described as (for example) sheltering in such places, these Muslim international travellers were frequently described as ‘hiding’. To offer just a few examples: the OpIndia blog claimed ‘Muslim foreign nationals found hiding’ in a mosque; a journalist for the TV9 Network tweeted a 1m22s video, showing men ‘hiding’ in a mosque, adding that they had been identified by military police; and the Indian news magazine *Swarajya* reported that a Malaysian woman had been ‘with 17 other foreigners’ in a mosque. Selecting the Malay woman from a list of eighteen foreigners (which also included three from Britain, two from the West Indies and two from Gambia, who could just

as easily have been singled out in this way) works as an anti-Muslim dog-whistle: she wasn't just a foreigner, she was a *Muslim* foreigner. The overall effect of this turn in the development of COVID-19 in India was to conflate a public health discourse with a criminal discourse; Muslims who caught the virus weren't unlucky patients who needed medical treatment, they were criminals that required punishment. These tweets also provided a context in which more explicitly anti-Muslim sentiment could be expressed in reply.

Other accounts during sample one were even more explicit in their Islamophobia. One Canadian newspaper columnist declared 'Islamic group singlehandedly spreads coronavirus across India'; he also tweeted a video apparently showing an Indian man blowing his nose on bank notes, to spread COVID-19, which prompted several users to reply to the tweet, calling Muslims 'a disease'. Reply threads posted in response to material like this were frequently characterised by Islamophobia on a sliding scale: some users offered scathing criticism of particular Muslims, perceived to be misbehaving or acting without due care; others offered prejudiced statements about Muslim more generally ('typical'; 'they are Jihadis'); others offer the interpretation that spreading COVID-19 isn't inadvertent and that Muslim groups, like Tablighi Jamaat, were deliberately spreading COVID-19 ('Mullavirus'); this in turn encouraged some to refer to (bio) terrorism or the specific conspiracy theory that Muslims were engaged in a 'corona jihad'. Such reply threads even included users calling for Muslims to be killed ('offending Muslim should be shot on sight'), or that Muslims with COVID-19 be encouraged to die ('lock them in madrasa without treatment'). There are still hundreds (perhaps thousands) of tweets online directly calling for violence to be committed against Muslims, triggered by how the COVID-19 pandemic was reported.

Interestingly, the percentage of tweets reporting anti-Muslim discrimination, or defending Muslims against discrimination, is relatively stable across the three sample periods – it is highest during sample one, when Islamophobic tweets were the most prevalent and were being called out by other users (34.1 per cent), dropping only slightly in sample two (32.2 per cent) and reduced again in sample three (29.8 per cent). Some of these tweets were simply rejections or rejoinders to Islamophobic claims ('fake news', 'Modi lies'); others provided reasons for why claims were incorrect (photographic or video evidence was being taken out of context or recorded months ago); others tweeted, and retweeted, articles which fact-checked and debunked spurious claims of Muslim wrong-doing.⁷

A more granular analysis of sample two shows that changes/disruption caused by COVID-19 was the most frequently tweeted topic (n = 174, 38.4 per cent); followed by Muslims celebrations (n = 63, 12.6 per cent); specific pro-Muslim topics (n = 44, 8.8 per cent); and calling out anti-Muslim

discrimination ($n = 33$, 6.6 per cent). Tweets about the disruption caused by COVID-19 were either supportive (52.3 per cent) or neutral (37.6 per cent) about Muslims, and the vast majority of tweets about Eid were supportive in tone (92.1 per cent positive). Anti-Muslim tweets, both general and specific, were significantly reduced – but the majority of the thirty anti-Muslim tweets still scapegoated Muslims for the spread of COVID-19 ($n = 19$, 3.8 per cent).

Sample three demonstrates a similar pattern to sample two, with COVID-19 disruption being the most frequently discussed topic ($n = 130$, 26 per cent); followed by Muslim celebrations ($n = 69$, 13.8 per cent); specific pro-Muslim topics ($n = 49$, 9.8 per cent); and public information/scientific breakthroughs ($n = 48$, 9.6 per cent). Scapegoating Muslims for the spread of COVID-19 was the sixth most frequently occurring topic ($n = 31$, 6.2 per cent), which was higher than in sample two and indexes a slight rise in conflict in this sample.

Tweets providing COVID-19 information or reporting disruption as a result of COVID-19 were quite low in sample one ($n = 180$, 18.0 per cent), perhaps reflecting the lack of medical advice at that time (other than ‘stay at home’), but this topic rose significantly in samples two and three. The number of tweets attempting to claim party political advantage from the pandemic was very low throughout – with the exception of sample three ($n = 43$, 8.6 per cent). That increased number of tweets advocating pro-left agendas reflected the criticisms levelled at Craig Whittaker, Conservative MP for Calder Valley, who suggested minority communities, including Muslims, were to blame for increased infection rates. Specifically, in an interview broadcast on LBC Radio, he claimed: ‘If you look at the areas where we’ve seen rises and cases, the vast majority – not by any stretch of the imagination all areas – it is the BAME communities that are not taking this seriously enough.’⁸

Table 3.28 reiterates our finding that, during the first sample, tweets sharing Islamophobic arguments/tropes were more likely to be retweeted than tweets supporting Muslims and/or contesting prejudice. Tweets scapegoating Muslims for the spread of COVID-19 were retweeted 53,389 times in addition to 55,188 other specific anti-Muslim tweets. Despite having a very low frequency ($n = 3$), tweets on Islamist terrorism were also shared many times ($n = 15,583$). In comparison, specific pro-Muslim tweets were retweeted 35,515 times, whilst tweets calling out discrimination against Muslims were retweeted 20,048 times. Similarly, tweets disseminating conspiracy theories were shared 2,096 times while tweets pointing out conspiracy theories were only shared 299 times. This demonstrates the high circulation of negative tweets and how, during the

Table 3.28 Simplified topics * number of retweets

Topic	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	#Tablighijamaat
General COVID-19 disruption/info	40,453	9224	6070	56
Discrimination against/defending Muslims	78,991	12,740	6545	3025
Anti-Muslim	129,807	1444	2330	8741
Pro-left agendas	2756	270	1738	8
Condolences/support	11,273	1840	1116	262
Pro-right agendas	4377	483	203	216
COVID and politics	10,280	8243	844	110
Other forms of discrimination	1235	145	88	16

first sample period, Twitter played a significant role in the amplification of anti-Muslim agendas.

Although there were pockets of anti-Muslim hate, often linked to lockdown restrictions, the majority of tweets posted during sample three were either supportive of Muslims ($n = 288$, 57.6 per cent) or reported the changes during Eid in a neutral and matter of fact tone. For example, the news agency Associated Press reported that ‘A scaled-down hajj gets underway in Mecca’ (fifty-six retweets), Al Jazeera English tweeted a 1m42s video on how Hajj this year was ‘dramatically different’ (fifty-two retweets), showing socially distanced pilgrims wearing masks, and the tweet posted by ABC News also placed ‘face masks and practicing social distancing measures’ front-and-centre in the 1m14s video included in the tweet (forty-seven retweets). Eid greetings were also frequently tweeted, both from Muslims (on occasion sharing photos of clothes that they planned to wear), from politicians and other public figures – the then-Health Secretary tweeted that it is ‘a challenging Eid’ but thanked British Muslims for their ‘continued efforts tackling #coronavirus’.

The sub-corpus of #Tablighijamaat tweets was characterised by the largest ratio of anti-Muslim to anti-discrimination tweets: Islamophobic tweets using the hashtag were retweeted almost three times more than tweets countering anti-Muslim prejudice. That said, tweets which pushed back against the association between the Tablighi Jamaat meeting and the spread of COVID-19 were retweeted over 3000 times, marking a partial appropriation of the hashtag for anti-racist solidarity.

Conclusion

What emerges through our analysis is the distinctive affective dynamics of each event, in relation to the user interactions generated by their contrasting temporalities. The singularity of Christchurch generated the largest set of anti-Islamophobic tweets in our sample, as users came together in articulating grief and shock. In contrast, the slowly evolving process of Brexit revealed a more entrenched pattern of debate as Islamophobia was articulated and contested in a more consistent pattern of to-and-fro engagements between supporters and critics of the EU. Conversely, the rolling story of the COVID-19 pandemic saw multiple small-scale news stories acting as flashpoints for Islamophobia, with users rapidly mobilising to spread disinformation accusing Muslims of spreading the virus and others, equally rapidly, coming together to contest this misinformation. The temporalities of different trigger events, in other words, were accompanied by different affective engagements.

Our analysis – which we develop in later chapters – therefore complicates straightforward understandings of how hate speech spreads, and what tactics can be used to combat it, by illustrating that these relations are not straightforwardly contingent on the content of social media posts or the rigid properties of digital platforms. Instead, the temporalities and affective dynamics of the trigger events themselves have a profound impact upon the affordances of social media, and what sort of narratives are rendered possible. What is required, therefore, is shifting attention away from the affordances of Twitter itself and towards more situated, context-specific relations between the platform, users (and networks of users) and events.

Notes

- 1 We are aware that this methodological claim is contentious; the validity of content analysis' objectivity is discussed in [Richardson \(2007\)](#).
- 2 See, for example, [Franklin and Richardson \(2002\)](#) on local newspaper reporting of the UK general election; [Richardson \(2004, 2006\)](#) on the representation of Muslims in British broadsheet newspapers; [Billig et al. \(2006\)](#) on 'Britishness' in general election reporting; [Richardson \(2008\)](#) on readers' letters; and [Richardson et al. \(2008\)](#) on national and regional identity in a Corsican newspaper.
- 3 See [emojis.wiki, Muslims](https://emojis.wiki/muslim/). Available: <https://emojis.wiki/muslim/>
- 4 Fallon, C. (2019) Racism in key Brexit Party campaign. *Channel 4*, 9 December. Available: www.channel4.com/news/racism-in-key-brexit-party-campaign
- 5 Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019. Available: <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>

- 6 Brodtkin, J. (2019) New Zealand judge sends neo-Nazi to prison for sharing mosque shooting video. *ArsTechnica*, 18 June 2019. Available: <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2019/06/neo-nazi-who-shared-mosque-shooting-video-gets-21-months-in-n-z-prison/>
- 7 For example: Rakhi Bose (2020) 'Muslims spitting on food, hiding in mosques to spread coronavirus? Beware of these 8 fake news stories', *News18*, 6 April, www.news18.com/news/buzz/muslims-spitting-on-food-hiding-in-mosques-to-spread-coronavirus-beware-of-these-8-fake-news-stories-2565483.html
- 8 Richard Williams (2020) 'Tory MP condemned for blaming BAME and Muslim people for rise in coronavirus cases', *Sky News*, 31 July, <https://news.sky.com/story/tory-mp-condemned-for-blaming-bame-and-muslim-people-for-rise-in-coronavirus-cases-12039949>

Counter-narratives against Islamophobia

I'm more than just a 'Muslim commentator' though so I'd be happy to come on your show to talk (debate?) not just religion but politics, foreign policy, the economy, Trump, Brexit etc. : -)

(Mehdi Hasan, Twitter, 11 December 2019, 7.35pm, 1458 RTs)

This tweet, by the political commentator Mehdi Hasan, was a response to Joe Rogan describing Hasan as 'a Muslim commentator' in his podcast.¹ The tweet featured two screengrabs of Rogan's podcast in which Hasan mentioned and gently chides Rogan for not using his name. In doing so, Hasan countered the implicitly Islamophobic idea that limit the speaking opportunities of Muslims to only matters of their own faith. This tweet was the second most visible tweet in the first Brexit dataset, with 1458 retweets and 526 comments (mostly from Hasan's supporters agreeing that Rogan should invite him onto the podcast and taking collective pleasure in supposing that Hasan would be an intellectually superior adversary), and so it provides a good example of the potential Twitter offers for countering long-standing media tropes. His followers operate as a significant networked collective, addressing each other knowingly with short phrases and addressing Hasan in a personal, conversational manner. However, despite productive attempts to foreground and contest commonplace tropes, the incident also illustrates the complexity of doing so. Though the tweet was highly visible in this particular dataset and illustrates the capacity of small-scale counter-publics in developing alternative norms, it is important to contrast this level of engagement with the 17.1 million subscribers to Rogan's podcast.

This chapter explores the conditions and context in which counter-narratives open up a space for positive activism but also the circumstances in which they can be closed down. Drawing on [Kavada and Poell's \(2021: 195, emphasis in original\)](#) conceptualisation, we recognise that the analysis of social media contention should be 'grounded and context-specific, carefully exploring the *where*, *when*, and *how* of popular contention', that is, the situatedness of this contestation and therefore taking into account, to

paraphrase [Kavada and Poell \(2021\)](#), the process that constitutes and reconstitutes key actors, spatial configurations, and narrative and counter-narrative claims. The chapter begins with an introduction to counter-narratives, then analyses the flow of narrative and counter-narrative activity across our chosen events. It explores the tactical interventions used to enhance their effectiveness and concludes by examining the types of racism that these counter-narratives aim to address or challenge.

Part I: counter-narratives

As discussed in the introduction of this book, we understand counter-narratives to be narratives that propose alternative perspectives to hegemonic ideas. Such narratives often have a deconstructive function, challenging the original narrative that they are responding to ([De Latour et al., 2017](#)). According to [Ernst et al. \(2017: 7\)](#), these counter-narratives exist along a ‘spectrum’ from acts of counter-speech – ‘quick responses’ or ‘counter messaging’ – to counter-narratives that remain responsive but include a more challenging narrative, to ‘alternative narratives’ (see below). Counter-narratives are often driven by affective engagement ([Papacharissi, 2014](#)) but can also have a corrective function, providing additional/alternative information or challenging dis/misinformation ([De Latour et al., 2017](#)).

Due to the problem of amplifying hate speech through engagement with it, some activists prefer the term ‘alternative narratives’; ‘an alternative narrative tells a different story, focusing on what society is “for” rather than “against”, whilst remaining completely distinct from the “discourse and influence” of a dominant, problematic narrative’ ([Carthy, 2021: 4](#)). While both counter and alternative narratives have a reframing agenda by providing a different interpretation of an issue, [De Latour et al. \(2017: 72\)](#) suggest that in ‘responding’ to a narrative means ‘implicitly accepting and reinforcing the narrative frame sustaining the oppressive narrative’. Rather than being just deconstructive therefore, alternative narratives are constructive and, for [De Latour et al. \(2017\)](#), should also be ‘positive, inclusive’ with ‘human rights/democratic values ... at the centre’. For [Carthy \(2021: 81\)](#) this aims not just at countering but displacement.

Studies on counter-narrative action demonstrate how digital media platforms such as Twitter have the ‘technical architecture’ that offers democratic potential, allowing groups who were previously marginalised from mainstream media to form counter-publics ([Fraser, 1990: 67](#)). Counter-publics can be inward-looking, to provide a safe and alternative space for excluded groups, but counter-narratives often have a wider objective to extend understanding outwards, even facilitate dialogue ([Figenschou and](#)

Thorbjørnsrud, 2023). The affordances of platforms such as Twitter allow for the virtually instantaneous connection and mobilisation and spread of these publics/narratives at speed, conceptualised both as ‘ad hoc’ publics by Bruns and Burgess (2015) and networked publics by boyd (2010). They are often driven by specific social and political developments and events (see Dawes, 2017) as we found in our own research on the #stopIslam hashtag, which went viral on Twitter after the 2016 Brussels terror attack. In challenging the association between Islam and terrorism, its widespread popularity led mainstream media outlets to report on it, amplifying its message and successfully bringing it into mainstream discourse (Poole *et al.*, 2021).

In this way, the counter-narrative contributed to public conversations, providing a function that some social media companies like Twitter/X are keen to promote themselves as doing. The narratives around publics suggest that all speech is good and that if people can be brought together in debate, a healthier public sphere would emerge (Poole and Giraud, 2021). Yet many theorists have shown that engagement in these spaces rarely leads to mutual understandings and dialogue but rather enables the kind of ‘trench warfare’ described by Karlsen *et al.* (2017), whereby presiding standpoints are reinforced through argumentation. Many scholars have shown how right-wing groups have harnessed particular platforms to circulate their agenda in a more structured, instrumental way than those participating in counter-narratives (Siapera *et al.*, 2018; Tréré, 2018; Schradie, 2019). Muslims, in particular, have been targets of hateful activity on social media. Drawing on Mouffe (2013), for instance, Evolvi (2019) argues that Twitter engenders ‘antagonistic’ interactions that limit democratic participation by seeking to exclude Muslims rather than include them in debate. Her study of #Islamexit (Evolvi, 2019) demonstrates how Muslims avoid confrontation with Islamophobic users. Our own analysis of #stopIslam demonstrated how the networks of (mostly US) right-wing actors tweeting it were much more tightly organised around significant nodes and, through persistent and consistent use of ‘flak’, or what has also been known as social media mobbing (Blevins *et al.*, 2019), were able to close down counter-narratives and afford their messages more longevity.

This conceptualisation of public/counter-publics has also been criticised for being reductive in both its staticity and for its focus on outcomes (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2023). Kavada and Poell (2021: 2) are particularly significant in making this critique. They argue for a conceptualisation of public(s) as process ‘that is constituted through the intersection of people technology and practice – the material, temporal and spatial relations from which it emerges’. This more dynamic, issue/time and space-specific conceptualisation – ‘a publicness in motion’ takes accounts of

all the contextual elements of public contestation. Rather than ‘countering’, which they argue makes the counter-narrative appear too distinct from the dominant narrative, [Kavada and Poell \(2021\)](#) use the term ‘contentious publicness’ to take account of this shifting process or ‘continuous activity’ of making things public to demonstrate the ‘messiness’ of public discourse. Adopting this approach, while maintaining the value of the term counter-narrative, we argue for a recognition of the entanglement of opposing arguments ([Poole et al., 2023](#)).

Other criticisms of social media as a place for both countering or mobilising solidarity with marginalised groups relate to both its characteristics (affordances) and political economy. The burgeoning field of ‘platform governance’ ([Siapera, 2022](#)) and ‘platform capitalism’ ([Srnicek, 2016](#)) recognises the limitations of social media due to its commercial interests. Commercialisation, in turn, has influenced the platforms’ structure/architecture which rewards inflammatory subjects and a more competitive, anti-social style of engagement. Hence, social media has been criticised as leaving little room for progressive solidarity movements or counter-publics to gain momentum and enact meaningful social change ([Nikunen, 2019](#)). In this context, academic discourse is more likely to emphasise the limitations of social media for counter-narrative formations and social activism than its potentials given conservative groups usually have more money, power and voice to exploit the current media environment. Theorists therefore often suggest that many online networks constitute connective rather than collective publics, temporary and loosely connected groups that have limited sustainability (see [Chapter 5](#)). Rather than empowering marginal groups, the commercial and technical logics have also been connected to ‘platformed racism’ (Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández cited in [Jackson et al., 2020](#): 192) particularly around practices of surveillance and data-gathering, raising security concerns. The increased use of algorithms and AI has already intensified and is likely to further intensify these patterns.

Hence there have been questions over the effectiveness of counter-messaging on social media particularly aimed at far-right groups who are resistant to this, perceiving these interventions as a form of state propaganda ([Fielitz and Marcks, 2021](#)). [De Latour et al. \(2017\)](#) argue that ‘logic focused’ state counter-narrative campaigns aimed at de-radicalisation have contributed to this perception. Equally, [Fielitz and Marcks \(2021\)](#) argue that democratic actors, who are interested in social harmony, cannot use deceptive/manipulative tactics or the inflammatory language of the far-right that gains attention on social media. Drawing on these various approaches in media, sociology, STS and organisational studies, [Brock \(2016\)](#) adopted a critical cultural approach to studying the relationship between technology, context and digital practices. Known as Critical Technocultural Discourse

Analysis, his method examines how technology, culture and power interact to produce meaning. In his view, the cultural biases embedded within technological systems shape and constrain user engagement, while the digital practices of users, particularly those from minoritised communities, actively combine with these systems to co-construct meaning. Drawing on a social-contextual discursive approach, over the following two chapters, we analyse how users and technologies interact to better understand the dynamics of counter-narratives as they emerge and gain traction within specific contexts.

Countering Islamophobia online: overview of events

Table 4.1 and Figures 4.1–4.10 show the proportion of tweets that were pro- and anti-Muslim from the top 1000 retweeted tweets in the datasets. From our engagement with the data, the tweets categorised as being supportive towards Muslims are understood as counter-narratives in this project, given that they challenge long-standing tropes about Muslims that have circulated in mainstream media.² Statistically, more tweets were positive than negative, with the Brexit date and #Tablighijamaat being negative outliers, but in compiling Table 4.1, we have also taken account of retweets and subsequent layers of analysis.

Table 4.1 Position on Muslims, all events

Datasets more supportive towards Muslims	Anti-Muslim	Mixed (even balance of pro- and anti-Muslim or neutral tweets)
Brexit general election data 28 November 2019 to 19 December 2019	‘Brexit Day’ data 17 January 2020 to 7 February 2020	Christchurch 2 (three months after) 15 June 2019 to 21 June 2019
Christchurch 1 (first month) 15 March 2019 to 15 April 2019	COVID-19 1 (first month) 19 March 2020 to 19 April 2020	Christchurch 3 (six months after) 15 September 2019 to 21 September 2019
COVID-19 2 Eid al-Fitr 19 May 2020 to 25 May 2020	#Tablighijamat (all COVID-19 dates)	COVID-19 3 Eid al-Adha 29 July 2020 to 4 August 2020
#helloworldbrother (all Christchurch dates)		

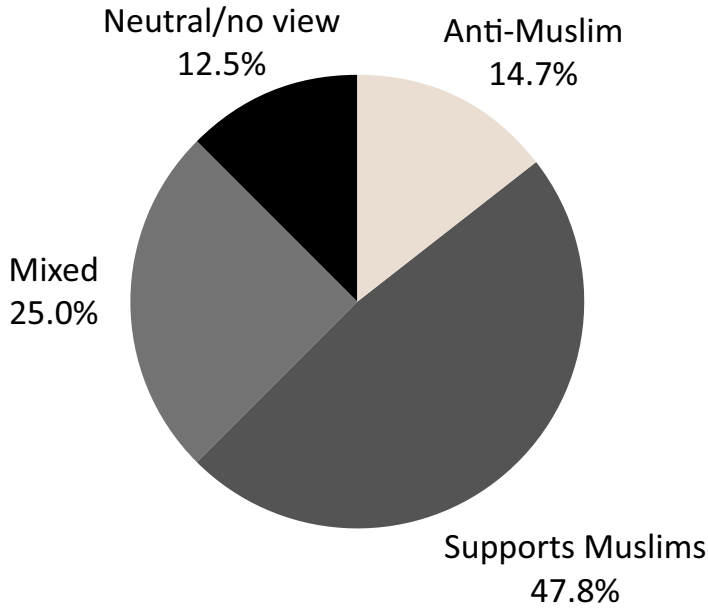


Figure 4.1 Position on Muslims: Brexit 1 (28 November 2019 to 19 December 2019)

Counter-speech or counter-narratives?

The first Brexit dataset, around the 2019 general election, was surprisingly supportive towards Muslims (47.8 per cent positive compared to 14.7 per cent anti-Muslim tweets, [Figure 4.1](#)) given our expectations that Islamophobia might be weaponised in the election to win support for the Brexit campaign. The tone of tweets was by and large due to a focal event which attracted attention on Twitter: during a BBC leaders' debate, the Conservative leader and (then) Prime Minister Boris Johnson was asked a question about Islamophobia in the Conservative Party and was accused of deflecting the question with his response – to 'Get Brexit done'! The analysis shows a large number of Labour/left and Muslim tweeters criticising Johnson, in particular, for his response, and character, but also more widely calling out Islamophobia in the Conservative Party.

The qualitative analysis of the fifty most retweeted tweets found that thirty-eight of these opposed Islamophobia explicitly or implicitly with only nine Islamophobic tweets. However, the analysis also complicates any sense of a 'successful' counter-narrative given the majority of the anti-Islamophobic tweets were predominantly using Islamophobia in an

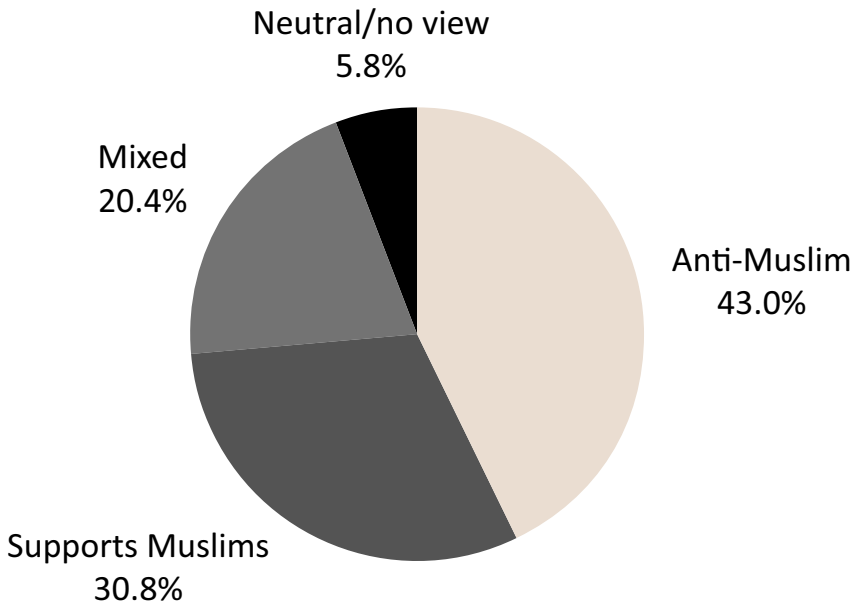


Figure 4.2 Position on Muslims: Brexit 2 (17 January 2020 to 7 February 2020)

instrumental way, as a means of attacking the Conservative Party. In this way, although the speech acts served to support Muslims by undermining Johnson's response, they did not further the discussion of Islamophobia by offering additional narratives. Key high-profile responses to the BBC leaders' debate included politicians and political groups such as Sayeeda Warsi, Liz Clements, Lord Sikka and Momentum as well as left-wing mainstream and independent journalists. Only nineteen of these tweets explicitly mentioned Islamophobia and very few of the replies engaged with the topic substantively. As an example, Sayeeda Warsi's response generated seventy-two responses:

No! The answer to a question on @Conservatives #Islamophobia is not Labour #Antisemitism and it's certainly not 'Get Brexit Done!' The quality of debate on this issue was shameful 🙄 (Sayeeda Warsi, 6 December 2019, 9.36pm, 1089 RTs)

While most replies agreed with the sentiment of the tweet, their main objective was to attack Johnson and the Conservatives. Islamophobia was only mentioned in six to seven³ of these replies and appeared, again, to be sidelined as one of several bigoted views communicated by Johnson,

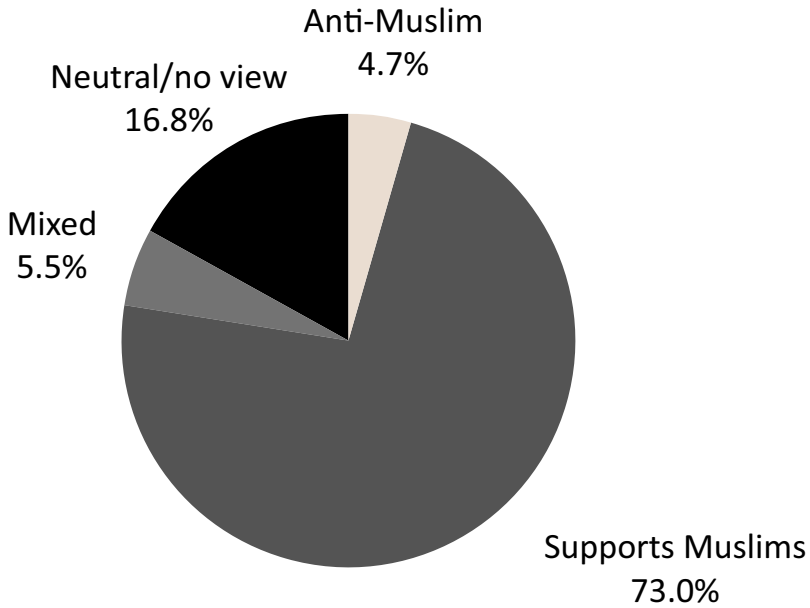


Figure 4.3 Position on Muslims: Christchurch first month (15 March 2019 to 15 April 2019)

rather than the principal issue. Of these tweets, some directly accused the Conservatives of being racist or Islamophobic (and antisemitic) with replies centring on two questions: why do Muslims vote for the Conservatives and why is Warsi in the party? One tweet explicitly used the hashtag #Toryracism and quoted the rise in hate crime following a high-profile 2018 newspaper article, where Johnson compared Muslim women to letterboxes. There was also some ‘whataboutery’ aimed to direct attention away to antisemitism in the Labour Party. It is notable, moreover, that only a handful of Muslims responded (three to four). The pattern of responses to Warsi’s tweet was repeated throughout the tweets in this dataset.

Many of the tweets mentioned Islamophobia as one of several of the targets of Conservative rhetoric and policy, for instance:

#BBCLeadersDebate Corbyn calls out Johnson for his offensive language, about Muslim women, black people, gay men, single mothers, working class men but all Johnson does is repeat crashingly dull quotes about Brexit. (Liz Clements, 6 December 2019, 9.27pm, 122 RTs)

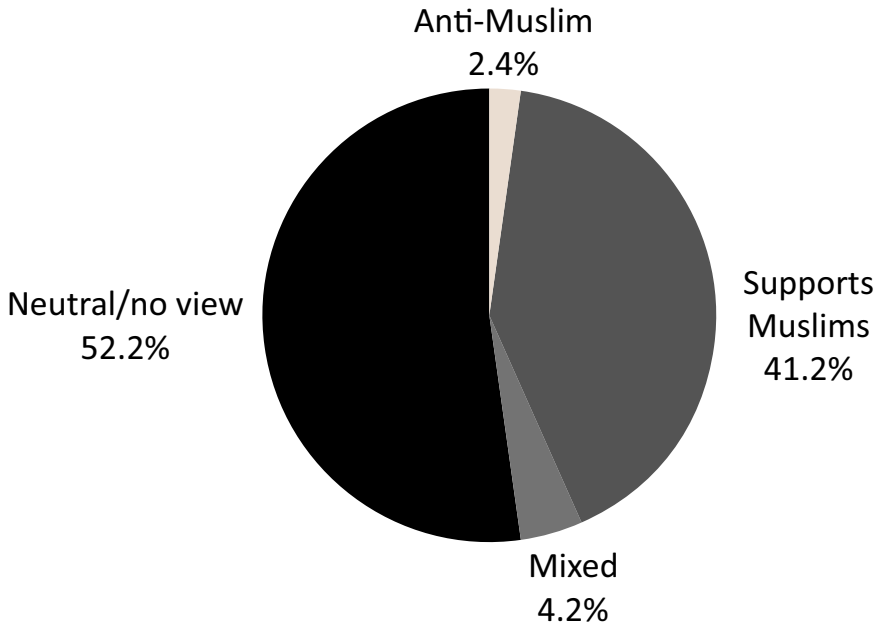


Figure 4.4 Position on Muslims: Christchurch 2 (three months later, 15 June 2019 to 21 June 2019)

The tweet from a Labour councillor, who described herself as a socialist in her bio, presents Corbyn as morally superior in this exchange and Johnson as inadequate. The phrase ‘calls out’ is a rhetorically significant verbal process, which simultaneously describes a speech act and presupposes that what was said is true (in a way that allege or accuse would not). There is a contrast between the list of groups that Johnson has said offensive things about and the insufficiency of his reply, repeating ‘crashingly dull slogans about Brexit’.

There were seven tweets visible in reply, one deleted and one from a suspended account. One questioned whether Corbyn actually spoke about gay men, three agreed that Johnson performed badly. Only one included any additional materials – a gif from a cartoon programme, with a character saying ‘I’m literally grasping at straws’. It is unclear whether this is directed at Clements’ tweet or is an assessment of Johnson’s performance. The last two replies were arguing with missing/deleted tweets. There was no mention of Islamophobia in these responses.

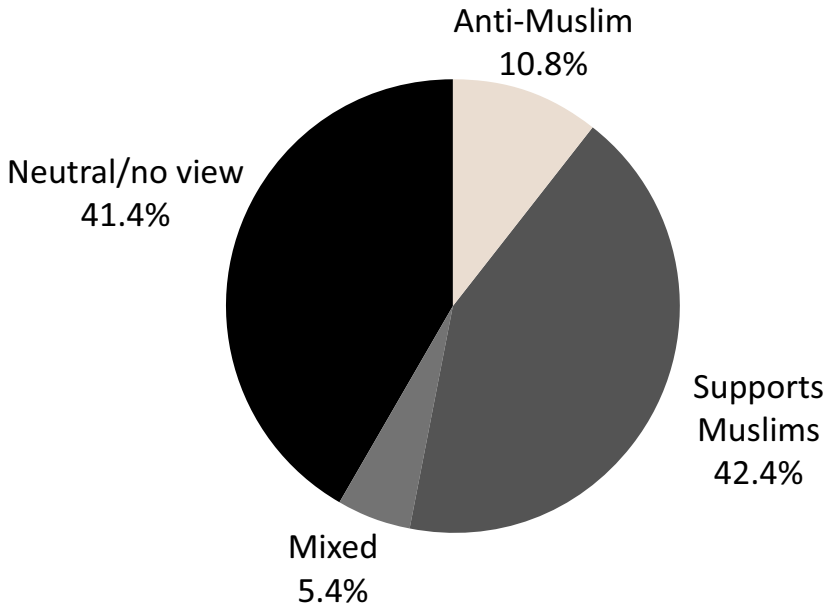


Figure 4.5 Position on Muslims: Christchurch 3 (six months later, 15 September 2019 to 21 September 2019)

On a counter-narrative spectrum, it would appear that these tweets operate at the level of counter-speech that elicit limited engagement, and raise questions about the sustainability of counter-narratives about Islamophobia on Twitter. However, the tweets also shift the terms of debate and reframe the problem, locating prejudice as coming from within a mainstream political party and offering a solution: vote for Labour. Although not highlighting wider structural problems, the consistent presence of anti-Islamophobic critique is suggestive of something beyond political expedience; if the data are taken as a whole, rather than treating individual tweets in isolation, they illustrate how sustained contestation of Islamophobia has become integrated into counter-hegemonic articulations of ‘polyvocal’ left-wing values (Ruiz, 2014).

While this allyship is useful in demonstrating solidarity with Muslims, self-representation was limited in this dataset, with only 3.5 per cent of the top 1000 tweets coming from accounts that were self-defined as Muslim. This suggests that participation in counter-narratives is not equally open to all. There may be several reasons for this: (1) that Muslims existed more at the margins of Twitter (at the time) so our focus on both highly visible and English tweets further marginalised their voices; (2) that some Muslims did not explicitly self-identify on Twitter so this aspect of identity was not

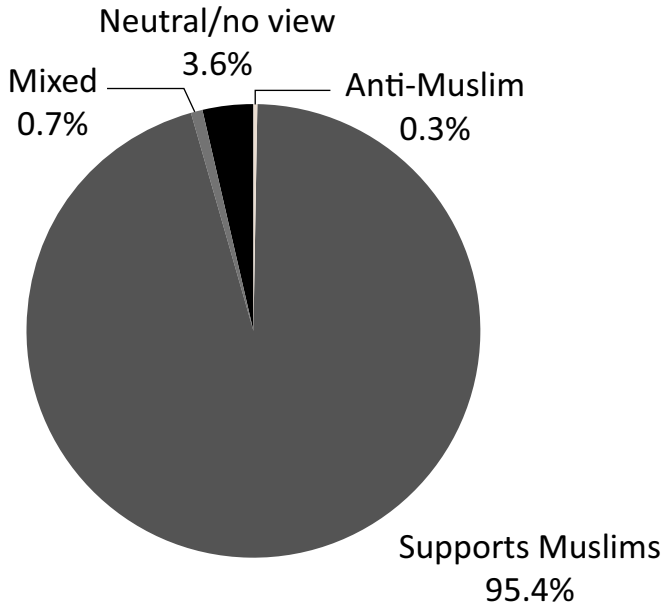


Figure 4.6 #hellobrother (all Christchurch dates)

captured; and, related to that, (3) it could have been strategic, given the hazards attached to making identity claims online, Muslims may have chosen to engage less with Islamophobic responses (also, potentially, to curtail further circulation) (see [Awan and Zempi, 2015](#); [Evolvi, 2019](#); [Eckert et al., 2021](#)). As [Brock \(2016\)](#) suggests, minorities are often ‘hyper-aware’ of their position in dominant society yet participation or lack of could also be a lack of interest or indifference to content perceived as intended for other audiences.

In the second Brexit dataset, around ‘Brexit Day’ (31 January 2020), there was less contestation between actors while at the same time demonstrating more antagonism towards perceived enemies (anti-Muslim tweets constitute 43 per cent of the dataset compared to 30.8 per cent that were supportive, [Figure 4.2](#)). As we showed in [Chapter 3](#), there is a very high statistical relationship between anti-Muslim and Brexit supporters in this dataset and between pro-Muslim and Remainers. These two camps give the impression of echo chambers in interacting with the politically like-minded. Brexit was a significant event in constructing rigid political collectives and in this case provides a strong organisational framework where individuals speak to each other as an ‘imagined audience’. As such most tweets generated only a couple of disagreeable replies except for the accounts of high-profile minority figures who were subject to ‘flak’ and

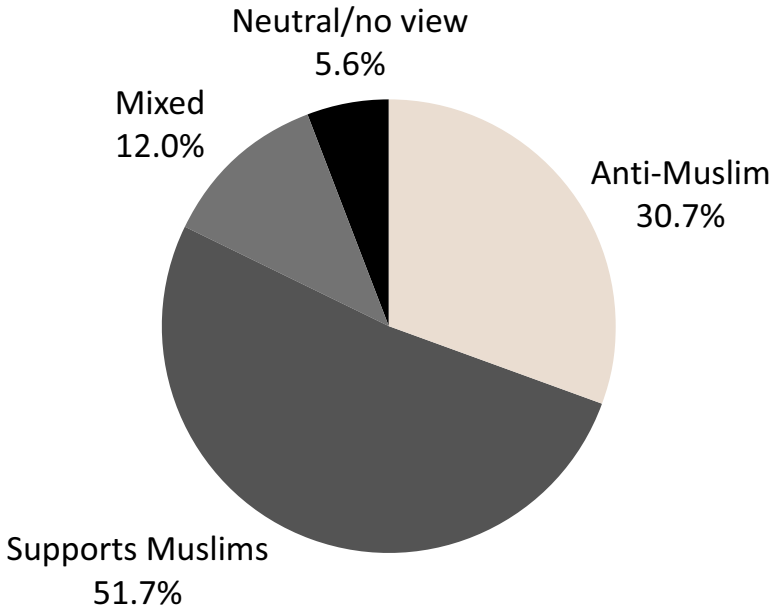


Figure 4.7 COVID-19 sample one (19 March 2020 to 19 April 2020)

trolling from right-wing accounts. Labour MPs David Lammy and Naz Shah, London mayor Sadiq Khan, peer Sayeeda Warsi and journalist Yasmin Alhbai-Brown were recurring targets here.

The tone from the left was more disparaging than in the Brexit election data, with Remainers commenting on Brexiters in negative terms using pejorative verbs such as ‘whingeing’ (implies childishness) and ‘ranting’ and reinforcing liberal-media ideas about their general intelligence, often euphemistically referred to through concerns about national intellect. Here, it is the left that invoke notions of rationality (see right-wing racism, [Part III](#), below) to underpin the character of their debate (with the implication that this is in contrast to the ‘uncivil’ discourse of the right). In this way, the counter-narratives about Muslims reflect the dominant narratives about Brexit by Remainers in wider left-leaning public discourse. These ‘culture wars’ debates have been criticised as a kind of theatre, a ‘performative spectacle of ritual blood-letting’ that allow those doing the calling out to feel morally good ([Ditum, 2014](#)). When framed in these kind of personal and moral terms, rather than discussing issues such as human rights and international politics and protectionisms, [Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud](#)

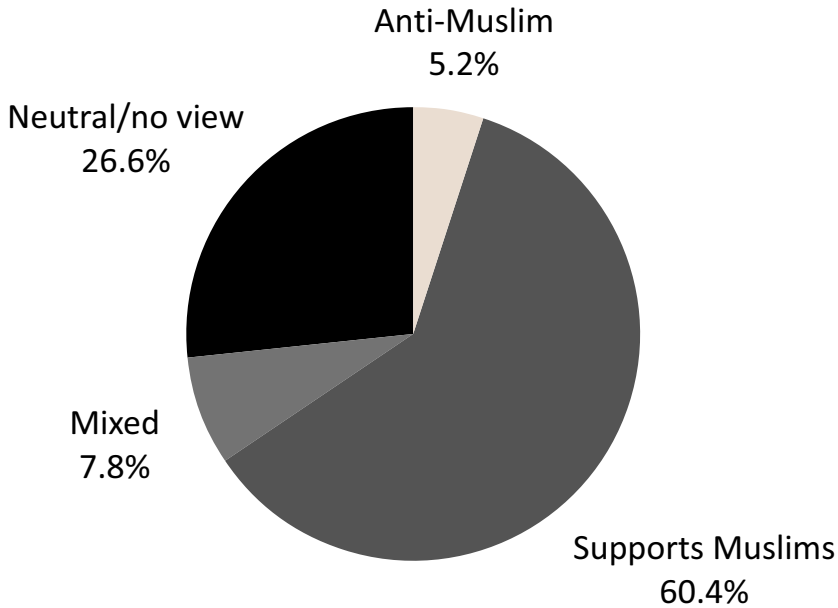


Figure 4.8 COVID-19: Eid al-Fitr (19 May 2020 to 25 May 2020)

(2023) argue, more moderate voices tend to stay out of the conversation (Collier, 2014), normalising the antagonistic environment.

As Lim (2017) has shown in her analysis of the highly polarised 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, these dynamics should not be oversimplified but are shaped by complex interactions between algorithms and user behaviour. Her concept of ‘algorithmic enclaves’ highlights how online spaces, such as those formed by Brexit supporters and opponents, can shape and amplify multiple forms of tribal nationalism. Within these enclaves, users defend freedom of expression while often practising exclusion, silencing dissenting voices. In this case of Brexit, therefore, this meant producing and legitimising nationalist identities rooted less in dialogue or inclusivity and more in loyalty to in-group values.

Despite differences at the quantitative level, therefore, discussion in this dataset was similar in content to the first Brexit sample with examples of Islamophobia used as political argumentation. In anti-Muslim tweets, Brexit was mostly perceived as a solution to the ‘problem’ of Muslims and there is a sense that ‘now Brexit is done’ (often referencing a battle fought and won), ‘we’ (as a mode of address) need to deport, deal with or have

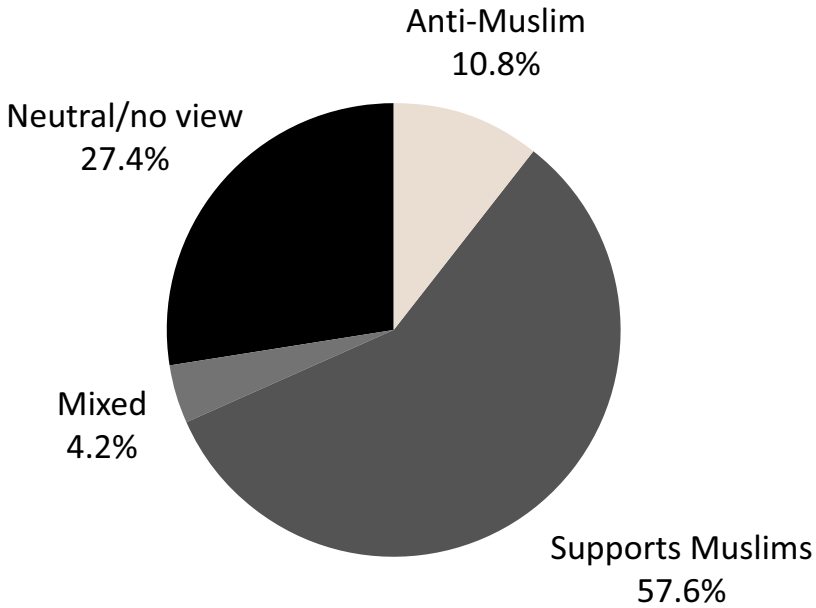


Figure 4.9 COVID-19: Eid al-Adha (29 July 2020 to 4 August 2020)

‘dealt with’ ‘the Muslims’ demonstrating a triumphalism rather than having a celebratory tone (see ‘Part III: types of racism’ section in this chapter for the other main narratives shared in this dataset). Although seemingly more negative towards Muslims than the previous dataset, this impression is undermined when we look at the number of retweets that anti-/pro-Muslim tweets received. Tweets that support Muslims were shared almost twice as many times as those that were Islamophobic (6478 compared to 3733). Similarly, in the top fifty shared tweets, twenty-five opposed or implicitly opposed Islamophobia, and nineteen were explicitly (fifteen) or implicitly (four) anti-Muslim. Whilst there appeared to be a strong anti-Muslim voice in this second dataset then, Islamophobia was centralised as a key issue in wider leftist counter-narratives, which suggests a commitment to maintaining a sense of solidarity.

Affective responses and the entanglement of countering

The Christchurch terror attack offers a further illustration of the complex relationships between different articulations of narratives that seek to challenge Islamophobia, and sometimes interact in conflicting ways. In the first, and largest, of our datasets – the month after the Christchurch terror

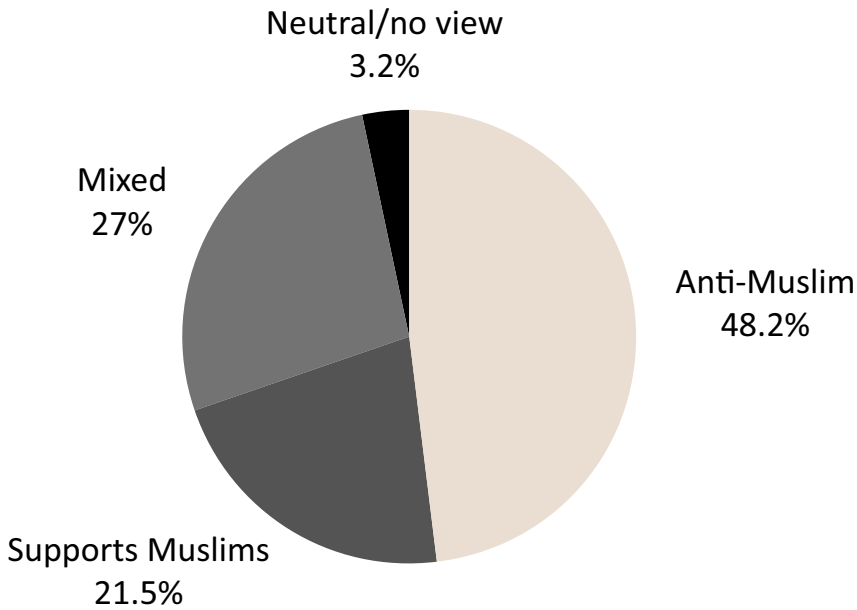


Figure 4.10 #Tablighijamaat (all COVID-19 dates)

attack – there was a huge outpouring of condolences, tributes to victims and support for survivors (of the top 1000 tweets, 73 per cent of the tweets supported Muslims [see Figure 4.3], 20.5 per cent were condolences for the victims and 12 per cent support for the survivors). This appears to be a clear-cut instance of an affective public (Papacharissi, 2014), wherein the formation of narratives and counter-narratives were propelled by affective investment (Siapera *et al.*, 2015).

There has been a growth of interest in ‘digital affect culture’ (Papacharissi, 2014; Evolvi, 2019: 4; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) and specifically on the relationship between mediated emotional politics and the rise of populism and nationalism, evidenced by political shocks such as Brexit and the election of President Donald Trump. Generally conceived of as more ethico-politically significant manifestations of solidarity than individualistic clicktivism due to their collectivity (de Blasio and Selva, 2019), affective publics still hold limitations due to their ephemerality. Analysis of this event seems to map onto these dynamics, which saw an instantaneous mobilisation of a transnational public against Islamophobia, which faded just as quickly. Again, though, closer examination reveals

a multidimensional picture of this initial public(s) wherein collective antagonism (that gave rise to sustained critique of the political establishment and disrupted normative media frames) was juxtaposed with individualistic performances of sympathy.

Many tweets in the first Christchurch dataset were posted by people in the public eye, or with a large numbers of followers, such as politicians, actors, sportspeople and other celebrities who sought to demonstrate support and show sympathy; these affiliation categories accounted for 34 per cent of tweets, rising to 46.6 per cent if we also include alternative media/journalists. The most shared tweet was Barack Obama's; the retweet count at the time of capture was 61,153:

Michelle and I send our condolences to the people of New Zealand. We grieve with you and the Muslim community. All of us must stand against hatred in all forms. (Barack Obama, 15 March 2019, 1.15pm)

Some of these politicians gave general condemnations of hate whereas others situated their arguments in relation to more fundamental critiques of institutional racism and Islamophobia. Here, Obama refers only to hatred but specifies Muslims. Boris Johnson referred to only 'the people of New Zealand' while as both Hillary and Chelsea Clinton pointed to both Islamophobia and white supremacy in their tweets.

Yet, due to the dynamics of Twitter as a platform, simplistic expressions of solidarity were quickly contested by users seeking to disrupt the hegemonic mode of commemoration with critique. Here the affective response was indignation as users called out both past actions and present character to justify rejecting the politician's statements of support (Richardson *et al.*, 2024). In the tweet below Hillary Clinton specifically mentioned the need to 'fight the perpetuation and normalization of Islamophobia':

My heart breaks for the global Muslim community. We must continue to fight the perpetuation and normalization of Islamophobia in all its forms. White supremacist terrorist must be condemned by leaders everywhere. Their murderous hate should be stopped. (15 March 2019, 12.26pm, 26.5k RTs)

The Clinton family's accounts were already highly contested on social media, given the polarised political landscape in the US. Hence many of the replies were personal – 'you should be stopped' or 'get lost' – but she, along with other politicians, were also accused of being hypocritical as she 'supported military interventions in the Middle East'. In previous work (Richardson *et al.*, 2024) we argue that this rhetorical approach constitutes an *ad hominem* attack: the antagonist criticises the moral authority of the politician (based on past actions) rather than the content of what they said. In other cases, users question the current character of

the protagonist as a way of undermining their position on Islamophobia and racism. Here, references to the protagonist's character are 'part of the propositional content of the standpoint under discussion' and so 'are, in principle, relevant arguments in the discussion' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992: 14 cited in Richardson *et al.*, 2024). Attacks on Boris Johnson, for example, were written in the present tense, he is a 'contemptable hypocrite' (now) and that he 'stand[s] together with far-right supremacists', because from their point of view, he hadn't changed his narrative since writing a negative newspaper column about Muslims in 2018. Although the sentiments of many of these politicians could be genuinely felt, their expressions of sympathy were criticised by counter-narratives that were oriented towards more sustained forms of structural critique. Here, counter-narratives were able to intervene to highlight the hegemonic assumptions held in what appear to be either neutral or supportive statements that often conceal political/power relations, and therefore hold politicians to account. The role of these high-profile accounts, while contentious, serves to amplify both positive and negative content, making these debates and expressions more visible.

Affective practices were also evident in responses to condolences/tributes shared by individuals. Heartfelt sympathies, particularly from Muslims, received an outpouring of support, thanks and emojis, the most popular ones being different versions of crying faces and hearts 🥹 (n = 88,530), 😭 (n = 77,896), ❤️ (n = 67,873), 💔 (n = 53,351), 😊 (n = 26,588), and so on, and mostly occurred in the twenty-four hours after the attack. However, the clearest example of an affective public is the user-generated #helloworldbrother hashtag. Hashtags have been widely discussed as having the potential 'to create collective conversations in times of crisis, conflicts, and controversies, they also mark and declare identities in distinction to other groups and opinions' (Evolvi, 2019: 387, drawing on the work of Giglietto and Lee, 2017). #helloworldbrother gained traction following a campaign by TRT World Citizen (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) to highlight the kindness of the first victim of the terror attack (Daoud Nabi), who opened the door of Al Noor Mosque to the terrorist and greeted him with the words 'hello brother'. The aim was, in their words, to 'continue the conversation he never had chance to finish' and 'spread hope, unity and love'.⁴ This hashtag was used 250,478 times⁵ in the forty-eight hours after the attack, and 95.4 per cent of the tweets were supportive towards Muslims. Users often simply retweeted a single tweet from a Saudi Arabian account (8540 RTs) with affective endorsement and emojis:

'Daoud Nabi', a 71-year-old Afghan refugee who escaped death in his country to cite in New Zealand where he received the terrorist at the mosque door with

the words ‘welcome brother’ but the terrorist killed him directly. (15 March 2019, 7.57pm)⁶

The tweet appeared with a photograph of Nabi in a mosque and the hashtags #hellobrother and #NewZealandTerroristAttack, so explicitly labelling this as a terror attack rather than shooting as some users in the wider discussion of the Christchurch attack chose to do (#NewZealandshooting, #NewZealandMosqueShooting).

Where location could be identified (which is not always possible), the #hellobrother dataset showed more diversity than the others, including the wider Christchurch sample, with users from Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and Indonesia. There was also more diversity in the type of users, the top users by followers were Mesut Ozil, the Turkish footballer, as well as an Egyptian footballer, a Malaysian politician, another Malaysian account, a Danish football supporter and a Saudi consultant – explaining its wider traction. Kavada and Poell (2021) argue that metrics affect the legitimacy and recognition of collective actors within flows of contentious publicness. It can also increase its permeability, and ability to attract allies including mainstream distribution (Jackson *et al.*, 2020: 119).

There were a significantly higher number of (self-identified) Muslim accounts in the #hellobrother sample (38.3 per cent compared to 3.5 per cent in the Brexit sample). Like other counter-public hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo (Zeng, 2020), #hellobrother provided a collective space to discuss sensitive issues by those most affected by them and that was comparatively free of antagonism. The tweets comprised largely of condolences or tributes to victims (68.1 per cent), outweighing attention to political issues; only 3.8 per cent of the tweets specifically pointed out Islamophobia as a primary issue. While the emotional tone therefore was sympathetic, the apolitical response of the hashtag users is typical of reactions to terrorism which largely avoid addressing systemic issues. There was also little evidence of disagreement in this hashtag which had some success on Twitter in spreading a positive message about Islam – reframing dominant narratives equating Muslims to terrorism but instead as representing ‘kindness’, ‘peace’ and ‘love’. Lim’s (2017) concept of ‘algorithmic enclaves’ may again be useful here for understanding how digital spaces are shaped by the interaction between user behaviour and content algorithms. In the case of #hellobrother, the network may not have been intentionally exclusionary, but the dynamics influenced the trajectory of the conversation in ways that may have contributed to a more siloed online environment.

While on Twitter the hashtag remained a religious enclave, its successful digital mobilisation did generate some global media interest, with legacy

media reporting on public reaction and often quoting Twitter users. We located seventeen news articles reporting the use of the hashtag in countries with a wide geographical spread – there were articles published in the UK, US and Canada, but also Thailand, Singapore, India, Canada and Turkey. The story of ‘hello brother’ (as an incident, rather than reporting on the spread of the hashtag) received much wider coverage in legacy media. As well as being supportive towards Muslims, some of these stories raised questions about Othering, which demonstrates an attempt to express an anti-racist viewpoint and advocate for social change. According to [Jackson *et al.* \(2020\)](#), this would constitute a successful counter-narrative, having material effects, and is an example of the hybrid media environment in which these stories operate. One criticism of counter-narratives is that they are always reacting against something and so can sometimes be counter-productive in contributing to the continued circulation of Islamophobic tropes, reinforcing them by seeking to prove otherwise and thus inadvertently opening up spaces where racism is presented as something that can be ‘debated’ ([Titley, 2019](#)). For example, encouraging Muslims to condemn actions of political violence also allows dominant groups to frame the discourse around their representation ([Law *et al.*, 2018](#)). [Titley \(2019: ix\)](#) argues that racism is not debatable but a product of ‘a constant contestation to what counts as a racism and whose reality counts in this evaluation, a process that renders it a matter of opinion and speculative churn, not history, experience and power’. When it becomes one opinion amongst others it is detached from these structural frameworks.

To avoid this approach, one user constructed an alternative narrative by taking the Islamophobic trope of ‘good’ and bad’ Muslims and responding in a satirical way. The noun phrase ‘peaceful mosques’ implies the existence of non-peaceful mosques and was a prevalent trope in media discourse, which suggested the attacks were particularly shocking as they targeted a ‘peaceful mosque’. The user challenged this tendency by encouraging Muslims to share everyday stories and observations from their mosques, rather than focusing on positive narratives of Muslims ‘making a difference’. The hashtag appeared 25,904 times in the sample, with most tweets being retweets or replies to the original post. This hashtag served as a counter-narrative, challenging the common portrayal of mosques as suspicious spaces that may pose a threat ([Richardson *et al.*, 2024](#)).

Hundreds of replies followed, mostly from Muslims sharing everyday experiences at their mosques – such as struggles with parking, the crowding at the entrance to the prayer hall (*musallā*) and when people are retrieving their shoes. Many posts were humorous, like children making inappropriate remarks during prayer or images of resident cats with signs instructing worshippers to leave them alone. Others were heartfelt reflections on

faith, community and inclusivity. Non-Muslims largely responded in two ways: either expressing appreciation for the thread's warmth and thanking contributors (sometimes noting these were uplifting after reading about the attack) or drawing parallels to their own religious experiences. Some engaged with the political undertones of the thread, acknowledging the Islamophobia it subtly countered, and offering solidarity. One user questioned why Muslims always have to prove their humanity, prompting a non-Muslim to respond, 'I see you, I hear you, and I have love for you'. The only anti-Muslim comment – a claim that all global conflicts involve Muslim combatants – was swiftly rebuked. In this case, users appropriated an element of the technical affordances of the platform (the hashtag) and, through the use of their own cultural referents and expressions of discursive identity, engaged it for (sometimes implicit) political action (see Brock, 2016).

Discourse aimed at opposing Islamophobic tropes can be problematic, as it often reinforces the very stereotypes it seeks to challenge. Narratives like 'not all Muslims are terrorists' still link Islam to terrorism, while calling some mosques peaceful implies others are not. However, this tweet and its resulting thread avoided this issue by emphasising the everyday ordinariness of the lives of Muslims instead. The hashtag can be seen as an example of the 'hyper-situational responses' that occur as a result of what Eckert *et al.* (2021) call 'hyper differential counter-publics' precisely because they must navigate difficult and shifting environments.

Both #helloworld and #peacefulmosques constitute expressions of solidarity based on collective action frames that spur others into joining, an illustration of the participatory action of ordinary users (Alfonzo, 2021). Here, the hashtags work as gatekeepers to religious and political inclusivity, through a shared purpose, whilst also providing a collectivity across difference (through transnational links). These dynamics demonstrate the hashtag politics discussed by Jackson and Foucault Welles (2016) who show how hashtags are used tactically as instrumental devices around which counter-publics can form to advocate for social change.

The focus on these more positive examples of countering should not be taken as an unqualified celebration of the way Muslims are discussed on Twitter. Even well-meaning counter-narratives can instrumentalise individual tragedy to further wider political narratives, or perpetuate Othering tropes about 'good' Muslims. Although there were more references to Islamophobia in original tweets in the Christchurch dataset, there was still limited attention to this subject in replies. This politics was evident in discussion of media language used around the Christchurch terrorist attack. A frequent narrative in response to media coverage of the attack highlighted the use of the term 'shooter' instead of 'terrorist', arguing that

this choice was influenced by the perpetrator's identity as a non-Muslim (mostly illustrated with images but not hyperlinks to media sources). This occurred from various accounts but Muslim users received the most flak in response.

The majority of replies to these tweets challenged the claim that he was not described as a terrorist, with some users providing screenshots of media reports labelling him a terrorist or describing his actions as a terror incident. Some replies supported the intent of the tweet but still argued that the claim was incorrect. In one example, posted by a Muslim, replies were very critical (for example, 'You're a f*** liar'), argued that the tweet was inappropriate ('Don't turn this into something other than what it is. Have some respect') or that it created new problems (for example, '[Y]ou are worsening racial tension'); fake news was also mentioned several times. Here, again, the focus tended to steer away from the main point being made about Islamophobia. These tweets elucidate the challenge of material-semiotic entanglement, wherein counter-narratives are closely entangled with original narratives, both in terms of meaning and in technical terms as users quote-tweet one another or hijack what they are contesting. A further example of this can be seen in a reply thread to a tweet by Mehdi Hasan who cited quotes about Islam from US right-wing commentators before asking the rhetorical question:

'When are we going to acknowledge we have a major Islamophobia problem, and that Islamophobia can kill?' Clearly if Islamophobia can kill, we need to acknowledge that it is a major problem immediately, #Christchurch. (15 March 2019, 5.46am, 7626 RTs)

There were over 100 replies, a large portion of which debated whether one of the commentators quoted was Islamophobic. The thread included several images of the commentator's written statements where he both denies that Islamophobia exists (the 'criticising a religion is not prejudice, even when you argue that this religion poses a special threat to civil society' defence) and states that the 'moderate Muslim' is a myth and the idea that Islam has been hijacked by some extremists is 'a dangerous fantasy'. Some people argued that quotes like this prove he isn't an Islamophobe, because he is not saying negative things about people, just what they (Muslims) believe; others argued the opposite.

Yet there was also some pushback when people posted Islamophobic replies. One thread (paraphrased to preserve anonymity), for instance, stated:

User One: Islam is terrorism: Fact

User Two: You need to get an education

User One: Madras education? No thanks.

User One then suggested that User Two is a ‘typical Muslim’ trying to divert attention away from the issue of Islamic terrorism, leading User Two to again suggest that User One needs to get an education, have self-respect and display more dignity.

There was more interaction overall in response to this terror attack than in relation to the other events. Much of this occurred in debates about white supremacy and right-wing terrorism. The discussion tended to be fairly constructive, pro-social and conversational as like-minded people debated but disagreed on specific points. This was evident in response to a tweet about whether the OK sign (made by the terrorist in the dock) is a symbol of white supremacy, and around whether to use his name or show his face (discussed further in the section ‘[Part III: types of racism](#)’ in this chapter). The Christchurch terror attack represents a shift in mainstreaming discussion of attacks by white far-right actors as terrorism inspired by white supremacist ideologies also seen in conventional news ([El-Nawawy and Hasan, 2022](#)).

Appropriation in right-wing politics

The second and third Christchurch datasets demonstrate the ephemeral quality of digital solidarities and raise questions about the sustainability of counter-narratives. Although still containing a high proportion of digital memorials and expressions of sympathy, the further away from the event in time, these gave way to greater contestation and the emergence of far-right narratives. As we can see from [Figures 4.3–4.5](#), the proportion of supportive tweets reduced from 73 per cent to 41.2 and 42.2 per cent whereas the number of anti-Muslim tweets increased from 4.7 per cent to 10.8 per cent in sample three (with more deletions in these datasets, reflecting this shift).⁷ However, the number of neutral tweets was much higher than in the first sample. This is due to US right-wing groups using the event to further their agendas around censorship and gun laws rather than specifically attacking Muslims.

Three months after the event, the story that gained the most attention was about a New Zealand man, Philip Arps, who had been sentenced to twenty-one months in prison for sharing the video of the livestreamed massacre, with thirty of his associates. Most users commenting on the sentencing were extremely critical of the prosecution. Half of the ten most shared tweets focused on this story, usually retweeting a news report with a comment (the *Bloomberg QuickTake* video was the most shared) or images of him which became symbolic of the ‘white victimhood’ narrative being circulated. These users omitted key details (even some news organisations did this) – his history of anti-Muslim hate crime and association with white supremacy – and referred to the sentence as ‘insane’, an example of ‘totalitarianism’ (there were further references to China, socialism, Orwell, communism and fascism),

‘islamopandering’ and having a ‘political agenda’, to defend the status quo in the US. These tweets defended Arp’s actions, suggesting that he was a victim of an overzealous legal system or an innocent who had unwittingly shared ‘a video on the internet’, and circulated narratives of censorship juxtaposed with ‘freedom’ that included references to the first and second amendment (from usernames that included ‘free speech’, ‘truth’, ‘wake up’ and ‘deep state’). This generated some commentary from other users about ‘free speech’. Freedom of speech as a value has been appropriated from the liberal left and weaponised by the right to defend their right to freedom of expression (Poole, 2012). Freedom of expression in this case often means the right to speak about (that is, criticise) immigration and diversity without constraint. Within this conceptualisation, racism is just another opinion, which allows for its contestation (Titley, 2019).

Nine months after the terrorist attack, tweets on global politics/right-wing terrorism were the most frequent – these were mainly about and criticised the terrorist, but a significant portion continued the gun control debate, linking a ban on assault weapons in New Zealand to gun control in the US; some tweets made this connection in a conspiratorial way, suggesting this was indicative of a ‘globalist game plan’. Other tweets suggested New Zealand’s response was an example of a recognisable pattern of blaming white supremacists and using this to tighten gun laws to ‘punish law abiding citizens’. Some shared anti-Muslim tropes as a way of furthering this agenda, for example one of these tweets included an image of Jacinda Ardern, in hijab, with the caption that claims Islam is ‘responsible for 99 per cent of the world’s terrorism’.

It is evident that trigger events on Twitter can lead to an outpouring of support for the victims of specific events and crimes such as terror attacks. However, many studies have noted a long tail effect in the temporal flow of Twitter identified here. This has been demonstrated previously through responses to the Brussels terror attack when, over time, the counter-narratives to #stopIslam gave way to ongoing right-wing racism (Poole *et al.*, 2021). We argued that, at the time, this was partly due to the manipulative tactics of tight networks of right-wing actors that had access to a wide range of ‘evidential’ sources to close down progressive voices. There was less evidence of these interventions in this particular case study, due to the nature of the event, and the greater moderation of US right-wing activists online at the time, but it is clear that the event was still appropriated to advance particular agendas. The evidence supports our argument that when these positive counter-narratives decrease, along with visible public commentary and media interest (individual accounts increase from 28 per cent to 59 per cent in the third sample), the long tail of racism continues (see Chapter 3).

What emerged from the analysis of the Christchurch attack is a more complex picture than initially indicated by the quantitative data and underlines the multidimensional properties of the narratives that emerge from affective publics.

Explicit Islamophobia, alternative narratives and contentious politics (COVID-19)

Although the quantitative analysis of the COVID-19 tweets showed that the majority of tweets were supportive (51.7 per cent compared to 30.7 per cent that were anti-Muslim [see [Figure 4.7](#)]), the most retweeted tweets were generally anti-Muslim; Islamophobic tweets were shared 129,179 times compared to pro-Muslim tweets, which were shared 97,758 times. This pattern was evident in the fifty most circulated tweets: five were explicitly Islamophobic, twenty-seven implicitly supported Islamophobia, three implicitly opposed and ten opposed it, with the remaining five being neutral.

Of these fifty most shared tweets, the majority were from Indian accounts (thirty-two), and from blogger/YouTube/‘political junkie’ accounts rather than mainstream news media; with most of these being non-Muslim. There were thirteen tweets from a high-profile Indian social media commentator listing cases of Muslims testing positive for COVID-19, and three from the right-wing Indian blog OpIndia. Four tweets were from Nigeria, encouraging Nigerian (Muslim) users to either self-isolate or commenting on the lack of social distancing (due to a lack of education).

These tweets tended to link together Muslims with the spread of COVID-19, but without explicitly stating ‘Muslims are to blame’, so we coded these as ‘implicitly supporting Islamophobia’. However, tweeting the number of Muslims testing positive for COVID-19, while often referring to the Tablighi Jamaat meeting or foreign Muslims in India (‘hiding in mosques’), provided a context in which more explicitly anti-Muslim sentiment could be expressed. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), threads of replies were frequently dominated by Islamophobia on a sliding scale. Indeed, it was in the replies that explicit abuse was most prominent, the majority of which had not been deleted, indicating a less stringent moderation process or moderation that is more in line with Hindu nationalist ideology ([Ghasiya and Sasahara, 2022](#)).⁸

[Chapter 3](#) also showed how the first COVID-19 sample focused on the Tablighi Jamaat’s annual gathering in Nizamuddin, Delhi, which hosted international delegates, many of whom were stranded due to sudden lockdown restrictions. The event was labelled as a superspreader ([Aschwanden, 2020](#)), triggering a nationwide search for attendees. Hence Muslims were constructed as a public health threat due to their alleged non-compliance with government pandemic measures ([Nasir, 2025](#)). Other studies

on Islamophobic content on social media in India have demonstrated how this event, and COVID-19 more generally, was the subject of a purposeful anti-Muslim campaign promoting Hindutva ideology (cultural nationalism) that included a BJP⁹ 'IT cell', which resulted in increasingly polarised content in the Indian Twittersphere (Prasad, 2020; Ghasiya and Sasahara, 2022).

The hashtag #Tablighijamaat or #Tablighijamat was used 13,742 times in tweets. The two key actors spreading Islamophobic content both referred frequently to this event – the high-profile Indian social media commentator and OpIndia (which also linked to OpIndia's blog):

Delhi: Dozens of coronavirus cases across the country traced to Tablighi Jamat Mosque in Nizamuddin, hundreds in hospital, 2000 quarantined, area sealed off <https://www.opindia.com/2020/03/tablighi-jamat-mosque-banglewali-masjid-nizamuddin-delhi-deoband-coronavirus-preachers-positive-cases-tamil-nadu/>. (30 March 2020, 2.05pm, 1081 RTs)

The Indian social media commentator repeatedly posted tweets listing examples of Muslims being 'found' with COVID-19. Typical tweets would begin with the heading 'Coronavirus' and then list locations along with numbers of 'foreigners hiding in mosque' and the outcome, usually arrest. No sources were provided for these claims (and several tweets in the reply thread asked the question 'Source?'); no accounts were tagged and no emojis or supporting materials were included.

These negative tweets resulted in a stream of virulent anti-Muslim responses, usually over 100 (388 on one post) that followed a similar pattern – using forceful, uninhibited and insulting language, they drew on Islamophobic tropes which point to the Islamification of India and Islamic terrorism – mosques were 'dens of terrorism' and should be 'bulldozed', Muslims were 'savages' deliberately spreading COVID-19 and resisting COVID-19 regulations. Variations of #Coranajihad, #Quranovirus and #Virusbombs were used to suggest COVID-19 is a planned form of biological terrorism, or warfare, which led to calls for Muslims to be killed in all manner of appalling ways. A criminal discourse was applied that calls for punishment rather than healthcare.

There were several examples of the celebration of police violence. Some of the replies to these tweets included film clips showing assaults – one showed the police attacking a 'self-styled god woman "Maa Aadi Shakti" (who) refused to call off a religious gathering', including her followers, and taking them away. They are shown being beaten quite viciously with sticks by the police; one user responded to this with '👊'.

There were several sarcastic references to 'peacefuls' and 'the so-called peaceful community', a common far-right euphemism to describe Muslims. There were also references to 'pseudo secularism' in these tweets, where

secularism is perceived as a manipulative ideology being used in a conspiracy, along with other groups – liberals, leftists, minorities – to transform India, or works as a code word for ‘paying too much attention to the preferences of Muslims’ (for example, ‘... is paying very heavy price of secularism’). One trope, that appeared more in these tweets than the posts of white nationalists, was referencing animal sacrifice, even suggesting it would be more appropriate for Muslims to sacrifice ‘their’ children than animals.

The typical affective response was anger, using emojis of rage 😡😡😡, which led to identity-based demands for action. These tweets conveyed a sense of an imagined audience, fostering a collective action frame that positioned a unified ‘we’ or ‘us’ in opposition to ‘them’, what Asen (2000: 429) calls ‘affirmations of specificity’ in relation to ethnicity and religiosity (in this case Muslims). Some of the replies asked rhetorical questions that were also answered with hate. The sharing of videos, images and memes in these replies was more frequent than in other events, as evidence of negative behaviour – one meme featured Modi with an automatic rifle suggesting how India should respond to the perceived problem. Another shared an image with the assertion that states there have been zero days since a Muslim ‘wack job’ tried to kill someone in the name of the ‘religion of peace’.

There were a few examples of racist denial but this was not necessary in most cases as a negative position on Muslims had been normalised. For example, one tweet began ‘This may sound a bit racist but’ we (non-Muslims) should stay away from ‘our Muslim brothers’ and places they attend.

While anti-Muslim tweets tended to generate agreement, mainstream media and counter-narratives provoked more debate due to having a wider distribution (with replies from a transnational audience).

Mainstream media report:

Malaysia coronavirus cases jump to 1,183, many cases linked to mosque
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-malaysia-idUSKBN2180BW/> (Reuters, 21 March 2020, 12.25pm, 1881 RTs)

The affective response to this tweet was fear rather than anger with pleas to stay at home. There were some attempts to de-escalate the Hindu/Muslim differentialist narrative in counter-narratives, for example, ‘please don’t tweet selective media’ and ‘it’s not the time for divisiveness’.

The level of collective antagonism against Muslims did, however, result in the construction of alternative narratives. In sample one, these were mostly examples of Muslims engaged in altruistic behaviour. In sample two, a large quantity of tweets pointed out Islamophobia. However, these tweets were subject to extreme flak. This abuse mirrors the type of tactics of the (US) far-right witnessed in our study of #stopIslam (Poole *et al.*, 2021), such as the bottom-up sharing of alternative sources rather than reliance on

mainstream media. There were several organisations that engaged in calling out Islamophobia and providing alternative accounts such as the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, DOAM (Documenting Oppression Against Muslims) and AltFactNewschecker. One of these organisations, the Indian American Muslims Council, had the resources to create its own content (such as video campaigns) and regularly posted alternative narratives about Muslims in resistance to dominant media narratives in India:

A compilation of all the videos of Muslims helping poor migrant labourers during Coronavirus pandemic across India

[Quote-tweets a video of another Indian Muslim who documents Islamophobia against Muslims in India]. (Indian American Muslim Council, 21 May 2020, 8.22pm, 381 RTs)

Another Indian commentator tagged another user who monitors ‘bigotry’ and tweeted a similar thread to the one above with twenty-four examples of Muslims helping others, and others then shared their own examples in reply. Another activist organisation linked to this user shared a similar tweet with forty-five instances of community interventions by Muslims that had seventy-seven examples in the reply thread, demonstrating how collective action online can create more visible and sustainable narratives. This ‘digital storytelling’ approach can be highly effective in generating engagement. By fostering empathy, understanding can be extended, further countering disinformation (Nærlund, 2020).

A common way of countering these supportive posts was to refer to them as ‘fake news’. The third most shared tweet in the first sample (10,870 times), circulated by an Indian freelance writer/journalist who, based on her name, is possibly Muslim (verified, 135.6k followers), included a 1m06s video footage showing a funeral. The tweet claimed that the funeral was that of a Hindu man whose relatives were too afraid to lift his bier, so he was carried by his Muslim neighbours, who also chanted a Hindu prayer. A repeated point of contention in the reply thread was whether this was an example of ‘fake news’ – several accounts suggested that it was (either by simply stating this is fake news, or by suggesting that Muslims would never chant this prayer); some shared other videos and media reports to support this (for example, the second reply in the thread included this report in Hindi which states that no family members other than the man’s son were present).¹⁰

Tweets in sample two, around Eid al-Fitr, were mostly positive (thirty-eight of the fifty top shared tweets were positive, nineteen from Muslim accounts), with public figures, often politicians, offering Eid greetings to other leaders, their populations and other Muslims. Such accounts included the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, who had the two most

retweeted tweets in the sample, other Indian officials, Nigerian officials, the president of Turkey, sports people and UK MPs. Responses could be categorised according to the type of account. Politicians mostly received thanks or people trying to attract attention to their cause. Media outlets received a mixed response, otherwise responses tended to be in line with the politics of the tweet. There was some continuation of anti-Muslim propaganda (only four tweets in the fifty most shared), and some showed how Muslims were victims of prejudice during COVID-19. Additionally, there was some support for Muslims from Sikh users (notably also found in the Christchurch samples).

Sample Eid greeting tweet:

Happy Eid il Fitr celebration to all Muslim Ummah. May Allah reward all our Ibadah during the Holy Month Ramadan and raise our nation above COVID-19 and associated challenges. Happy Celebrations! (Femi Gbajabiamila, Chief of Staff to Nigeria's President, 24 May 2020, 09.51am, 158 RTs)

In both Eid samples, there were more tweets about the UK context than in the first sample. These included government/National Health Service (NHS) social distancing campaigns and news reports on this topic, but also people supporting allegations that ethnic minorities were not social distancing, and a considerable number of people contesting this through counter-narratives. These posts occurred in the context of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Manchester, lockdown having ended for a few weeks, followed by several regions in the north-west (including Rochdale, which was involved in prosecuting sexual grooming gangs) announcing a new lockdown on the eve of Eid, which led to more contention and debates in replies. The content of English nationalists was similar to that posted in the Brexit sample: right-wing posts were largely echo chambers, and left-wing MPs, such as Angela Rayner, were subject to significant abuse. For example, a tweet by an individual, who had eight UK flags in his handle, shared the story of the Conservative MP who claimed that ethnic minority communities were not taking the lockdown seriously along with the words 'Quelle surprise' and a frustrated emoji 😡. All but two responses agreed (thirty-nine) citing typical anti-Muslim tropes, with reference to sharia law, 'leftie cancel culture', '#defundtheBBC', the streets 'crawling with Muslims' and fake images of Muslims not social distancing, for example in mosques or at prayer en masse.

An example of a counter-narrative post was from a Muslim Labour candidate, the second most circulated tweet in the third sample:

The first 4 doctors to die of covid were Muslims. So many BAME key workers in the NHS and elsewhere have made the ultimate sacrifice with their lives to

save lives. On the day of Eid-al-Adha, the festival of sacrifice, a Tory MP leads the despicable strategy of blaming minorities. (Rushanara Ali, 31 July 2020, 12.11pm, 1511 RTs)

This tweet was referring to an LBC article by the Conservative MP that blamed 'BAME communities' for lockdowns, and Muslim and BAME communities for not taking the COVID-19 pandemic seriously.¹¹ It included reference to Leicester's lockdown (a Midlands town that experienced the longest UK lockdown) as well as the north-west (both areas associated with a high percentage of ethnic minorities). This tweet is fairly archetypal, in that it: (1) mentions Muslim NHS workers; (2) reiterates the link between Muslims and racialisation (originally made by MPs but perpetuated by this well-intentioned post); (3) mentions the Eid lockdown; (4) associates the Conservatives with racism. The replies were very heated, with huge levels of debate, and while this mostly did not extend beyond single posts, there were some mini threads within them.

Of the replies, 122 agreed with the tweet: common links/reference points included images of beaches packed with people, criticism of the Conservatives (and Brexit), white people in pubs and celebrating VE day (Victory in Europe day), #BLM, and a specific set of tweets by locals criticising people for going on holiday to Cornwall. One response described 'Islamophobia' as the 'acceptable face of racism' for the Conservatives.

Seventy-one replies disagreed with the tweet: most of these simply said 'why are all the infections in BAME areas then' or 'maybe BAME people are bringing it to the NHS' and circulated claims of 'people hugging in mosques' with a specific image of a queue outside mosque shared multiple times. BLM was mentioned several times (with an image of a protest). There was some racist denial and references to fact and truth, as in 'the truth isn't racist'.

The COVID-19 sample is largely an antagonistic dataset that demonstrates context specific communication patterns. However, these practices were also appropriated across contexts, for example, there were consistent patterns across white and Hindu nationalists' anti-Muslim narratives and evidence of appropriation of events to spread Islamophobia. There were also striking visual similarities between anti-Muslim discourse in India and the UK. Muslims were consistently blamed for spreading COVID-19 and the images that were repeatedly used featured people gathering outside mosques (which were often decontextualised). [Kavada and Poell \(2021\)](#) have previously noted the consistent and sustained use of images (as well as videos and metrics) in contentious publicness as evidence of the way contention materialises, which can have significant (and democratic) implications.

This dataset showed the level of anti-Muslim racism still available on Twitter at the time of analysis but also that in this context, there was more

pushback, with bottom-up alternative narratives acquiring sustainability through collective networking amongst activists, giving them traction. This sample demonstrates more evidence of contentious politics, for example, 41 per cent of the top retweeted quote-tweets disagreed with the sentiment of the original tweet compared to 31.5 per cent that agreed, partly due to the polarised discourse on this topic. Engagement with these negative narratives retained an important function in this dataset, by challenging claims and redefining narratives, it demonstrates how social media has the potential to engender progressive/democratic movements *under the right conditions*. For [Tilly and Tarrow \(2015: 7\)](#), ‘contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors’ interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties’ (cited in [Kavada and Poell, 2021: 195](#)). Yet if contentious politics is a form of ‘information warfare’, the unequal relations/resources and platform conditions often allow dominant publics to monopolise, making it a difficult terrain for activists to navigate.

Part II: tactical interventions

In our own work, we have suggested that the approaches used by key actors in mediated activism often serve as ‘tactical interventions’ ([Giraud, 2018; Poole et al., 2021](#)), wherein users attempt ‘to interfere in complex communication ecologies by modulating the affordances of particular media, a sort of digital weapon of the weak intended to counteract the growing power differentials in this realm’ ([Lezaun, 2018: 224](#)).

A discursive device commonly used by actors sharing counter-narrative tweets was the rhetorical question, as in ‘How do you justifiably deflect a question about Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, and racism in your party into “get Brexit done?”’ in the context of the #BBCLeadersDebate with the implication that the tweeter believes there was no justification for Johnson answering in such a way. This implication is then underlined in the next sentence, where the user directly accuses him of targeting and victimising groups of people. Yet these questions can generate hateful replies, further amplifying the discourse. This tactic was also used in anti-Muslim tweets in the COVID-19 sample, where they often acted as statements of ‘common sense’ – for example, the question ‘why are Muslims given special privileges?’ presupposes that this is, in fact, the case. This demonstrates the tensions generated in trying to counter right-wing activism online without further reproducing existing inequalities by opening up avenues for further disinformation to be propagated.

A further rhetorical approach is using the platform's affordances to maximum effect through discursive structures, in this case, the use of lists. Generating lists is a popular stylistic approach of users, a way of emphasising an argument within the confines of Twitter. This was especially evident in the second Brexit dataset, where both left- and right-wing posters shared examples illustrating the state of the country (from their perspective), often citing Islam or Islamophobia as one of the issues. There were ten such 'lists' in the fifty most circulated tweets in the Brexit Day sample, seven of which referred to censorship in the media. From the left, for example, the lists grouped together issues that are considered right-wing/Brexit supporters' (often conflated) preoccupations or 'grievances' – Meghan Markle, Greta Thunberg, environmentalism, Islamophobia – with the implication that this demonstrates irritational thinking. Anti-Muslim tweets referred to 'things I'd like to get sorted' now Brexit is done. Often the author implies the list could be longer with the use of 'etc.'. Through repetition these patterns of communication can become a platform norm but also have a cumulative effect. For example, supportive posts after the Christchurch attack list white supremacist terror attacks to emphasise their recurrence. However, during COVID-19, they could be categorised as a form of *reiterative racism* with lists of people being 'found' and testing positive (becoming a meme for the right at this time). Lists are a powerful structural and discursive device because they simplify complex ideas, enhance readability and encourage engagement. They can be used persuasively to reinforce and normalise perspectives and stereotypes by providing multiple examples and highlighting patterns. This makes arguments easy to communicate and share, especially in fast-scrolling digital environments.

Unlike our previous study of #stopIslam, there was limited use of links and memes in the Brexit datasets (Brexit 1: 22.8 per cent, Brexit 2: 16.9 per cent). Most of the URLs shared were from the mainstream media, particularly in the case of Brexit 1, to demonstrate media bias – and the particular form of alleged bias depended on the politics of the user. This was a central narrative from both right- and left-wing actors with Miqdaad Versi a key advocate across the datasets. As the executive for the Centre for Media Monitoring, which scrutinises media bias against Muslims, this is not surprising, but it is notable that his tweets gained traction and appeared regularly in the top fifty retweeted tweets. He highlighted examples of Islamophobic commentators appearing on the BBC (Brexit 1) and examples of content barely covered by mainstream media (Irish terror plot foiled, *Belfast Telegraph*, Brexit Day), as well as fact-checking and challenging claims about social distancing. As well as generating agreement, Versi also received much criticism. In response to a tweet criticising the BBC for platforming right-wing journalist Melanie Phillips, he was accused of extremism, of playing the race card, and it was

suggested that criticism of Islam is rational (see below for a discussion of arguments around rationality).

Censorship in the media was a common narrative in these tweets. In the Brexit Day dataset, seven of the most circulated tweets focused on this (often using the list structure described above), which was also a focal point for the right, with the BBC being a particular target as a representative of 'liberal media'. The second most circulated tweet in the Brexit Day dataset was a criticism of the BBC from an individual account (unverified, 3881 followers, 1658 RTs), who had flags of the UK, US and Israel in their name, and their bio listed their dislikes as 'EU/wokery/communism/BBC/SNP' – this combination of nationalist and right-wing political talking points is characteristic of white nationalist users. The tweet used irony to suggest that the BBC had not given any airtime to supporters of two right-wing political projects (Brexit and Trump) or reported on 'Islamic paedophiles in Britain'. It conjured up a situation where someone who only ever viewed the BBC would not be aware of these stories or viewpoints ('they know there are no [x]'). The length of the list works up a sense that these absences are deliberate, and that the BBC has an institutional agenda. Having posed the problem, the solution offered by replies and in other tweets was mostly to scrap the licence fee (the argument also appeared as #ScrapTheLicenceFee). There was an affective response with over 100 replies using red face emojis and angry terminology such as 'rage', 'sick', 'disgrace', 'fume'. Notably, in the second Brexit dataset, there were more links to alternative and right-wing media (*Breitbart*, *Spiked*, *Byline Times*), as evidence to support partisan views.

Few links were used in the Christchurch terror attack following the first month after the attack (which is dominated by condolences). Images were mostly of victims, or the terrorist, so tended to be used on more supportive accounts. Viewed together, the images juxtaposed the kindness of the victims with the aggression of the protagonist so reinforced a victim/aggressor trope but also humanised the victims through personalisation. However, in the second sample, many people shared mainstream news articles relating to the story of Philip Arps and the terrorist's plea. As these tended to be shared by either people who disagreed with the sentencing of Arps, or by mainstream news that provided little context, a noted tactic in replies was people using links to push against (counter) this by providing more context.¹²

This type of evidential posting was prevalent from right-wing actors in the COVID-19 sample who used more alternative media to support extreme voices (a way of spreading hate speech in a legitimised form). Sample one showed a higher incidence of URLs shared (in 43.8 per cent of tweets) and images (59.6 per cent) than in the previous two events. Ghasiya and Sasahara (2022), in their study of the Tablighi Jamaat controversy on Facebook, found similar (misinformation) link-sharing behaviour, and small

but integrated right-wing sharing activist communities which has previously been observed in US Islamophobic campaigns (Poole *et al.*, 2021).

Responses to counter-narratives also took the form of ‘flak’ (defined as networked sanctions by Rashidi *et al.*, 2020; Suzuki and Velasquez, 2025). In the Christchurch dataset, Democratic politicians were targeted with this kind of hostility, which was especially virulent in response to women’s and Muslims’ accounts, who were subject to a form of individualised racism. US congresswoman Ilhan Omar (verified account, 3m followers), suggested that a tweet from US news website *The Hill* made an irrelevant reference to her being Muslim.

What is a ‘Muslim verse’?

Why did you have a need to signal it out?

And more importantly, aren’t Muslims allowed to say a prayer for our dead?

This is lazy and ‘othering’! Do better!

#Astaghfirullah

[Quote-tweets *The Hill*’s tweet of their article: <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/434210-omar-responds-to-new-zealand-mosque-shooting-we-must-not-live-in-fear/>] (16 March, 2.05am, 9090 RTs)

There were 100-plus replies, about half of which disagreed with her reading of *The Hill*’s tweet, arguing that she was being over-sensitive, that ‘we’ are a different culture and it’s the way we say things (implying she is outside this). Some were more critical – ‘How ungracious! Rethink this tweet’ and personal saying ‘she’ deserves the criticism because she is ‘an antisemitic bigot, not for being a Muslim’ or criticised her politics which they argued supports ‘Islamic militias and radicals’. Threads attacking politicians, including right-wing commentators, followed a similar pattern to the Brexit data (attacking and defending political ideologies), and did not extend discussions of Islamophobia. One of the outcomes of this flak is to disrupt counter-narratives and decrease their longevity, limiting democratic debate.

A further tactic used by progressives in attacking or questioning politicians/commentators was tagging, for instance Mehdi Hasan’s address to @joeRogan in the example at the start of this chapter. This use of addressivity markers not only makes the tweet visible to the addressee, but calls them to account, and increases potential engagement with the tweet if that person responds (Rogan does not, which some interpret as him avoiding those who disagree with him). Tagging provides an impression of a conversational, open approach, but is also performative, and in the case of these provocative tweets rarely gets a response from the person tagged but sometimes from their followers. The approach allows the tweeter to

reframe the conversation and alter its direction, often undermining the original argument, which can therefore be an effective tool for countering. It can also misfire and generate a backlash. There was very little use of tagging in the large Christchurch sample but it was used by Muslim activists in the COVID-19 sample to alert other activists, politicians, commentators and journalists to prejudice. The Indian American Muslim Council tagged multiple accounts to draw US officials' attention to discrimination in India and encourage other Muslim nations to get involved (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Most of the discourse in these datasets (except the COVID-19 sample), although often critical of opposing viewpoints, tended to remain polite. This could be for two reasons, that progressive actors want to keep their interactions respectful as evidenced by our interviews (see [Chapter 5](#)) or that the most abusive content had been deleted or accounts suspended. Some of this could be self-censorship, we can still see many of these tweets in our data (due to having been deleted since we captured them) and many are at the more extreme end of abuse. Hence, these datasets appear more civil and less abusive at this particular period in time (before the decline of moderation on X). If this was the case, what types of racism/anti-racism were present?

Part III: types of racism

Although a large proportion of tweets in the Brexit datasets called out Islamophobic actors and speech, they did not extend their attention to wider discussions of structural racism. Most of the anti-racism was individualised, aimed at specific actors and their personal behaviours; Boris Johnson, in particular, was singled out as a left-wing folk-devil, along with other Conservatives on the right of the party such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, and there was a degree of pleasure in formulating clever attacks. When racism is individualised, it does not challenge the status quo as the suggestion is that if these individuals are removed, so too is the racism – the solution for example in these tweets is to place your vote elsewhere. In the second Brexit dataset, the tone of these attacks was heightened with many references to current manifestations of 'fascism'. There was also a spat between Labour candidate, Faiza Shaheen, and Geoff Seef (Liberal Democrat MP), whom she accused of starting an Islamophobic campaign against her. Again, this appeared as a secondary concern to the political infighting which was a feature of both Brexit datasets. Shaheen said:

OMG, he has no shame. You're under investigation for the letter!!! I have signed the pledge and been on countless TV shows and forums that I want to

remain and Brexit is a mistake. Please stop spreading lies, quote tweeting Seef's 'Firstly you know perfectly well I did not start an Islamophobic campaign against you and there is nothing in my letter that remotely suggests it. Secondly. please explain why you have not signed Labour candidates pledge to remain'. (4 December 2019, 11.29am, original spellings)

These personal exchanges contribute to perceptions of racism as individualised and debatable (Titley, 2019).

Racism in the Brexit datasets fell into typical Islamophobic categories of cultural racism, white nationalism, ethnonationalism and differentialism (Breen and Awan, 2025; Hall, 1997). Common tropes, which were more prevalent in the second Brexit dataset, as well as categories of responses, included in particular a focus on 'Muslims and Pakistani grooming gangs', sharia law, immigration, radicalisation, Islamist terrorism, antisemitism, Islamification, 'anti-wokism' and right-wing victimhood. These appeared as overt racism/Islamophobia and were mostly circulated by unaffiliated accounts but have largely been deleted or were from accounts which have since been suspended (17.6 per cent deleted, and 15 per cent suspended in the second Brexit dataset). Intersectional oppressions were mainly evident in references to gender. Tweets that referred to grooming gangs often mentioned the oppression of women in Islam, most explicitly referred to as 'Muslim child rapists' (deleted tweets). The protection of women is a common trope in far-right, anti-immigration and anti-Muslim discourse, and the most frequent form of gender-related discussion in the datasets, though it often appeared marginally or implicitly in the tweets we analysed. For example, it was expressed in the Christchurch dataset when Jacinda Ardern wore a headscarf in solidarity with Muslims as part of the #scarvesinsolidarity campaign. Delgado *et al.* (2012) use the concept of differential racialisation, which acknowledges the intersections of racialised identities and the power dynamics that underlie racist practices. This element of collective and cultural racism – constructing an 'us' and 'them' and suggesting that 'they' are 'eroding our culture' – was evident in many anti-Muslim tweets. Examples of deleted tweets in the Brexit sample included references to Sadiq Khan being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (some of this bordered on conspiratorial thinking referring to a 'Muslim invasion'), and a story about an Irish Pakistani Muslim being accused of necrophilia (a recycled story where the identity of the accused was not originally specified). Base racism was more overt in the COVID-19 datasets, where explicit abuse was normalised and remained uncensored (discussed in more detail in the section on COVID-19 tweets; the rise of Hindutva ideology on Twitter is also discussed in Chapter 5).

In the first Brexit dataset, racism was more covert and often appeared in replies as racist denial as well as appeals to ‘rationality’. In particular, replies challenged the concept of Islamophobia and justified ‘rational’ fear of Islam with reference to examples of acts of terrorism. These pro-social responses drew on a more intellectual logical approach, the tone giving the argumentation more credibility. Racist denial is a common feature of post-racist discourse (Sharma and Brooker, 2016) and according to Mondon and Winter (2020) constitutes a form of liberal racism where racism is condemned but simultaneously maintained. A reply to a typical #BBCLeadersDebate tweet therefore suggested ‘Dislike of Muslims is racist ... but Islamophobia to describe that is meaningless’ (individual account). Similarly, a reply to a tweet that attacked Yasmin Alibhai Brown for praying in a chapel on Brexit Day, said ‘I wondered [why she was there] but didn’t want to be accused of an ism’ (using coded language to infer racism, adding to the tone that suggests a culture of censorship). Sharma and Brooker (2016) noted this attention to ‘truth’ in (post-)racist tweets in their own analysis of the hashtag #notracist. They argued it is a form of defensiveness and used to justify indirect racism in a time when overt racism is no longer acceptable. This approach was also evident in the COVID-19 sample where counter-narratives were undermined with the concept of ‘fake news’. People sharing counter-narratives about Craig Whittaker MP’s claim that minorities are spreading COVID-19 were frequently subject to truth claims as a form of racist denial.

Humour was also used in this capacity, to conceal and legitimise racism. An example that appeared in both Brexit datasets is ‘Islamicat’, a parody account that uses cat memes, which are hugely popular online, using wordplay and puns, alongside Islamophobic tropes for comic effect. One tweet included a video of a postal worker attempting to deliver mail (4 February 2020, 259 RTs). A cat attacks the mail and the postal worker through the letterbox, from the other side of the door. As with other tweets from this account, it used puns and wordplay intended to parody the voice of a ‘Muslim radical’ (‘Infurdel’) and therefore trades on anti-Muslim tropes. It may, also, lampoon opponents of Brexit, who argue that Brexit propaganda is racist (exaggerating this argument as ‘Nazi Brexit propaganda’). Replies incorporated more Islamophobic tropes and wordplay referring to ‘Pusslims’, the postal worker as a ‘Zionist Mouse-ad spy agent’ and finally ‘Cod is great’. Ridicule was also used prejudicially by Islamophobic tweeters during the COVID pandemic, particularly through memes and the use of sarcasm whereas humour was much less apparent in the Christchurch attack tweets due to the topic.

In the most circulated tweets in the Brexit datasets, there were only a couple of examples from Muslim accounts where they shared first-hand

experiences of racism/Islamophobia. They also expressed their concern about increasing hostility to Muslims following a Conservative win in the election, and Brexit. These elicited few responses. Personal examples of racism were more prevalent in the other datasets where the effects of Islamophobia were more direct but tended to be about the impact of racism on other people rather than personal accounts.

The well-meaning focus on the Islamophobic and racist views of far-right extremists, like the protagonist in the Christchurch terror attack, serves to place racism outside the mainstream. This is also a form of individualising racism which is decontextualising and depoliticising and distracts from structural forms of racism. For [Bouvier \(2020\)](#), this allows people denouncing racism to engage in moral posturing without condoning meaningful change. Some replies to tweets tried to highlight the point that mainstream media has normalised and legitimised Islamophobia through their coverage but there was pushback on this, that Muslims are deserving victims. Some of these replies demonstrated explicit Islamophobia, referring to the rape of British girls by Pakistani Muslims, for example. A tweet from a non-Muslim New Zealander that argued ‘This is not us’ received some engagement where people tried to highlight racism and bigotry in society but replies to these often pivoted back to the threat of right-wing terrorism. According to [Mondon and Winter \(2020\)](#), in a post-racial society, where mainstream racism is perceived as largely resolved, racism is defined only in its extreme, illiberal form. As a result, attention focuses primarily on far-right racist activity that does not challenge the status quo, framing terrorists as exceptional aberrations. This was particularly evident in recent coverage of riots following disinformation on social media that claimed the murderer of three girls in the northern town of Southport (UK) was a recent asylum seeker. This unrest was widely attributed to the ‘far-right’ across the mainstream media.¹³

Our analysis of representations of race draws on the work of [Stuart Hall \(1997\)](#), who argues that ‘ways of seeing’ racial others are culturally embedded along normative values and therefore remain largely unseen. Joe Feagin’s concept of the White Racial Frame and Charles [Mills’ \(1997\)](#) epistemology of ignorance further explain how this distortion is sustained and legitimised. The White Racial Frame provides an interpretive framework that centres white values, allowing racial inequalities to become naturalised to dominant groups. Mills’ epistemology of ignorance describes the active social production of not-knowing, how dominant groups are socialised to overlook, or deny, racial oppression in ways that maintain their privilege. Together, these concepts show how racism can be reframed as non-racist discourse. The banal and reiterative racism we identified, which positions Islamophobia as a legitimate concern in liberal political discourse, is

indicative of the persistent ideological framework that sustains white supremacy, both overtly and implicitly. This persistence poses a challenge for counter-narratives, as it simultaneously legitimises and obscures the very racism they seek to challenge.

Conclusion

Although the data compiled initially appeared to be mostly supportive of Muslims, a closer analysis complicated this position and showed the heterogeneity of narratives that are difficult to situate even within a ‘counter-narrative spectrum’ (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). The Brexit and Christchurch attack data, for example, showed how much online discourse is depoliticised in terms of an examination of structural anti-Muslim racism. Yet the general election debate also generated significant support and allyship for Muslims around the topic of Brexit. This support was less evident when Brexit was the sole focus of discussion, as demonstrated by the second Brexit dataset, which was more stereotypical and negative in repeating anti-Muslim tropes.

Theorists have noted the limitations of Twitter for any in-depth discussion of issues (despite a politicised environment) and as a catalyst for social change. The Christchurch massacre attracted the attention of high-profile users which gave traction to a spike in visible support for Muslims which quickly dropped off after the initial event, allowing right-wing groups to appropriate it to further their agendas on gun laws and online censorship. This raises a question about the sustainability of counter-narratives and solidarity networks online. Yet in Tilly and Tarrow’s (2015: 11) conception of a social movement as ‘a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim’, and if its effectiveness can be assessed based on ‘the *worthiness* of the claim, as well as the *unity*, *numbers*, and *commitment* of social movement participants’ (cited in Kavada and Poell, 2021, emphasis in original), the data here shows how Twitter provided the momentum to challenge hegemonic narratives and disrupt them, resulting in successful reframing, a prerequisite for mobilisation. Conceived as contention by Kavada and Poell (2021), the concept of ‘friction’ is also useful here (see also Chapter 2). Friction is a site of agency in that activists are forced to develop workarounds to the tensions experienced through having to work in specific and sometimes challenging environments (Shea *et al.*, 2015). Rambukkana’s (2015b) idea of productive friction points to the counter-narratives that arise out of the discursive frictions with dominant norms that further propel these ideas

outwards. This can lead to a consolidation of alternative narratives over time. Hence, rather than seeing counter-narratives as simply reactionary, the data shows the entanglement of counter- and dominant narratives, which at times can be counter-productive in contributing to the continued circulation of stereotypical tropes but in turn can amplify a greater diversity of voices and sustain them.

Similarly, [Brock's \(2020\)](#) analysis of Black Twitter demonstrates how the digital practices of minoritised groups can utilise the socio-technical institutional context for resistance, creating a significant social political force. 'Entanglement', in this case, represents the intersection of artefact (technology), practice (organisation) and belief (culture) co-producing politically and culturally specific meanings and relations ([Brock, 2016](#)).

For Muslims, in the context of a platform that may reinforce unequal power relations, further marginalising them, this provides a more democratic environment where, at times and through allyship, alternative voices and narratives can gain visibility which can extend into the mainstream. However, the data also demonstrates how dominant groups can monopolise, seeking to re-establish hegemonies through tactics such as social media mobbing. In the case of the COVID-19 data, then, this showed how specific events can be manipulated for spreading propaganda against Muslims, aligned to Hindu nationalism. Yet this hostility, in turn, produced more meaningful and sustainable counter-narrative work and alliances. The latter COVID-19 datasets showed how counter-narratives can become the norm at particular moments, around specific events and festivals. The value in the discursive struggle then is in legitimising these discourses which then become normalised in the mainstream, as was evident by the predominance of counter-narratives shared by the mainstream media in this data. Yet, there is an argument for suggesting this mainstream support is an example of a post-racial environment where explicit racism is unacceptable but is maintained through a focus on specific topics (associating Muslims with terrorism, for example).

Far from operating solely in echo chambers, this study shows how Twitter debates can, or at least could, cut across a range of social issues, intersectional identities, geographical localities and media platforms. The [next chapter](#) aims to demonstrate how actors and activists seek to navigate the terrain in which they operate, and how specific networks and socio-political configurations coalesced, interacted and dissipated, highlighting the multidimensional potentials of mediated activism in which media-user-event relations evolve.

Notes

- 1 Commentator and podcaster of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which has been controversial for giving far-right commentators a platform.
- 2 And were coded as such in the quantitative analysis. Anything ambiguous or mixed was coded as neutral or mixed.
- 3 This number is unstable due to the fluidity of Twitter which can result in a varying number of replies when checking at different intervals.
- 4 <https://worldcitizen.trtworld.com/hello-brother/>
- 5 Sometimes in the same tweet.
- 6 Given the wording of this tweet was actually plagiarised by other tweets in the top fifty, effectively anonymising the account, we are quoting this verbatim rather than paraphrasing.
- 7 Our data shows that the deleted content tended to be more anti-Muslim.
- 8 The law in India allows for government oversight of the moderation of social media companies which has been used as an instrument of censorship according to critics (Sombatpoonsiri and Mahapatra, 2024). In addition, Sombatpoonsiri and Mahapatra (2024) argue that during COVID-19, the government used existing legislation to remove content on Twitter that criticised their handling of the pandemic.
- 9 Bharatiya Janata Party, the ruling Hindu nationalist party.
- 10 Navbharattimes.com (2020) Corona: When relatives failed to arrive, Muslims carried the bier, chanting 'Ram naam satya' (Ram is true), and performed the last rites. *Hindi News by The Times of India*, 29 March. Available: <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/uttar-pradesh/bulandshahr/no-relatives-reached-after-death-of-hindu-muslims-join-last-ride-cremate-body/article-show/74870336.cms>
- 11 Sherling, A. (2020) Muslim and BAME communities not taking coronavirus pandemic seriously, Tory MP says. *LBC*, 31 July. Available: www.lbc.co.uk/article/muslim-bame-communities-coronavirus-pandemic-DWyXtc_2/
- 12 r/newzealand (2019) Man who shared mosque shooting livestream sentenced to 21 months in prison. Available: www.reddit.com/r/newzealand/comments/c1u5xh/man_who_shared_mosque_shooting_livestream/
- 13 Fox, K. (2024) UK rocked by far-right riots fueled by online disinformation about Southport stabbings. *CNN*, 1 August. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/01/uk/southport-attack-disinformation-far-right-riots-intl-ubr>

Actors, networks and affective ecologies

I think it creates real solidarity. I mean, why else would one be active on it, really? Yeah. (Interviewee 2, journalist)

I've found it a bit frustrating ... (there's) some frustration, just with Twitter, where I think it has become just, you know, a talking space rather than an action space, you know, for when we're, for when we're thinking about Islamophobia. (Interviewee 11, academic activist)

The aim of this chapter is to make sense of the relationships between users, as well as how they engaged with events and platforms, to understand the complex ways that political agency is manifested in attempts to contest hate. These arguments are grounded in two specific datasets: network analysis; and interviews with people identifying as Twitter activists, as well as academics, journalists and others who engaged in anti-racist counter-narratives on the platform. We identify significant users associated with each event to establish who were central in circulating and contesting hate. Combined with an analysis of the networks, biographies, the geographical distribution and political arguments articulated by these users, we offer a sense of who exactly participated in the formation of Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives.

Throughout the analysis we identified a range of users who served as key nodes in debate. Some of these users only had peripheral relationships to counter-narratives, such as 'ordinary' users who participated in hashtags and alternative narratives to contest Islamophobia and other expressions of digital hate. Other users were nodal points in tight-knit networks of far-right activists seeking to propagate disinformation and normalise xenophobia (as came to the fore in relation to Brexit or the Brussels bombings). In contrast, some of the other most shared tweets in our datasets were created by celebrities and politicians who condemned Islamophobia, or activists and would-be allies calling out Islamophobic media content and policy decisions. A comparatively small proportion of tweets, however, were from

the accounts of users identifying as Muslim, speaking to difficult questions about exclusions perpetuated by counter-narratives themselves (cf. [Poole et al., 2021](#)).

While our network analysis began to reveal the affective dynamics that underpinned these counter-narratives, it also raised questions about the intentions and tactics of actors (users) when engaging on Twitter. To address these questions, we draw on a distinctive dataset of interviews with activists that took place at a key juncture in Twitter's history: in the midst of its (controversial) purchase by billionaire technocrat Elon Musk. Central to these interviews was the core question of why people continued to use Twitter despite extensive criticisms levelled at the platform for its transience, inefficacy and, more recently, critiques of the political economy of the platform itself. What was revealed through the interviews was people's commitment to using the platform as a means of pushing back against hate. Despite expressing ambivalence and recognising the fragility of solidarity that is only fostered through digital means, interviewees reiterated the opportunities created by social media. Indeed, many interviewees treated their activism as a professional role, which was accompanied by norms and expectations about maintaining civility in online debate, and identified tactics they had built up through years of experience. Journalists, in particular, emphasised the importance, distinctiveness and ongoing value of the platform for their work. At the time, therefore, activists retained (cautious) hope in Twitter's capacity to enable transnational connection-making, take up discursive space and create new narratives, while simultaneously acknowledging both its limitations and the emotional toll of this work.

By combining network analysis with interviews with key actors, we were able to reflect on the sort of actions and conditions (technology, context, user relations) that might enable interactions between users to congeal as larger networks and how these networks might offer more durable articulations of solidarity across difference.

Part I: who were the key actors in debates about Islam and Muslims on Twitter?

Twitter (now X) has been known for its elite profile, which has given it a disproportionate influence on public debates. However, although the role of elites was evident in our research, individual non-affiliated non-public figure user accounts were the largest number of users in each of our datasets ([Table 5.1](#)). While this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, it seems important to state at the outset in order to answer the question above.

Geographical distribution and transnationalism

As demonstrated in [Chapter 3](#), the location data ([Table 5.2](#)) shows a wide geographical diversity in the users tweeting in each dataset, with the Brexit data being very British (in both date ranges) and the COVID-19 data predominantly located in India. The Christchurch dataset is a world event although dominated by ‘Western’ countries, though this finding is perhaps biased by the focus on English-language search terms. Although the big data also included non-English tweets, the findings from this data were corroborated by the quantitative and qualitative content analysis, which did not. For example, the quantitative content analysis shows that 50 per cent of most shared tweets in the general election data were from the UK, with 4.6 per cent from the US and 3.5 per cent from Europe. For Christchurch, 32.5 per cent of accounts with an identifiable location were tweeting from North America, 12.7 per cent from the UK and 10 per cent from South Asia (a combination of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) (see [Chapter 3](#)).

While India and other South Asian countries dominated the first and second sample period for COVID-19, in sample three, the UK had become the most frequently cited location as debates about social distancing took precedence there (23.8 per cent of tweets were from the UK compared to 13.6 per cent from India). In the first sample of COVID-19 (big) data set, keywords in the bios also pointed to India, with the top word being ‘proud’ (n = 21,004) followed by ‘Indian’ (n = 18,276), ‘Hindu’ (n = 11,191), ‘Muslim’ (n = 9777), ‘India’ (n = 8855) and ‘nationalists’ (n = 7815), while the collocated words show that ‘proud Hindu’ appeared more often (over 4000 times) than ‘proud Muslim’ (just over 1000). In sample two there is evidence of a wider use of languages reflecting the international exchange of Eid greetings, and ‘proud Pakistani’ (n = 303) featured more often than ‘proud Hindu’ (n = 115). #Tablighijamaat tends to mirror the first COVID-19 sample due to its high occurrence in this database, for example, 64.1 per cent of the accounts were based in India and 64 per cent of the tweets from India were anti-Muslim. ‘Proud Indian’ appeared in bios 236 times, Hindu 126 times and Muslim only nineteen. The quantitative content analysis shows (where location is identifiable) that most of the negative posts came from Indian accounts (15.3 per cent of negative tweets) as well as some from the UK (2.8 per cent) and US (3.4 per cent), although posts from these regions were more likely to be supportive (UK 9.4 per cent, US 7.2 per cent). By sample three, however, most of the negative posts were located in the UK (4.6 per cent, but 15.2 per cent were

Table 5.1 Proportion of non-affiliated accounts (percentage)

Brexit 1 (election data)	Brexit Day	Christ-church sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	#helloworldbrother	COVID-19 sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	#Tablighi-jamaat
63.4	67.5	28.6	37	59.2	77.5	28.7	24	28.8	61.9

Table 5.2 Location data

Brexit (all dates)		Christchurch(all dates)		#helloworldbrother		COVID-19 (all dates)	
No location data	14,783	No location data	1,050,000	No location data	9349	No location data	518,481
London	1053	US	31,999	Malaysia	434	India	310
London, England	930	Malaysia	26,210	London, England	253	New Delhi	107
United Kingdom	769	London England	21,371	Indonesia	252	Mumbai, India	94
UK	657	India	17,676	London	138	Hyderabad	51
England, UK	620	Pakistan	16,636	Saudi Arabia	106	Mumbai	41
India	471	London	15,355	Nigeria	106	New Delhi	37
US	196	California, USA	13,452	Lagos, Nigeria	106	Bengaluru, India	35
England	188	Canada	11,093	Selangor, Malaysia	85	ààà¼à°ààà (India)	33
South-east England	162	USA	11,085	United Kingdom	82	Pakistan	32

supportive). In this sample, only 1.8 per cent of tweets from India were negative while 7.4 per cent were positive (the rest being neutral or mixed; also see [Chapter 3](#)).

The US and India were key location nodes across all events. In Brexit, this was partly due to the number of times a comic from India was retweeted (3736 times, the most shared tweet in the dataset), who attacked liberals in the UK, US, Pakistan and India, constructing those opposing Brexit as naïve and ignorant. This reflects one of the main shifts in our data compared to our previous project on #stopIslam where international engagement was mainly from the US, particularly through anti-Muslim tweets. Although numbers were fairly small here (due to the cross-tabulation with a category that is hard to identify – that is, location), quantitative content analysis topic data (both Brexit date ranges) indicates that tweets from the US and India were more likely to be negative towards Muslims. This demonstrates how, when transnational events were co-opted, it was often for negative agendas. Similarly, in the first month after the Christchurch attack, forty-seven tweets in the sampled top 1000 tweets expressed anti-Muslim sentiments ([Table 5.3](#)) and thirty-five of these anti-Muslim tweets came from accounts identifiably located in the UK, the US/North America or South Asia. Apart from this terror attack, Oceania was also the origin of negative tweets across the datasets (again mostly small numbers). However, six months after the attack, 11.4 per cent of tweets about Christchurch, from identifiably Australasian accounts, were anti-Muslim, which was higher than the percentage in the whole Christchurch dataset (10.8 per cent). This proportion was even higher for tweets from UK accounts, where 16.7 per cent of tweets on Christchurch from this period were Islamophobic.

What is revealed through our analysis is how the demographic and geographical distribution of key users has shifted over time. Our pilot dataset, for instance, saw a concentration of US-based ‘alt-right’ users who leveraged Islamophobia in support of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, but in our later data sets many of these users had been suspended from the platform, often shifting to ‘dark platforms’ such as Gab and 8kun ([Zeng and Schäfer, 2021](#)). However, despite containing less overtly white supremacist content, the ‘long tail’ of hate associated with trigger events such as Brexit was nonetheless sustained by coded forms of ‘banal racism’ wherein narratives of cultural difference continued to be propagated by users identifying as anti-immigration (cf [Siapera, 2019](#)). In the most recent COVID-19 datasets, moreover, overtly Islamophobic content resurged due to the rise of Hindutva Twitter and seemingly limited moderation of this content ([Leidig *et al.*, 2021](#)). Despite evolving over time, each of our

Table 5.3 Anti- and pro-Muslim sentiment according to country, Christchurch sample one

	Anti-Muslim		Supports Muslims		Mixed		Neutral/no view		Total	
UK	6	4.7%	98	77.2%	6	4.7%	17	13.4%	127	100%
US/North America	21	6.5%	221	68.0%	19	5.8%	64	19.7%	325	100%
Europe	0	0.0%	13	81.3%	0	0.0%	3	18.8%	16	100%
South Asia	8	8.0%	78	78.0	10	10.0	4	4.0	100	100%
Other Asian country	0	0.0%	25	96.2%	0	0.0%	2	7.4%	27	100%
MENA region	0	0.0%	26	89.7%	1	3.4%	2	6.9%	29	100%
Other Asian country	0	0.0%	11	91.7%	1	8.3%	0	0.0%	12	100%
Australasia/Oceania	1	2.3%	36	81.8%	0	0.0%	7	15.9%	44	100%
Russia	0	0.0%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	100%
Mixed	2	10.5%	14	73.7%	0	0.0%	3	15.8%	19	100%
Other	0	0.0%	4	33.3%	0	0.0%	8	66.7%	12	100%
None mentioned	9	3.1%	203	70.5%	18	6.3%	58	20.1%	288	100%
Total	47	4.7%	7.0	73.6%	55	5.5%	168	16.8%	1000	100%

datasets revealed distinctive transnational dynamics. These dynamics were evidenced by the way that the transnational right appropriated events in other global contexts in support of anti-immigration narratives (with the US far-right routinely using examples from the UK to evidence the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism, for instance). Yet transnationalism was also evident in the loose-knit solidarity networks that emerged as ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi, 2014) coalesced around charged events such as Christchurch, as users mobilised in shock, anger and sympathy, in condemnation of Islamophobia.

Visible accounts and persistent tweeters

Which actors were shared the most?

Key actors in the Brexit (general election) dataset tended to be users who posted predominantly left-wing content which was corroborated by the big data where word frequency in bios referred to mostly left-wing affiliations such as socialist (925), Labour (657) and left (308), as well as showing EU support (404) and being European (320). Of the most shared users, the majority were left-wing actors/critics (Table 5.4).

Similarly, in the first month after the Christchurch attack (Table 5.5), the most shared users were also progressive and liberal individuals and

Table 5.4 Key actors in Brexit 1

User	Number of shares
Comic based in India*	3736
Faiza Shaheen (Labour candidate)	1581
Mehdi Hasan (US commentator)	1493
Sayeeda Warsi (Conservative peer)	1041
Independent journalist	685
Momentum (left-wing arm of the Labour Party)	442
Individual (critical of Boris Johnson)	332
Miqdaad Versi (Muslim Council of Britain)	290
‘Conservative’ French blogger	268
Individual US anti-Trump supporter	228

Note: *We only include names of verified accounts at the time of data gathering, or account names of high-profile public figures.

Table 5.5 Most shared accounts following the Christchurch attack

Accounts, sample 1 (month after the attack)	Number of retweets	Accounts, sample 2 (three months later)	RTs	Accounts, sample 3 (six months later)	RTs
Founding partner wearesoze.com	66,845	US anti-gun lobby activist	1085	PTI official (Pakistan political party)	1390
Muslim human rights activist	64,768	UK account (former Army engineer)	580	US individual, Republican	159
Barack Obama	61,153	Menaka Doshi (journalist)	278	NBC News	83
Private account (entrepreneur)	60,239	American human rights lawyer	243	Pillars Fund (Muslim advocacy group)	64
C.J. Werleman (journalist)	44,575	Bloomberg Quicktake	211	Bloomberg Quicktake	63
American human rights lawyer	41,867	CNN Breaking News	189	<i>MuslimMatters</i> (non-profit Muslim magazine)	52
Wajahat Ali (journalist)	37,449	Sikh community activist	180	UK individual, 'outspoken atheist'	42
CNN	32,700	UK freelance journalist (critical of the sentencing of Philip Arps)	165	APP (Pakistan's National News Agency)	27
Imran Khan	28,287	Indian BJP activist	131	NZ Human Rights Commission	26
NowThis (news website)	26,610	Reuters	123	'ally #BLM' (individual)	24

organisations: the most retweeted user was the founding partner of 'a worker-owned creative agency for social impact' (wearesoze.com, 66,845 retweets). The second most popular was a US Muslim human rights activist (64,768 retweets).

The most retweeted users in Christchurch sample two diversified to include a US anti-gun lobby activist (who tweeted about how the legislative response in New Zealand differed to US inaction), an ex-army engineer (tweeting his opposition to halal meat) and a BJP/Hindutva activist (tweeting about the combined threat of Christian and Muslim terrorism). The retweets in the third Christchurch sample were dominated by the official account of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the centrist Pakistani political party founded by Imran Khan, tweeting their opposition to Indian Prime Minister Modi.

As previously noted, although the most shared users in sample one of the COVID-19 dataset were mostly based in India with a few US accounts, so diversifying from a Western bias, there was still evidence of elitism (Table 5.6). Without wanting to label people pro- or anti-Muslim, unless they identify as such, there was an even number of people who shared pro- and anti-Muslim tweets, noting the number of times an anti-Muslim Indian blogger was retweeted. Samples two and three were slightly more diverse with a few more Muslims and pro-Muslim perspectives occurring. As previously mentioned, sample three shows a shift in location of accounts to the UK.

This is in line with theories about crowdsourced elites (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012), people with many connections who become discursively important within particular events. Elites that were not shared frequently in our datasets but whose follower counts gave their (often single) tweets high visibility also differed across the datasets. In general, these tended to be high-profile news organisations or actors. For example, in the first Brexit dataset, due to the political content, the users with the most followers tended to be from companies such as *Time*, the BBC, the *Independent*, *Daily Mirror* or journalists such as Laura Kuenssberg and Owen Jones. This demonstrates how corporate media organisations dominate the attention economy (Fuchs, 2017). Similarly, the ten most popular URLs were from news media albeit more liberal sites like the *New European*, the *Canary* and the *Mirror*, with the most shared URL being the *Independent's* story about the founder of the Brexit Party endorsing Boris Johnson's Conservatives (Cowburn, 2019).¹

In the COVID-19 samples one and two, the top users by followers were also mainly transnational news organisations but predominantly from India and the US (*New York Times*, BBC World, Reuters, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, ABC News, NDTV, the *Times of India*). Almost half the tweets contained weblinks (43.8 per cent) and 59.6 per cent contained images,

Table 5.6 Most shared users: COVID-19

User sample 1	Number of shares	Sample 2	No	Sample 3	
Indian blogger	43,910	Narendra Modi	7039	Indian individual/ comic	3700
French Muslim	16,668	Indian columnist	4408	Rushanara Ali, Labour MP, UK	1511
OpIndia.com	16,379	DG ISPR*	2871	US Muslim MD	789
Subramanian Swamy (Indian MP)	15,504	Keir Starmer MP	2553	Justin Trudeau, Canadian PM	681
Indian political analyst (pro-Muslim tweet)	11,866	Malaysian individual account	2443	Muhammadu Bahari, President of Nigeria	672
Columnist/activist against Islamophobia (US)	9452	Opindia.com	2422	Zarah Sultana, Labour MP, UK	648
Malaysian private account	9384	Guardian correspondent	1591	Syrian opposition columnist based in Doha	596
Asian News International	7116	Al Jazeera English	1582	Pakistani ex general, government official	505
Director of Jihadwatch	6392	Dr Arif Alvi, President of Pakistan	1388	UK Muslim media commentator	503
DOAM (Documenting Oppression Against Muslims)	5498	Turkish Presidency	966	Columnist/activist against Islamophobia (US)	472

Note: *Spokesperson for Pakistan Armed Forces.

which is also indicative of both the news-driven agenda and visual imperative in social media. In sample two, Narendra Modi was the top tweeter by followers ($n = 68,760,994$), while the president of India ($n = 13,846,353$) and a Chinese broadcaster were also significant influencers (CTGN; $n = 13,554,688$). Modi also had the most shared tweets ($n = 7039$). The mixture of people being retweeted in this sample was a reflection of the international exchange of Eid greetings. In sample three, users by followers diversified further, as well as including a couple of world news agencies and news organisations from Pakistan and Indonesia, the World Health Organization featured, officials from Pakistan, and the activist group, Anonymous.

Despite this bias in the data towards high-profile tweeters, when we examined the affiliations of tweeters from the quantitative analysis, it was evident that they were most likely to be individuals. For the first Brexit dataset 63.4 per cent were categorised as ‘individuals’ (with no specific affiliation), followed by commentators/journalists, whether that be mainstream (4.5 per cent) or independent (3.5 per cent), with politicians accounting for only 2.6 per cent. All affiliations apart from ‘alt-right groups’² were more likely to support Muslims (and alt-right group numbers were very small and evenly split, with only two anti- and two supportive tweets). Similarly, for COVID-19, sample one, 28.7 per cent of users were from unaffiliated accounts followed by media accounts (both mainstream, 16 per cent, and alternative, 16.7 per cent) along with state actors/politicians, 8.6 per cent. Celebrities had a low occurrence in this dataset at only 0.8 per cent of all the affiliation categories. However, state-affiliated accounts ($n = 27,109$), celebrities ($n = 3434$) and media, particularly (in this case) the negative alternative media (mainstream $n = 40,400$, alternative $n = 88,339$), had high retweet rates. State actors increased during the Eid festival, in sample two, to 17.6 per cent, as they shared international greetings (in 73.7 per cent of their tweets). Media accounts continued to be relevant (24 per cent), reporting updates/disruption (62.5 per cent of their tweets) and some guidelines on celebrating during COVID-19 (accounting for 43.1 per cent of tweets on this topic). Sample three shows that while individuals were more prevalent, state actors had a higher circulation rate (ninety tweets from state actors were circulated 6293 times compared to those of individuals whose 144 tweets were circulated 4076 times).

There was more diversity in the users following the Christchurch attack but elites were extremely prevalent. The type of accounts also changed over time. After the attack, 30 per cent of users were from mainstream (17.4 per cent) or alternative media sources, 28.6 per cent from individual members of the public, 10.5 per cent from politicians and political parties, and 6.1 per cent from celebrities sharing condolences. Six months later, there was

a significant concentration of tweets from individuals ($n = 296$, 59.2 per cent), with blogger and alternative media significantly lower ($n = 56$, 11.2 per cent), and the mainstream media at less than 10 per cent. Six months after the attack, all other institutional sources, whether politicians, NGOs, advocacy or pressure groups, showed very little interest in the continued repercussions of the event.

In contrast to the first Brexit dataset, however, the *most shared tweets* around the Brexit exit date were more likely to come from a mixture of non-affiliated individuals who were either pro- or anti-Brexit, or discussing racial politics, with the exception of David Lammy MP, Miqdaad Versi (Muslim Council of Britain), Mehdi Hasan (journalist)³ and an Indian professor (all more supportive of Muslims). This was also evident in the manual content analysis, which showed that 67.5 per cent of tweets were from individuals followed by independent bloggers/journalists (4.9 per cent). Mainstream media were unlikely to link Brexit to Islam and Muslims, they accounted for only 0.8 per cent tweets. The contrast demonstrates the difference in the type of content mainstream organisations/public accounts and individuals share, and what happens when these public accounts are removed from the analysis (the content becomes more negative). Cross-referencing affiliation with position on Muslims showed that anti-Muslim tweets were only promoted by individual and unidentifiable accounts, with some coming from the few alt-right and parody accounts. A similar situation was found in the COVID-19 sample, where alt-right actors ($n = 39$, RT = 9628) and alternative media, that had a high retweet rate, were more likely to be anti-Muslim than pro: 46.8 per cent ($n = 89$, RT = 88339) of alternative media/bloggers were anti-Muslim compared to 38.4 per cent ($n = 73$) that were supportive. This showed how negative tweets promoted by alternative media sources, alt-right groups and some state actors were being retweeted at a high rate, increasing their visibility.

Most people in the first Brexit dataset did not identify with any religion (93 per cent), and only 3.5 per cent identified as Muslim. Although this points to more allies in the dataset than Muslims, this could be because we only coded religion if it was a directly claimed identity (to avoid making assumptions). In the big data, however, 'Muslim' is still mentioned less than atheist (183 compared to 175 times). In the Christchurch sample, it was notable that the number of declared or identifiable Muslim accounts was much higher – 13.9 per cent – in the month following the attack but declined over time to 9 per cent three months later and 7.8 per cent six months after the attack, as sympathies decreased and critical debate increased. This suggests that a lot of the initial reaction to the attack was driven by Muslims responding to the atrocity *as* Muslims. This was further evident in the #hellbrother hashtag

where there were a significantly higher number of (self-identified) Muslim accounts in the sample (38.3 per cent). Many of the top tweeters' accounts in this hashtag were from the Middle East (particularly Saudi Arabia), there were a large number of Arabic tweets (ninety-six non-English tweets out of the 1000 original tweets). This is illustrative of the collective identities that coalesced around this hashtag, important in the way discourse is amplified on Twitter, through affective solidarities (see [Richardson et al., 2024](#)).

The high proportion of accounts from declared or identifiable Muslims in the most shared tweets in the COVID-19 data compared to other events was evident from the manual quantitative analysis where Muslims clearly outnumbered other religions posting on this topic ([Table 5.7](#)). #Tablighijamaat was the exception here, with more Hindus posting ($n = 118$ compared to fifty-three Muslims). In this hashtag, 88 per cent of content shared by Hindus was negative towards Muslims while 83 per cent of Muslims' content was positive (the rest was mostly mixed).

Who were the most persistent tweeters?

In the COVID-19 dataset, the most prolific tweeters of original posts (as opposed to those who were most likely to be retweeted) were more likely to be Muslims (in sample one, of the top ten, most were based in India with one user [non-Muslim, anti-Muslim] in the US). The top tweeter was a UK-based Muslim (no of posts = 344). In sample two, actors were more mixed – but all were unverified except from the *New Arab* (news from the Middle East). The top posters were information services; three accounts were from Nigeria and one was from Pakistan. Sample three was similar, frequent posters were mostly Muslim, three of these were from Pakistan and two verified sources both from Gulf states. One US campaigner appeared in both samples as a prolific tweeter.

This was in contrast to the Brexit election dataset, where those who created the most original tweets were a mixture of left-wing critics and people with suspended accounts. For example, the top producer of tweets in this dataset, who posted seventy-one times, has now had their account suspended. This is suggestive of negative content and is a reflection of the stricter moderation at the time. Those *individuals* who tweeted most frequently were different from the top accounts by follower count, which were largely major media organisations, and from the accounts behind the most circulated tweets, also mostly news outlets. This raises questions about our methodology, as we focused on frequently shared tweets rather than on the users who tweeted the most. In the more negative datasets, such as the Brexit Day, there were no verified (at that time) users in the people who posted the most original tweets. These ranged from a Tommy Robinson

Table 5.7 Religion of the account holders: COVID-19 data

Religion of the account holder	Sample 1: no.	Per cent	Sample 2: no.	Per cent	Sample 3: no.	Per cent	#Tablighijamaat	Per cent
Unidentified	699	69.9	355	71	361	72.2	677	79.3
Muslim	230	23	133	26.6	129	25.8	53	6.2
Hindu	32	3.2	1	.2	7	1.4	118	13.8
Atheist/agnostic	23	2.3	2	.4	0	0	3	.4
Jewish	7	.7	0	0	1	.2	0	0
Christian	6	.6	2	.4	2	.4	1	.1
Sikh	3	.3	7	1.4	0	0	2	.2
Total	1000	100	500	100	500	100	854	100

supporter to an Italian user circulating #stopIslam, a Trump supporter and various freelance writers who were pro-EU and critical of Islamophobia.

For Christchurch (first sample) persistent tweeters tended to be activists supporting countries or causes such as Syria or Palestine, or bloggers. However, by sample two this had shifted to the US, with several right-wing tweeters and some deleted accounts. Some users repeatedly retweeted the same post, leveraging platform tools to maximise visibility.

The significant actors identified largely corresponded with key nodes in our network analysis, as both datasets are based on the most retweeted actors. However, the network visualisations and analysis also allowed us to examine the connections between actors, the shape of these connections over time and hence the potential of Twitter as a space for solidarity.

Part II: networks and solidarity

Questions about the efficacy of social media for developing meaningful connections and solidarity through networks have taken a similar trajectory to wider debates on the limitations and benefits of digital media as well as those on mediated activism (from being broadly positive to widespread pessimism).⁴ Moving beyond these binaries, scholars have developed a ‘spectrum’ of digital solidarity (Jackson *et al.*, 2020) or created typologies that range from limited manifestations of solidarity through clicktivism, to large-scale affective responses and sustained solidarity movements (see Table 5.8 from de Blasio and Selva, 2019). Multiple studies have shown how the structural dynamics of Twitter allow publics to coalesce around specific issues and causes (see discussion of counter-publics, Chapter 4) with,

Table 5.8 ‘Typology of solidarity activities through social media’ (de Blasio and Selva, 2019)

<i>Type of activity</i>	<i>Repertoire of action</i>
Emotional clicktivism	Reactions to posts, likes, emoticons
Affective publics	Solidarity memes (i.e. hashtags, visual memes, profile pictures, themes)
Solidarity movements	Physical demonstrations and strikes combined with digital storytelling and online activism
Networked solidarity	Applications and online social networks that are specifically designed for organising solidarity activities, usually involving the subjects of solidarity as final users

according to Passy (2001), humanitarian groups focusing on immigration and anti-racism having particularly benefited from the platform's affordances (see also Costanza-Chock, 2014; Jackson *et al.*, 2020).

Informed by Papacharissi's (2014: 125) concept of affective publics – 'networked public formations mobilised and connected or disconnected through the expression of sentiment' – a distinction has been drawn between 'networked connectivity' and 'networked collectivity' (de Blasio and Selva, 2019). Connective publics are connected by an emotional cause, but ideologically and organisationally fragmented, and are driven by the network's dynamics. The technologies are used to support and help structure these movements to move beyond local organisation to 'translocal' structures, adopting an aggregative function in allowing dispersed and differential individuals to coalesce (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5; de Blasio and Selva, 2019: 32; see also Bakardjieva, 2020). Networked collectivity often stems from existing social movements that are also engaged in 'offline' collective action and have existing/shared histories, experiences or identities. According to de Blasio and Selva (2019), networked solidarity involves 'the use of networked technologies that are specifically designed to pursue solidarity goals' (2019: 32), through the development of purpose-built applications. In accordance with this distinction, emotional shocks have the potential to create networked solidarity, but networked collectivity requires greater investment.

An emphasis on 'body politics' (Butler, 2015) maintains that showing up in a physical space carries more weight than digital media activity (Kavada and Poell, 2021) due to the deeper communal bonds they engender, and the greater risk involved. Hence, a hierarchy has developed based partly around degrees of impact: with clicktivism requiring the lowest level of investment, and risk to the individual, and therefore perceived as the least socially transformative.

While technologies are seen to be important 'organizational agents' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 755), clicktivism has been criticised for being a version of 'networked individualism' (Castells and Cardoso, 2005), involving trivial and transactional actions and based on forms of sociality that are opposed to notions of 'community' (Wittel, 2001; Giraud, 2015). We would argue that these activities are not necessarily meaningless or empty of genuine emotion, but at this stage the collective bonds that can materialise into social action are loosely formed. Through volume, however, clicktivist actions can gain an intensity that leads to visibility across the media ecology and shifts discourses (Poole *et al.*, 2019). With virality, these discursive formations can form affective publics that, through engagement, can have a role in widening and diversifying political communication and provide an impetus for social movements (Rambukkana, 2015a). However,

critics have noted that the ephemerality of affective publics rarely results in sustainable commitment to specific causes (Dai, 2024). Likewise, in the case of transnational solidarity work, mediated networks can ‘catalyse change’ but they can equally ‘reproduce power relations between West and global South’ (Chouliaraki, 2013: 267). Chouliaraki (2006, 2013) has also highlighted the ‘weak commitment’ of movements oriented around expressions of sympathy, as have others (Vis and Goriunova, 2015; Kleres, 2018), which can sideline victims as Anglosphere and Euro-centric projects of self-construction are centred.

Kaarina Nikunen (2019) has been pivotal in advancing discussions of mediated solidarity. Mediation, she argues, has assumed a central role as ‘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’ (Nikunen, 2019: 3). Historically, Nikunen argues, the transformation of social structures has been a key measure of ‘meaningfulness’ in social movements. Yet, in what she terms ‘the paradox of media solidarity’ (2019: 3), while the presence of suffering in legacy media has increased alongside greater opportunities and calls for public engagement on social media, the structures that support collective solidarity have been undermined. Framing commercial platforms as ‘impatient media’, Nikunen (2019: 13) argues that the political economy of these platforms, with their ‘commercial sentimentality’ and ‘emphasis on circulation rather than contextualization’, foster fragmented, individualistic expressions of solidarity, creating a challenging context for activism that requires intensive emotional labour (as witnessed by our interviewees).

Following Nikunen’s (2019) lead, in the final section of this chapter we engage critically with ideas of networked solidarity, resisting conceptualising it in terms of a spectrum or hierarchy. As well as positioning digital solidarity into discrete categories, some of the earlier arguments have positioned technologies in a deterministic role. As Littler and Rottenberg note in the context of feminist solidarity: ‘The nature of the logic of competitive individualism, in academia as well as in contemporary life, might encourage us towards an interpretation of which is “the best”. But we argue that a more fruitful – and indeed solidaristic – approach is to use these texts as resources indicating different dimensions of feminist solidarity’ (Littler and Rottenberg, 2021: 868). Extending this principle, and with reference to our own data, we resist narrow definitions of what constitutes digital solidarity and aim to think in terms of its ‘multidimensional’ properties. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, rather than conforming to straightforwardly hierarchical conceptions of solidarity, our data complicates any sense of a coherent spectrum. While appearing to ascend from superficial (Brexiteer

general election) to politically meaningful expressions of solidarity (COVID-19 sample one), each example was more ambivalent and complex than our first impression. Through longitudinal and comparative examination of our case studies we showed how solidarities that appeared to fall into discreet categories were, in practice, multifaceted. Similarly, in our analysis of the networks of solidarity we aim to show the dynamic and multiple dimensions of networked connectivities that evolve over time and space, and across multiple collectivities as the entanglements between events, platforms and user activities evolve.

Network analysis

This section analyses the way groups coalesced during each event in our datasets by analysing network diagrams. These were produced using the force-graph code library by Vasco [Asturiano \(2022\)](#), which visualises relationships based on ‘nodes’ and ‘edges’, which in the case of this research were Twitter users who were involved in retweeting and quote-tweeting. The visualisation itself represents a graph data structure in a two-dimensional canvas using a force-directed iterative layout. This is presented in a web browser as an interactive interface, to allow exploration of the visualisation, but appears as static visualisations here. Further exploration of the networks to determine relationships between particular nodes was also undertaken using Gephi (a popular visualisation and exploration software for graphs and networks). With reference to the limitations mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), we analyse the different time frames separately but note that even within these time frames, groupings may have occurred at varying points. Thus the appearance of distinct clusters of users does not necessarily mean they are entirely unconnected, as opposing groups could have materialised at distinct times. Another point to note is following further analysis using Gephi to analyse the direction of quote-tweeting, it was revealed that those circulating quote-tweets tended to be *followers* of influential actors who then quote-tweeted other significant actors rather than these high-profile actors quote-tweeting each other (we developed separate files for the actors that were connected by these people).⁵ In this case, it was the followers who made the connections and were the bridging actors, or – to use [Foucault Welles and Jackson’s \(2019\)](#) concept – ‘brokers’, in these datasets. As an example, for the Brexit general election dataset (see [Figure 5.1](#)), a follower of Mehdi Hasan quote-tweeted both him and Sayeeda Warsi, creating the connection between the nodes. Through this analysis we were able (as with Jackson *et al.*, 2019: xxxv) ‘to identify emergent leaders and their pathways of influence within each of the counter-public networks we examine’.



Figure 5.1 Brexit general election: clusters

The first Brexit dataset (Figure 5.1) shows the key nodes (actors in the dataset), those that were retweeted (in white) and quote-tweeted the most (in red); these are the ‘crowdsourced elites’ in the language of Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012). In the main, these key nodes correlate with key actors found in the first section of this chapter. As expected, those active in the UK political environment form a large cluster, with Mehdi Hasan positioned just on the periphery of this, as someone who comments on many topics so has a diverse range of followers but not directly involved in UK politics. He is a key actor with ‘betweenness’, therefore, whose followers generate information flow (Foucault Welles and Jackson, 2019: 7). A widely retweeted Indian comic, on the other hand, is somewhat removed from the main cluster due to having a distinct set of followers engaged in a separate conversation. Although the diagram (Figure 5.1) shows Mehdi Hasan was retweeted and quote-tweeted more than Labour candidate Faiza Shaheen (166 times compared to 137), our further analysis of patterns of quote-tweeting showed that Shaheen’s followers had more connections between multiple users, suggesting that they were more engaged in a debate, interacting with different people, multiple times, probably due to the specific interaction she had with Liberal Democrat MP Geoff Seeff,⁶ and were therefore more likely to be the ‘brokers’ in this dataset, operating between polarised publics. These were key actors therefore in the formation and circulation of counter-narrative content.⁷

What was interesting when examining quote-tweet networks is that there was more interaction between followers of and with Muslim figures, and

some smaller personalities became more visible; for instance, a lawyer, a Muslim woman freelance journalist and a right-wing TV talk show host emerged as key nodes. These networks thus demonstrate the greater complexity that can emerge when delving beyond the aggregated big data. This echoes the work of [Foucault Welles and Jackson \(2019\)](#) on #Baltimore, where they suggest that it's not necessarily people with the most connections who become significant. They highlighted that sometimes the influential nodes are those with more diverse connections or on-the-ground people without pre-existing recognition who can have their perspectives amplified by others if they capture something important about key events.

The first Brexit sample also demonstrates the 'logic of connective action'; what Bennett and Segerberg describe as networks that are 'far more individualised and technologically organised sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing' (2013: 750). Identifying connections should not automatically therefore be interpreted as evidence of collectivity, nor should it imply assumptions about similarity between the participants.

Brexit Day: echo chambers?

[Figure 5.2](#) appears to show two clear echo chambers between those supporting Muslims, the key actor here being Labour MP David Lammy, and those who were anti-Muslim (the key node is an English nationalist). Although Lammy had more retweets, the English nationalist was more likely to be quote-tweeted and his followers interacted with more people.

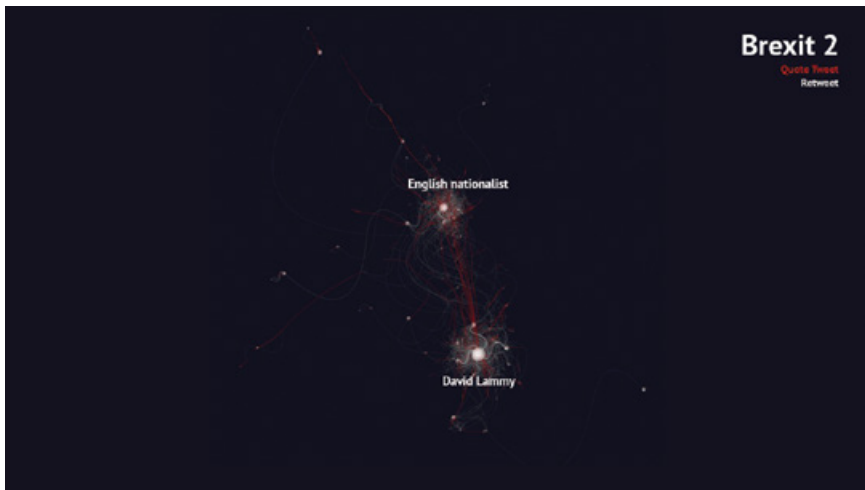


Figure 5.2 'Brexit Day' network

Non-public figures were also more frequently quote-tweeted and more English nationalists appeared on our filtered list (for having quote-tweeted multiple people, six of the top ten) whereas progressive voices were more evident on the unfiltered list (who were only quote-tweeted singular times, eight of the top ten). This shows that the political far-right remained active on Twitter despite stricter regulation at the time, sustaining close connections and reflecting continuity with our pilot dataset on #stopIslam (Poole *et al.*, 2019). It is important to reiterate, however, that even though this network appears to show two distinct clusters, these could have formed at any point in the three-week time period and did not necessarily emerge at the same time.

Although solidarities are usually invoked in the study of progressive politics, recent studies have focused on the rise of far-right solidarities online (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Askanius, 2021), with some scholars pointing out that conservative movements have more resources to invest in collective infrastructures than progressivist groups (Schradie, 2019). A number of studies have also pointed to the role of uneven levels of affective investment which have also advantaged right-wing groups (noting how the emotional tenor of Twitter is dominated by ‘rage’; Sills, 2017; Evolvi, 2019). According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), for instance, right-wing populist groups use anger strategically (and performatively) to mobilise support through discursively constructed grievances as well as enemies, forming ‘affective frames’ for their arguments (Foucault Welles and Jackson, 2019). Some individuals in our data, defined as ‘stokers’ (people who fuel antagonism towards perceived enemies within their own networks increasing polarisation) by Foucault Welles and Jackson (2019), were especially influential in this respect.

What started to become evident through the Brexit data is the similarity in tactics and discourse between various anti-Islamophobic right-wing groups linking or appropriating issues to further agendas, both in India and the US. The appropriation of Brexit by both MAGA (Make America Great Again) supporters and Hindu nationalists attest to this. With the largest diaspora of Hindus in the US, and an alignment of some ideology on Muslims, the recurring convergence in the narratives of right-wing extremist groups is not surprising (Ghasiya *et al.*, 2023). The global connections of Hindutva Islamophobic hate (particularly apparent and explored further in the COVID-19 dataset) across geographically dispersed areas has been noted in several studies that, according to Dutta (2024: 1), creates ‘an uninterrupted communication infrastructure around the frame of the “Hindu in danger,” simultaneously intersecting with white supremacy in producing and amplifying Islamophobic hate’ (see also Rajan and Venkatraman, 2021; Amarasingam *et al.*, 2022; Bhatia, 2022; Sen, 2023; Saeed, 2024). It should not be assumed of course that Hindutva ideology is homogeneous,

particularly across regions where it will find distinct expressions based on specific social contexts and cultural identities (Anderson, 2023).

Christchurch terror attack: unsustainable solidarities?

The network diagram (Figure 5.3) shows the cluster of support and sympathy for Muslims following the terror attack.⁸ Networked connectivity tied many of these people together, which provides a sense of a collective. The key actors were both retweeted and quote-tweeted, with those engaging in quote-tweeting also circulating other prominent figures within the network (Barack Obama; founder of a creative co-operative). The most circulated tweets were breaking news about Christchurch, often originating from news organisations (Associated Press, CNN, BBC World), but if we examine the profiles of those that were connected by people tweeting multiple actors, more freelance/alternative journalists appear – particularly from the US – including Wajahat Ali (*Daily Beast*), a Muslim human rights activist, and NowThis news. This shows how diverse, high-profile progressive actors were tweeting both mainstream and alternative media organisations which gave the alternative platforms more visibility.

An outlier in this network was a private individual who tweeted about the so-called ‘eggboy’ case: a news story about a young man who threw an egg at an Australian politician who implicated Muslims in the attacks (see Chapter 3 for details). As a separate but related conversation, it was less connected to the main cluster. People tweeting about the Christchurch terror attack also quote-tweeted US right-wing political commentator

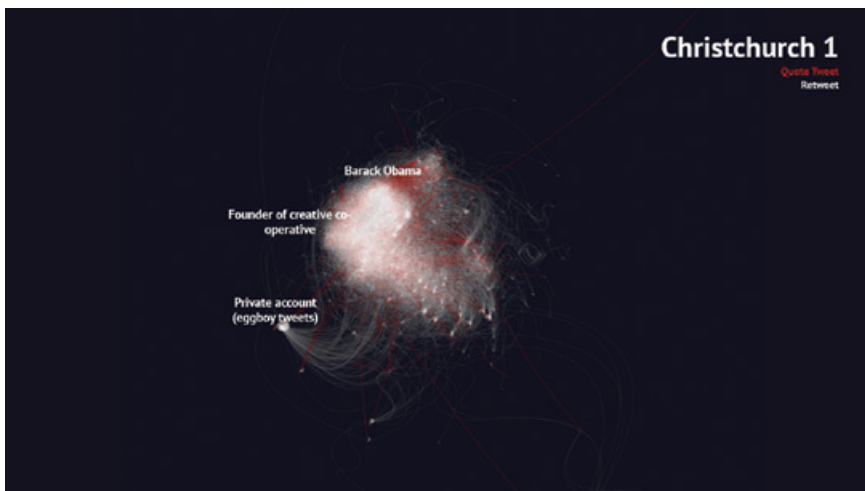


Figure 5.3 Network visualisation, Christchurch sample one



Figure 5.4 Christchurch attack: three months later



Figure 5.5 #hellobrother network

Candace Owens, criticising her for her defensive rhetoric in relation to the attack. According to [Juris \(2012: 267\)](#) social networks support a mode of connection based on aggregation rather than networking, with individuals brought together through shared interests rather than fostering meaningful or lasting connections. This was evident in the networks formed after the Christchurch attack that quickly dispersed afterwards, evidenced by the disparate clusters shown three months later ([Figure 5.4](#)).

The #helloworldbrother network diagram tells a different story, consisting of mostly retweets of three key actors, one being Turkish footballer Mesut Özil (Figure 5.5).

The big data showed how transnational the #helloworldbrother dataset was and an example of where more marginal (Muslim) voices can become visible, such as the two other key nodes here (Swedish and Saudi Arabian users). These users were connected by those retweeting and quote-tweeting them but the diagram suggests that these networks were comparatively weaker than the more cohesive cluster evident immediately following the Christchurch attack. Multiple studies show how hashtags can be used as an ideological and organising tool for harnessing collective power (#BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, #Baltimoreuprising and #myNYPD) to raise the visibility of alternative narratives in relation to marginalised groups. The hashtag provides ‘stitching potential’ (Alfonzo, 2021: 5) that allows for ‘organising without organisations’ (Earl *et al.*, 2014 in Kavada, 2015: 873). Although potentially loosely connected in this moment, the strength of #helloworldbrother demonstrates how hashtag rhetoric can be ‘simultaneously instrumental, relational, and materially consequential’ (Alfonzo and Foust, 2019 cited in Alfonzo, 2021: 5).

COVID-19: public contestation

The first month of COVID-19 data that we analysed revealed parallels with that of the first month after the Christchurch attack, in that the networks demonstrated close social proximity given the conversations mainly circulated around India (Figure 5.6). Significant nodes were highly retweeted actors such as *OpIndia* and key Indian bloggers who circulated anti-Muslim content, one acting as a central stoker of hate. All the actors who were connected by the same people quote-tweeting them were Indian journalists/commentators, with the anti-Muslim commentators getting slightly more circulation than the pro-Muslim (who were also likely to receive contestation through quote-tweeting). However, there is also more dispersal, suggesting small assemblages of dissenting views. Those involved in separate conversations, such as an American sociologist that writes about Christian–Muslim relations and a French Algerian who discusses French politics, appear on the edge of the main cluster. The analysis of quote-tweets shows us that it is not always the *most* retweeted actors (here an Indian politician and the French Algerian commentator) that are also quote-tweeted, hence quote-tweeting can give tweets visibility to a wider and sometimes more diverse network. The networks coalescing in the second sample show similar connectivity, with pockets of activity that are further connected to each other, and this is driven by the international networked greetings of leaders that are then retweeted by groups of followers, often within regional contexts (Figure 5.7).

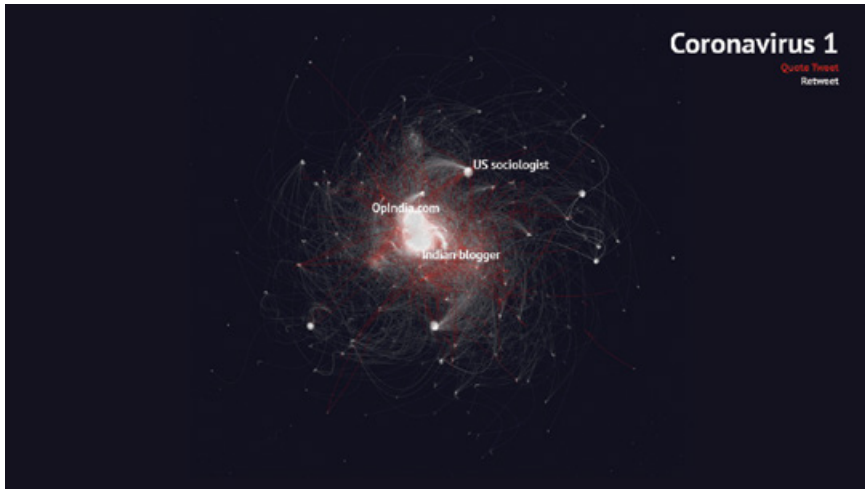


Figure 5.6 COVID-19 sample one

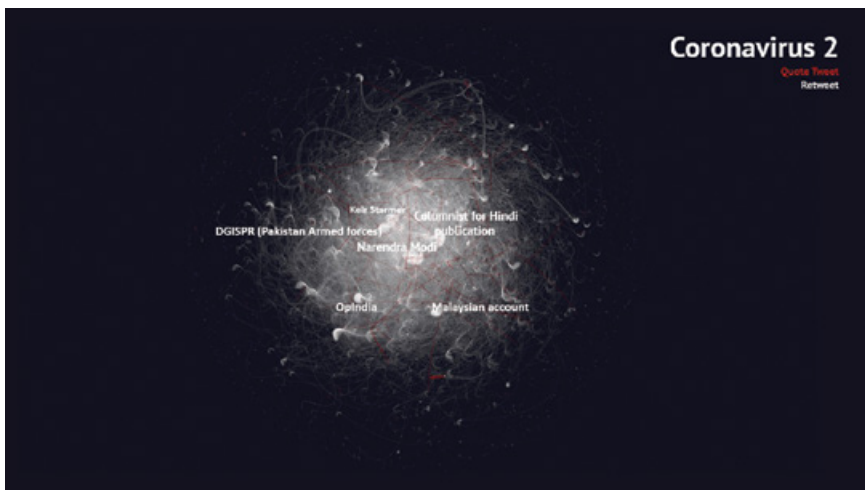


Figure 5.7 COVID-19 network: Eid al-Fitr

Similarly, the three clusters in the third sample are divided into national networks, the British network is at the bottom of the diagram, with India in the middle and the US at the top (Figure 5.8). There are also multiple connections between them, with those following Indian politics connecting to other conversations.

#Tablighijamaat (Figure 5.9) displays a similar configuration. The top three nodes on the diagram include Indian Muslims calling out Islamophobia

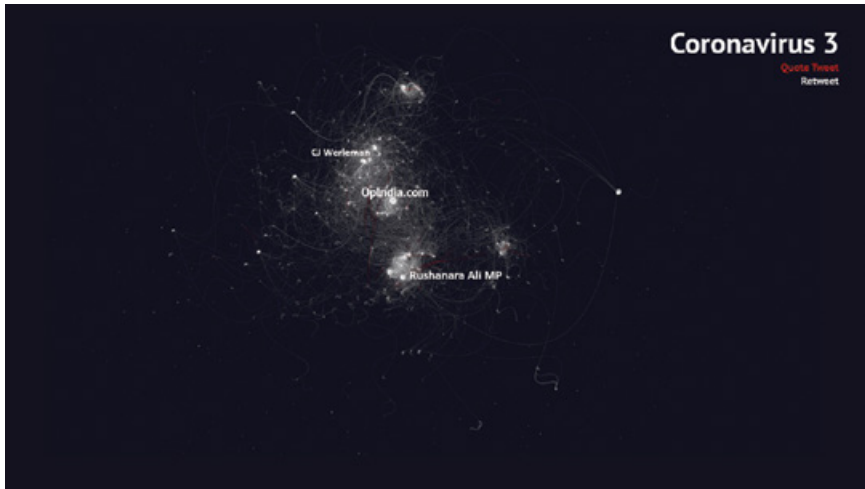


Figure 5.8 COVID-19 network: Eid al-Adha

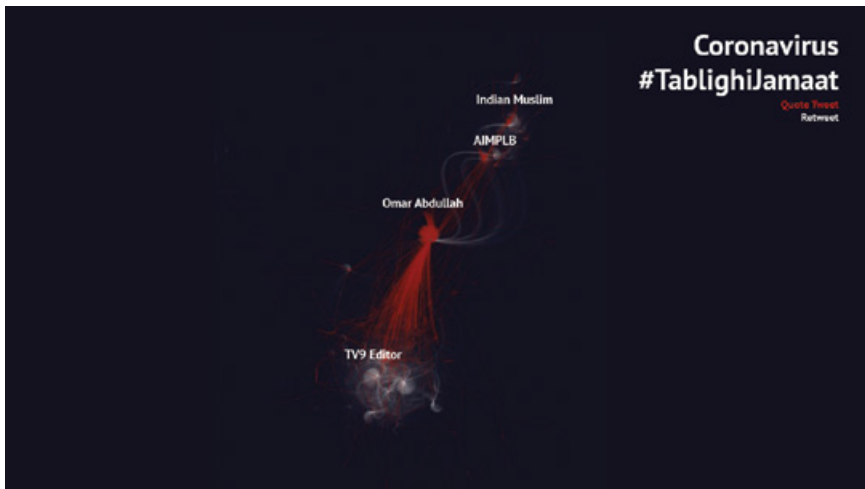


Figure 5.9 #Tablighijamaat network

(with AIMPLB representing the All India Muslim Personal Law Board). At the bottom is an editor of a TV platform that circulated a widely shared video showing Muslims from the Tablighi Jamaat group ‘hiding’ in a mosque. The middle node represents a key actor through whom information flows (Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir). Across the databases, a number of individuals – C.J. Werleman, Miqdaad Versi, Mehdi Hasan and a deceased

Pakistani-Canadian journalist often critical of Muslims – consistently participated in discussions about Muslims. People who were interested in these issues were likely to follow several of these influential actors who then made connections between them. This illustrates how the affordances of the platform (in this case, social proximity) contribute to how Twitter mediates discourse influenced by shared cultural or political interests (Brock, 2016).

A growing body of work demonstrates the networked structure of Hindutva organisations across a media ecosystem that works to disseminate Hindu nationalists' ideology globally (Therwath, 2012; Udupa, 2018; Bharia, 2022; Ghasiya *et al.*, 2023). Members of the BJP as well as other Indian officials and media sources are evident here in perpetuating anti-Muslim disinformation and propaganda. *OpIndia* has been implicated in other studies of online hate, including in the UK (Dutta, 2024). Figure 5.9 explicitly shows the global flow of information in dispersed sites. The infrastructure of Twitter provides a synergy in amplifying the tactics and narratives of Hindutva and white supremacists whilst maintaining important ideological distinctions and spatial distance 'given the increasing scrutiny of the violence that is carried out by White supremacist extremists' (Dutta, 2024: 25; see also Ghasiya *et al.*, 2023).

Two key findings stand out from the network analysis: first, although the most visible tweets tend to be well-known actors, it was the 'foot soldiers' engaged in the labour of circulating these tweets, in this case, they were the brokers or stokers of these conversations. Because of the diversity of the people they followed, sometimes other alternative actors, potentially 'emergent leaders' (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016) became more visible. This was especially the case in the circulation of quote-tweets. Although the actors who were retweeted the most were often the same people who were quote-tweeted, the analysis of the quote-tweet networks showed that sometimes other actors emerged as influential. There were key online influencers in discussions of Islamophobia, or 'non-traditional leaders' in the words of Jackson and Foucault Welles (2016), who may not be so visible in mainstream media, but public contestation can sometimes challenge these online hierarchies through a 'process which constitutes and reconstitutes the identity of key actors' (Kavada and Poell, 2021: 193). This process introduces broader audiences which enables new leaders to emerge. There is no doubt that unequal power relations remain – witness the dominance of Hindutva perspectives on COVID-19 in India – but this database also showed how dominant Islamophobic narratives can be resisted and challenged, and the power of these networked actors to enable this. Through an examination of different events across time, we can see how particular political-cultural configurations coalesce and the fluctuation of discursive counter-publics (Kavada and Poell, 2021).

Second, examining different time periods reveals some of the dynamic qualities of the formation of networks but another level of analysis (and computer coding) would be needed to really witness the development and dissipation of these networks. Although social media is thought to be ‘designed in a way that is technologically and commercially antithetical to sustaining collectivity’ (Kavada and Poell, 2021: 203, drawing on the work of Poell and van Dijck, 2015), and though these structures favour established actors and narratives, our analysis shows the persistence of networks across time and events that can quickly coalesce to provide an effective counter-public/counter-narrative challenge. Yet in many cases they appear to be only loosely organised counter-publics, as is the case when the expression of solidarity appears more as a front-stage performance following the Christchurch attack, rather than commitment to structural change. When these coalitions come together at speed, following a trigger event, there is a further question of their sustainability. As described in more depth in the [next chapter](#), those that have more stability are the actors and groups that already exist and quickly assemble to counter attacks when they are needed. This was evident in the work of advocacy groups during COVID-19, being a longer-term event, as well as the actors who connected across diverse political interests to reframe and reclaim the conversation about Brexit following the BBC leaders’ debate, and further corroborated by our interviewees in the following section. These anti-Islamophobic networks operate across time, space and difference to provide an effective opposition at times of crisis. Hence, the rise of more sustained solidarity narratives should not be understood as a wholesale break with clicktivism but speaks to the *multidimensional* potentials of solidarity, which can emerge as these user–platform–event relations evolve (see [Poole et al., 2023](#)).

Part II: activist tactics

Who did we interview?

The aim of this stage of the project was to speak to those people who had engaged in the debates on our events/Twitter samples to discuss their objectives and tactics for engaging with online narratives. According to [Giraud \(2018: 142\)](#), drawing on [Couldry \(2012\)](#), ‘attention must be paid to how technologies are used and engaged with in practice, as opposed to in idealised ways. It is important, in other words, to examine how tensions between technologies and political aims are negotiated in practice by specific groups and individuals ([Barassi, 2015](#))’. In this sense, we were interested in how these activists navigated Twitter given the structural limitations cited in the literature. We sent out 150 invitations to people who had engaged frequently in the debates we examined in our qualitative and quantitative Twitter data.

We aimed to interview a range of people, including activists, journalists, academics and non-affiliated users from a range of political positions. As we had to use direct messaging through Twitter to contact most people, the response rate was low (fifteen interviews were secured). This, we believe, was partly due to the impact of Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter that was taking place at the same time (September 2022), and had resulted in many people leaving the platform or being wary of unsolicited contacts. Not surprisingly, most people who agreed identified as being supportive of Muslims or anti-racist. Seven of the fifteen participants were Muslim, only one of whom was a woman; there were ten men and six women overall (two people representing an activist group were interviewed together, see [Table 5.9](#)). Their locations ranged from the UK, Europe, North America, South Asian countries and Australia. We adopted an interpretative approach to analysing the interviews based on theories that suggest topics of discussion allow us insight into meaning making amongst certain groups in society and associated values ([Flick, 2009](#)).

The interviews lasted from 45 to 160 minutes and took place on Microsoft Teams. The interviews were semi-structured with initial questions (available in [Appendix 2](#)).

Usage

Not surprisingly the users we interviewed reported a high Twitter usage – 'my phone is Twitter ... was Twitter' (Interviewee 9, activist) – although many also cited recent reduced presence on the app, due to fatigue, toxicity and Musk's acquisition of the platform. Even in early functional questions, participants revealed the tensions they felt in using a corporate platform that had recently come under attack from left-wing critiques. Some dilemmas people faced were resolved by reverting to established professional norms

Table 5.9 Affiliations

Affiliation	Number
Individual activist	4
Academic/journalist	2
Journalist	3
Academic activists	2
Activist organisation (civil society organisation)	4
Total	15

of usage and by citing platform knowledge (in being able to manipulate the platform to their own ends).

Professional identity and platform knowledge

While not fully adopting a ‘practice approach’, we are drawing on some of its perspectives as part of an integrated approach to analysing and understanding how people interact with media (Stephansen and Tréré, 2019). In this paradigm, which draws on Couldry’s (2010) practice theory, media practices are constitutive, they help construct the social order. According to Stephansen (2016), who used this approach to show how citizenship is constructed through use of citizen media, media practice is socially situated (Stephansen, 2016), part of wider social practice. This was evident in the practices of our interviewees who mostly cited their use of Twitter as a ‘professional tool’. The specific practices reflected, but also contributed to reinforcing, professional identities and norms that have been ‘encoded’ and routinised, allowing some of the tensions associated with the platform to be overcome in everyday usage (see Kavada, 2015). For example, the advocacy groups adopted a more deliberate approach, and felt it was part of their job to directly engage in disagreements, the organisation providing some anonymity, and therefore a shield from abuse which allowed them to be more proactive. These users also had the resources to develop their own content, and in some cases dedicated communication teams. Hence, they were more tactical in their use of Twitter tools and in connecting to key influencers to gain traction for their campaigns:

[S]o, for example, obviously if we, if we’re doing, if we’ve done some research or we’re running a physical campaign or we’ve published a report, we will use Twitter to amplify that and we will use Twitter a lot to, for example, to get people involved in digital engagement, whether that’s signing petitions or making donations or any of those kinds of things. (Interviewee 8, group member)

In contrast, academics’ networks developed more organically and their interactions were more guarded. Academics were also the least likely interviewees to engage with negative narratives, acutely aware of their professional profile, being careful not to be misunderstood and only tagging people if highly relevant. They spoke about the need for ‘self-preservation’ and weighing up if something is ‘worth the risk’:

I’m using Twitter, as I said, for something that’s kind of aligned to my work. So I would prefer to as I guess, as a professional, I would prefer to try and do my work in a more, I guess, discreet way and in a way that’s more measured, is maybe I guess, as an academic that’s methodologically sound. (Interviewee 10, academic)

Journalists adopted an in-between position here, with their practice also encoded by professional norms of journalist practice in, for example, following a wider network of people for gathering information and sources. By presenting a professional identity, the participants also presented a version of ‘good activism’ (Craddock, 2019), which was reflected in their cited objective of having a responsibility for producing a critical but constructive and civil discursive environment. There were many references to using ‘reason’, being ‘rational’, ‘respectful’, engaging in ‘debate’ and showing ‘caution’:

I still would not want to contribute in a negative or corrosive way to public discourse, even as a private individual. (Interviewee 4, journalist)

I speak in a way that doesn’t trigger people to go do violence. (Interviewee 9, activist)

Hence, participants carefully considered their content management with very little use of blocking and muting, only in extreme cases, instead adjusting privacy settings, location data and who can reply to their tweets. Part of the objective in their participation was to challenge the diminishment of expertise and disinformation circulating on social media platforms, thus contributing to a more democratic environment. This demonstrates the interaction of professional norms and technical logics of the platform in producing specific types of communication (see Kavada, 2015, 2016). Expanding on the idea of contentious politics by drawing on E.P. Thompson’s concept of the moral economy, Bonini and Treré (2024b) suggest that this is evidence of the diverse (and often competing but not always) moralities of both platform and users. Practices here were important in sustaining both boundaries and subjectivities in a professional context and further producing both professional identities and a civic space.

On the face of it, this construction of an ‘ideal activism’ (Craddock, 2019) in contributing to the production of a ‘civic culture’ (Stephansen, 2016) contradicts public ideas of the discursive culture of Twitter as a conflictual environment. However, in doing so participants also reproduced a narrative of ‘culture wars’, constructing an idea of liberal and rational progressive actors and voice on one side with far-right uncivil trolls on the other.

Counter-publics are often by necessity agonistic rather than deliberative; often the incommensurability of their values with existing institutions is what motivates these publics to engage in contentious activism to create social change. The role of contentious action is evident in some of the most high-profile counter-publics: from HIV activism and its transformation of healthcare, to BLM creating visibility for defund-the-police narratives in mainstream political discourse. In constructing the far-right as ‘irrational’,

therefore, there is a risk of constructing a particular model of ‘reason’ or ‘civility’ (one compatible with deliberative models of political debate) as the only acceptable mode of political participation. The danger of this approach is that it delegitimises the work of counter-publics who, by necessity, often have to operate outside of existing institutions and institutional norms, but who – through virtue of this exterior position – have played a vital role in securing social change. According to [Brock \(2016\)](#), examining these tensions is essential, as it requires exploring how beliefs about the world mediate ideas of ‘appropriate’ uses of and discourses about ICTs.

[Craddock \(2019\)](#), in the context of gendered activism, also discusses the emotional labour that maintaining this kind of professional activism on social media entails, which was clearly evidenced by the affective responses of our participants to their practice. Many had very personal stories of the toxicity of Twitter and the emotional toll of their engagement with distressing stories of abuse, including from one woman interviewee in India who had been auctioned online. Following professional norms and using professional language therefore provided people with more formalised guidelines for avoiding harms. Several also talked of their role in spreading ‘love not hate’ (Interviewee 12), or at least of goodwill, and positively acknowledging replies, to challenge negativity online.

It is notable, however, that some users productively complicated notions of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ activism or neat bifurcations between anti-racist leftist users and an ‘uncivil’ far-right, by describing how the intersection of race, religion and gender had created distinctive patterns of oppression that cut across political lines. This challenging context for engagement was particularly felt by the Muslims and women we interviewed who felt targeted from multiple sides:

[H]ere comes this, you know, modern Muslim woman who can speak for herself and people just go nuts. Because when when people like me speak, they think that ‘weren’t you subdued? Weren’t you not supposed to speak? So why are you speaking?’ So that kind of ticks them off, the centrist, the leftist, the rightist. (Interviewee 9, activist)

Theorists have noted instances of sexism and racism even in activist spaces, but, in turn, how an emotional investment can reinforce identities and invoke solidarity ([Emejulu and Sobande, 2019](#)). In particular, [Banet-Weiser \(2018\)](#) highlights how the visibility of feminist discourse often attracts intense opposition in the form of ‘popular misogyny’, a systematic response to challenges against existing power structures. For Muslim women in particular, navigating the balance between public expression and selective engagement to foster safe spaces is particularly challenging.

Tactical interventions

Our use of ‘tactics’ draws on [de Certeau’s \(1984\)](#) distinction between the tactics of the non-powerful as opposed to the strategies of the powerful. The use of tactics recognises that the non-powerful have to adapt to or adapt the environment that strategists create but they can also take advantage of its unpredictable outcomes through tactical agility/agency: a model that has a long history of being applied to digital practices (see [Bonini and Tréré, 2024a](#)). We have previously shown how key actors engage in ‘tactical interventions’ ([Poole et al., 2021](#)), wherein users attempt ‘to interfere in complex communication ecologies by modulating the affordances of particular media, a sort of digital weapon of the weak intended to counteract the growing power differentials in this realm’ ([Lezaun, 2018: 224](#)). The socially situated practices mentioned above offered users a pathway in which to navigate and circulate media discourse but the tactics used were also a way of demonstrating professional competence in terms of platform knowledge. Tactics employed in content management mentioned by interviewees were numerous and are grouped here in three sections; manipulating the platform; monitoring and contesting; and capacity- and network-building.

Manipulating the platform

Participants spoke of platform expertise in maximising their influence – using Twitter analytics to analyse impact, as well as exploiting algorithms, other automated tools and the affordances of Twitter according to their objectives. For example, several interviewees mentioned retweeting when they had nothing to add, were unsure of the full facts, and for speed. In contrast, quote-tweeting was utilised to generate debate, highlight disinformation, provide context and nuance (particularly where mainstream media was lacking), share information with their own followers, and credit an author. Retweeting, they suggested, was also a way of circulating content that was less at risk of trolling than replying directly to disagreeable comments. Some activists (particularly organisations) had multiple accounts to target specific audiences. Most exploited hybrid media ecologies (promoting blogs, writing for news media, sharing into closed groups, cross-media work) to extend their reach, as previously observed by Tréré in relation to social justice movements ([2018](#)).

Using evidence was a key tactic for demonstrating credibility, quality and authenticity, and was also used to close heated discussion down as well as promote understanding. For groups, this often took the form of their own content creation; the Indian American Muslim Council, for instance, created a series of videos to challenge disinformation in India during COVID-19. One of these tweets began:

As India's poor reel under the 21 day lockdown, the country's 200 million Muslims have been subjected to anti-Muslim hate and scapegoating over Coronavirus by the Hindutva goons leading to a rise in hate crimes across the nation (1 of 4) #COVID2019 Watch and share. (12 April 2020)

The organisation referred to this in their interview:

[T]hese TV people like, you know, accusing Muslims of spreading COVID, coronavirus. So we kind of created this montage. We will start with what happened in India and what TV channels were doing, and showed the contrast of what Muslims were doing in return. (Interviewee 4, group)

As with value judgements made by journalists in relation to the specific types of 'rational' discourse required to participate in debate, the emphasis on evidence likewise opens up some complex questions. Science communication has long emphasised the risk of promoting 'deficit models' of public understanding, which assume that all people require is the correct information in order to change behaviour and attitudes. The assumption that all is needed is to address a public knowledge deficit is through rational argument and evidence resurfaced in discussions of how to combat fake news and disinformation in relation to Brexit in particular (Marres, 2018) and intensified in the wake of COVID-19 and widespread concern over vaccine hesitancy. Like appeals to rationality, over-emphasising the need to provide evidence to combat knowledge deficits can carry risk.

Firstly, a deficit approach neglects some of the complex socio-cultural factors that underpin phenomena such as vaccine hesitancy and anti-lockdown protests, belief in far-right conspiracies or climate change scepticism, which stems – in some instances – from well-founded suspicion in institutions (Ozduzen *et al.*, 2023). Secondly, challenges can arise due to certain models of rationality historically being promoted by elites and used to dispel people's lived experience: an issue that has affected counter-publics as well as far-less-sympathetic defensive publics, to revisit Jackson and Kreiss' (2023) distinction. Again, therefore, the dilemma is that specific models of what constitutes evidence can inadvertently perpetuate knowledge hierarchies and thus fuel, rather than quash, populist discourses that position themselves as anti-elitist. At the same time, as underlined by interviewees' own lived experiences, it is important not to be dismissive of the capacity of fact-checking to debunk disinformation and push back against stereotypes.

While it might not be without risk, therefore, this type of counter-narrative content demonstrates the generative potential of collective practices of fact-checking to support capacity-building amongst grassroots organisations, and works alongside other online and offline practices (networking, collaboration, direct action) in the process of movement-building. According to Stephansen

(2016), capacity-building practices also create the preconditions for counter-narrative circulation, enabling these narratives to spread more effectively. The quantitative analysis showed that individuals are more likely (than other affiliations) to circulate links, particularly to alternative media, promoting counter-narrative content and in doing so providing more sustainability to activist content (Giraud, 2018). While this tactical creativity provides content to corporate platforms, the tensions in using this media for activism were offset by asserting technical know-how and by linking to non-commercial content, circumventing platform determinism and subtly mediating its affordances (Giraud, 2018). The concept of ‘entanglement’ can be adopted here, as multiple agencies/actors intersect and interact in the context of media activism (Giraud, 2019).

Monitoring and contesting

An important objective, particularly for groups where their job required them to be proactive rather than just responsive, was the counter-narrative work they do in relation to challenging dis- and misinformation. This required surveillance tactics in a systematic and evidential way to create ‘a dashboard of patterns’ in order to ‘know your enemy’:

Also, I guess it’s also a monitoring thing. What are people saying and does it need to be reported and how can we best challenge it? Is this something that a journalist might want to see and, you know, is this a tweet that can be challenged knowing not that the person themselves will will change their opinion, but it may change the opinion of some of the other audience looking? (Interviewee 1, individual)

For example, an overtly Islamophobic tweet might be recorded, reported and passed to a research team to investigate the account. The quote above shows that there was careful consideration of the most appropriate tactic and person/audience to target in highlighting disinformation with an eye to the ‘third audience’, the middle ground. As Kavada (2015) has suggested, occupation of discursive space is also important to subvert invisibility:

[I]f that space is left empty, then whatever they are saying would just go unchallenged and would, definitely like there are a lot of folks who would just believe without that counter-narrative, they will just believe in what the other side is putting out. (Interviewee 3, group)

Providing alternative narratives through repeated patterns of communication so they become normative, and making other voices visible, were also key objectives:

[T]he story needs to be told again and again and again until people understand how crucial and how critical it is. (Interviewee 9, activist)

[Showing an] ordinary person in a hijab doing her thing. (Interviewee 13, journalist)

Disruptive or interruptive engagement to delegitimise Islamophobia was thus seen as routine for groups:

So our approach is always to give the examples as a case study alongside a debunk, so you can also see that in the comments. The Islamophobic comment is an example of Islamophobia and then I'm providing a debunk, in the comment. (Interviewee 14, group)

For others, while there was more consideration of the risks involved, most said they would engage in debates with people who had different views to them if the dialogue was respectful and constructive (that is, not with users perceived to be trolls) with the hope that 'maybe it would be that one drop' to make a difference. One activist recounted a positive experience:

[T]hey posted intensely anti-Jewish tweets and I engaged with them and I said to one of them, we are human, you know, not monsters. And then he, to my surprise, he replied, something like, of course you're human. We're all human. And somehow it was a tipping point on which the hostile conversation turned and became much more friendly, much more friendly. When that happens, there's a sort of great gratitude between the antagonists. That it could be resolved. (Interviewee 2, activist and blogger)

However, our analysis of Twitter discourse shows that aspirations to productive exchanges are probably an activist ideal (and sometimes rhetorical?), an exception rather than the norm. Our content analysis of interactions shows these were fairly limited, and largely argumentative, point-scoring and personal attacks rather than constructive. There were frequent cases where the poster of an original tweet would attempt to counter disagreeable replies through interaction but then quickly retreat due to the futility of this. One example that includes several of these approaches were responses (fifty) to a tweet by C.J. Werleman, an anti-Islamophobia activist and columnist for the *Byline Times*, who attracts a diverse audience. In it, Werleman highlights examples of BJP Islamophobic discourse, in one case how a BJP minister 'taunts Muslims' by suggesting they should sacrifice children rather than animals during COVID-19. While many people who responded agreed with the sentiment of the tweet, others attempted to disrupt the narrative, debating the veracity of these claims, and argued about how the stories had been framed by Werleman. There were also, more unusually however, nuanced threads discussing why animal sacrifice is explicitly used to stigmatise Muslims.⁹

This fraught politics might not be the rational discourse of Habermas' public sphere but these messy discussions can challenge and 'wear away' at hegemonies (Rambukkana, 2015b). Most debate did not involve interaction but individual contestation in response to a news story, as in a BBC article that reported 'Muslims urged to avoid communal Eid celebrations'.¹⁰ However, even though not engaging directly in debate,

these separate but persistent voices can create incremental shifts, disrupting hegemonic discourse about an issue (see [Rambukkana, 2015b](#)).

Our previous research foregrounded the danger of amplifying digital hate through engaging with it ([Poole et al., 2021](#); see also [Ernst et al., 2017](#)). Interviewees recognised this issue and took care to avoid counter-productive behaviour, staying alert to trolls, potential triggers and etiquette, while carefully considering when, how and with whom to engage.

[B]ecause a lot of times with counter-narratives you end up repeating the narrative in the first place, right? So you're just, you're actually adding more grist to the kind of the narrative mill, like a pantomime, you know? It's like, oh no you didn't, oh yes you did. And where do we go with that? (Interviewee 10, academic activist)

As a result, some individuals deliberately avoided counter-narratives, recognising the limitations of contesting content within socio-technical systems, and instead focused on promoting positive alternative narratives. As one interviewee noted:

You have to have positive narratives in order to motivate people to to change and to get involved. (Interviewee 14, group)

This may include resisting the framing by not always discussing issues around Muslims and Islamophobia.

It was also notable, though, there was not universal agreement on responding to Islamophobic narratives, with some groups arguing that engaging with this negative content could be productive in amplifying their own content:

[M]aybe it is a valid argument that we're reproducing hate speech, but I think sometimes it's necessary in order to educate. (Interviewee 14, group)

This discussion shows the positive intention to engage with Islamophobia but also highlights the dilemmas this creates, mostly for individuals. These dilemmas could be resolved, to an extent, for those people who have professional norms to guide them, but the situation was more complicated for those working outside these parameters. Despite the limitations, the platform gave activists the agency to reframe and intervene in narrative debates which can be empowering in giving them a level of 'rhetorical power' ([Alfonzo, 2021](#)).

Network-building and solidarity

Activists were acutely aware of the limitations of Twitter as a platform for solidarity and allyship citing the 'fragility' of these links, with non-Muslims recognising that they had 'the luxury of shutting off'. Despite these constraints, most were optimistic, at the time, about the benefits of Twitter

in that its affordances around influence, utility, accessibility and virality made it a ‘very powerful tool for social change’. These benefits ranged from demonstrating solidarity and supporting others to fostering community building on a practical level, as demonstrated by an academic interviewee:

[S]o somebody might have a problem, they might need advice. It might be a journalist who wants something, it might be a fellow academic who wants something, it might be a student who wants something. So that’s quite nice. (Interviewee 11, academic activist)

Others referred to using Twitter to extend network formations across borders, for mobilising and organising activists:

I think meaningful activism has occurred on Twitter and across social media platforms. I mean, I’m routinely asked by various campaigns to, you know, engage in Twitter storms or to retweet campaigns at certain times in order to get visibility. ... But I do think that there is a, really there is a prominent sort of organizing effort potential within both Twitter and social media generally. (Interviewee 5, academic/journalist)

In this sense, there was evidence of the counter-public formations (Fraser, 1990) or the practice-making publics suggested by Stephansen (2016). Tactics adopted to advance and shore up activist connections are discussed next.

Firstly, advocacy work – tagging celebrities/politicians and attracting journalists’ attention, to amplify or redirect content and encourage fact-checking, with careful consideration to the appropriateness of this approach.

Tweet: Voice of America calls out the weaponization of #COVID19 by India against its Muslims population @StateDept@SenateGOP@SenateDems@WhiteHouse@HouseDemocrats@HouseGOP@SpeakerPelosi@RepEliotEngel@RepBera@BradSherman@USCIRF@IRF_Ambassador #HateVirus. (Indian American Muslim Council, 19 April 2020)

A second key tactic was using allyship/networks to maximise exposure through coalition campaigns such as a ‘Twitter storm’:

They were called corona bombs. ... And I think that is when the Arab world also got a little involved into what is happening in India. Twitter activism is helping governments talk about the persecution that’s happening in India right now. it is about creating influence within with people that are important to us. (Interviewee 3, group)

Users, thirdly, frequently described how tagging was used to garner support, after events such as attacks:

[I]f someone’s been antisemitic to someone, or being awful to someone, they’ll sometimes tag me. And then I sometimes do go in there and defend the person. (Interviewee 2, activist/blogger)

And the other thing I would probably do, particularly if it was targeting a specific person, but in general, would reach out to Muslim friends and contacts and say, you know, to sort of, say I'd seen it and say how sorry I was about it, or, you know, hopefully checking in with them, check they're OK. (Interviewee 8, group)

Another journalist called this an 'anti-trolling technique', 'call to action' and 'a really hugely powerful bystander technique':

And what you do is you basically get, you get that person that's being attacked a huge show of support and a huge following, and you amplify their voice. (Interviewee 13, author/activist)

For example, after the Conservative Party won the 2019 general election, another activist said:

[T]his is a very personal tweet for me as well, and, yeah, I was thinking about this time and speaking to many friends and people who were worried, you know, who were genuinely worried about the rise of racism, following the Brexit debate. (Interviewee 11, academic activist)

This kind of peer-to-peer interaction, that is starting to resemble a form of collective action, was also linked to offline capacity-building, which was seen as a necessary part of forming meaningful coalitions. In this way, micro-level practices can contribute to more organised models of resistance (Bonini and Tréré, 2024a). In general, however, this discourse demonstrated the value of public-facing social media platforms to activists in showing solidarity, and in achieving other activist goals, despite their limitations. Through these interviews, we gained an insight into what work they deemed important and useful in achieving their goals, and maintaining connections, as well as the reality of using the platform for them.

What was particularly evident is the agency that individuals felt was afforded by engagement – interviewees articulated a dynamic, ideal activist and professional identities (rather than consumer) – was also unsettled by hostility on Twitter. In this sense, activists are required to navigate a contentious terrain which can be emotionally exhausting and fraught with difficulties. Their professional and activist codes of practice interact with the technical aspects of the platform which requires them to constantly negotiate their positions and approach, engaging in acts of 'invisible work' (Giraud, 2015: 16). This is particularly necessary for those who 'fail to fit' the system, the marginal actors that do not receive the attention of high-profile accounts who are then unable to fit with the socio-technical norms of Twitter (Giraud, 2015 drawing on Star, 1990: 29). This was demonstrated by the practices and visibility of Muslims in this project who had to negotiate a more difficult path to balance exposure and risk. Usage engenders both

positive and negative responses to control and surveillance, and is constantly negotiated depending on specific conditions.

An example of the problematic relationship between Twitter and more marginalised users was expressed by one Muslim activist who took a somewhat different and more critical position on the corporate infrastructure relating to censorship and moderation than other participants. While most of the participants recommended more and tighter moderation standards to combat online hate speech, this interviewee was concerned with the type of censorship that might shield authorities from scrutiny.

Twitter has been doing what the FBI and other agencies have been telling them to do, in terms of closing accounts. And there's that real issue between national security, you know, and what should be this kind of open public platform? So I think that there's huge issues, there about censorship ... what history has told us is that often, you know, we might like these things against our enemies, censorship, you know, against, say, the far right, or whatever, but invariably, this censorship is often used against the left, right? (Interviewee 11, academic activist)

These and similar anxieties cause temporary and partial withdrawals from engagement, which challenges the sustainability of counter-narratives on Twitter, but also critical reflective practice that generates further resistance, in this case more active investigation and calls for openness.

The theories of the potentials and limitations of activism on social media are well-rehearsed. From earlier more optimistic but sometimes deterministic views advanced by theorists including [Castells \(1996\)](#), followed by conceptions of an active audience through participatory engagement ([Jenkins, 2006](#)), to Jodie Dean's (2009) argument that these commercial technologies 'capture' their subjects to meet the needs of capital, thus limiting their potential for activism. More recent explorations of hybrid media activism adopt an ecological approach, recognising the value of media to activists through multiple (and active) practices and uses ([Barassi, 2015](#); [Tréré, 2018](#)). [Giraud \(2015\)](#) has previously argued that theories which assign control to the platforms depend on perceiving subjectivities as ideal types, that conform to platform expectations, denying their subjects any agency.

Rather than seeing activists as either accepting the conditions of the platform *or* actively resisting them, we suggest a more productive approach is offered through drawing on the concept of friction to understand how user–event–platform relations are configured ([Tsing, 2005](#); [Shea et al., 2015](#)). Friction occurs when the logics of commercial platforms clash with the needs of activists who then develop workarounds for these problems ([Poole et al., 2021](#)). In this sense, friction is a site of agency, as the tensions

witnessed above encourage critical reflection which can drive productive friction that in turn increases political agency (Giraud, 2015). These frictions can engender both diverse and conflicting outcomes, the ‘unpredictable effects of global encounters across difference’ (Tsing, 2005: 3). They are contingent on both the media form, specific events and user interactions (which themselves are based on wider social practices and knowledge of media environment; Stephansen and Treré, 2019). Note the frictions that occurred in the different uses of the platform based on professional subjectivity – academics tended to be more cautious, requiring groups to exercise sensitivity when engaging with them – frictions can therefore be both compromising and empowering (Tsing, 2005).

Conclusion

The bricolage of tactics involving surveillance, consciousness-raising and network-building demonstrated here has produced a public good, developing relationally as activists’ socio-subjectivities, identities and goals interacted with the technical infrastructure and the events in question, thereby generating new digital social norms and practices (Barassi and Treré, 2012; Giraud, 2015). Through adopting, utilising and, in turn, shaping the affordances of the platform, these activists did not passively occupy the consumer positions that the platform fosters but actively applied its tools for activist agendas and movement-building. As Shea *et al.* (2015: np) argue, ‘the concepts of entanglements and frictions support us to explore the complex realities of co-dependent relationships between activists, technologies and the corporations who create them, in ways that support us to move beyond the old, dull and tired “good” versus “bad” technology narratives’. While our participants may have had disparate experiences, they also had common goals in raising awareness of issues around Islamophobia. These shared goals combined with the technical infrastructure led to both diverse and divergent connectivities that were evident through network analysis.

These different manifestations of agency are conceptualised by Bonini and Treré (2024a: 13) as ‘algorithmic agency’ in their recent research on algorithms of resistance. This work provides an appropriate framework for analysing the practices we witnessed in our own project. Activist tactics take multiple, fluid forms of resistance ranging from individual to collective actions, and from mundane practices to emotionally charged responses to triggering events. In the face of platform power, activists use these tactics to game the system, operating within diverse moral economies. At times these values may align with that of the platform and at others they are resistant. The framework is useful for understanding mediated activism not

merely as a set of practices, but as ‘a structural condition of the platform society’, highlighting the relational properties between them (Bonini and Treré, 2024b).

Similarly, our understanding of user–platform–event dynamics aligns with Brock’s (2016) analysis of how discourse is mediated through the interplay of technical, cultural and ideological relations. Brock’s Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis approach demonstrates how platforms’ design and affordances interact with cultural identities and ideological frameworks to structure digital discourse. This approach emphasises how user practices both reflect and transform the socio-technical systems within which they occur.

Siapera *et al.*’s (2018: 207) work on refugees and voice on Twitter shows that on this platform ‘power is exercised by those who are successfully able to create, tap and steer information flows in ways to suit their goals’. Similarly, in our work on #stopIslam, we have shown how right-wing groups were particular adept at such tactics, which creates an uneven discursive terrain (Poole *et al.*, 2021). As we have shown, providing alternative frames is a key goal for activists. Through persistent affective and networked labour, and by employing effective discursive tactics, advocacy groups can leverage collective power to shift online discourse. As Law *et al.* (2018: 14) argue, for counter-narratives about Muslims to succeed, these networks must be mobilised to ensure that the ‘core political, media and populist value that Islamophobia is ... exposed, denigrated, dismantled and de-normalised’. Due to the structural dynamics of Twitter (and particularly now as X), and its current ownership, some theorists argue this power will always be liminal and requires an overhaul along the lines of social justice and equality values to address this (Siapera, 2022). However, by adopting a user–event–platform analysis, we have been able to show how counter-narratives can become normalised in online spaces under the right conditions. In the [next chapter](#), we will further interrogate the important questions raised about the sustainability of these networks.

Notes

- 1 Cowburn, A. (2019) Brexit Party founder forced to resign over Islamophobic comments endorses Boris Johnson’s Tories. *The Independent*, 11 Dec www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-brexit-party-islamophobic-boris-johnson-conservatives-blaklock-a9242046.html
- 2 A category used in our coding schedule, defined as people with right-wing views at odds with the conservative establishment (Marwick and Lewis, 2017: 9).
- 3 He promoted one of his talks on Islamophobia which was also quote-tweeted.

- 4 Though definitions of solidarity are heterogeneous, there is a general consensus that collectivity – informed by a politics of recognition – is central (see Bakardjieva, 2020). Kaarina Nikunen (2019: 3), for instance, defines solidarity as ‘the shared commitment to challenge injustice and social vulnerability’.
- 5 The process we used to do this was as follow:
Identify active users: Find users who have engaged (via quote-tweets or retweets) with tweets about the event on two or more occasions.
Filter for diverse engagement: Exclude users who only engaged with a single account multiple times. This helps focus on users interacting with different parts of the network.
Focus on quote-tweets: Narrow down to just quote-tweets, as these create links between different parts of the network.
Group by target: Organise users by the person they quote-tweeted, likely the central figures in the network. This helps see if engagement is evenly spread or concentrated on one person.
- 6 See Chapter 4; she accused the MP of starting an Islamophobic campaign against her and questioning her position on Brexit.
- 7 To see the enhanced network diagrams of people who were quote-tweeted please see our website: www.keele.ac.uk/humanities/study/mcc/research/contestingislamophobia/
- 8 The focus here is mainly on the month after the attack, due to the lower numbers in later date ranges, there is not much to glean from the latter two network diagrams except that an anti-gun advocate in the US is a key node through which information flows.
- 9 Some of these interactions are no longer available.
- 10 BBC News UK, (2020). Coronavirus: Muslims urged to avoid communal Eid celebrations. 19 May. Available: <https://x.com/i/web/status/1262538620185042949>

Death of a platform? Continuity, change and legacies as Twitter becomes X

This is not protest, it is pure violence.

We will have a standing army of public duty officers.

We will ramp up criminal justice. We will apply criminal law online as well as offline.

We will not tolerate attacks on mosques or on Muslim communities.

(Keir Starmer, 5 August 2024)

Shouldn't you be concerned about attacks on *all* communities.

(Elon Musk, 5 August 2024)¹

When we initially wrote this chapter, between late July and early August 2024, a wave of far-right riots was occurring across England and Northern Ireland. Fires were deliberately started at hotels that housed asylum seekers, falafel shops were vandalised and aggressive crowds gathered near mosques. The riots arose in the wake of a violent knife attack on a children's dance class in the north-west town of Southport, in which three young girls were murdered. These events became a trigger for anti-migrant and Islamophobic violence after disinformation that the 'perpetrator was a Muslim small-boat migrant' (Dearden, 2024) was spread through Telegram then amplified by far-right influencers and celebrities on X. The platform was then used to share footage of the ensuing riots; Elon Musk, for instance, posted the phrase 'civil war is inevitable' beneath a video of footage of violence that was originally circulated by far-right activist Tommy Robinson (Elgot, 2024).²

In response, high-profile politicians – including UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer – used X to condemn the riots. Echoing our own case studies, however, criticisms of far-right violence were both entangled with what they were reacting against and afforded further visibility to far-right discourse. As reflected by the exchange between Starmer and Musk that opens this chapter, for instance, highly retweeted critiques of Islamophobia were often hijacked. Divergent hashtags related to events also started to trend on X, including anti-immigration narratives such as #enoughisenough or #twotierkier

(which accused Starmer of being harsher on anti-immigration protests than on the left), as well as anti-racist narratives such as #riotsnotprotests (that were critical of media depictions of the events). Prominent tweets were then quoted by other news media, particularly online newspaper websites, where they were treated as emblematic of public discourse that was circulating about these events.

Events surrounding the riots, therefore, seemed to suggest that patterns we identified during our examination of Twitter were playing out, yet again, as X was used to circulate both racialised Islamophobia and counter-narratives against it. The platform, in other words, persisted as an information node at the nexus of far-right media ecologies, journalism, political discourse and counter-public spheres. In doing so, X's role echoed the wider body of scholarship we have drawn on across this book, which has documented how trigger events are tactically utilised by far-right communities to normalise anti-migrant discourse (Siapera, 2019), and foment physical violence (Awan and Zempi, 2017).

Yet events also spoke to a sea-change in relation to Twitter/X that had been gathering force since the 2020 US Capitol attacks, after these incidents fostered wider popular debates about the platform's role in amplifying far-right disinformation and hate speech. These debates were echoed by political discourse in the wake of the UK riots, with calls for greater regulation of online content and prosecution of those using platforms to incite violence and social division (European Commission, 2024). In the months that followed, hundreds of offenders were sentenced for a variety of crimes committed during the riots, including Andrew McIntyre, who set up Telegram channel called 'Southport Wake Up', to encourage violent disorder.³ In addition, users identifying as left-wing or progressivist, including members of UK parliament, declared their intention to quit – or at least reduce their use of – X, due to Musk turning the platform into 'a megaphone for foreign adversaries and far-right fringe groups' (Courea, 2024).

Socio-political developments in relation to X intersect with the platform's changing role in academic knowledge production. As outlined throughout this book, over the past decade and a half, a vast body of scholarship has focused on Twitter due to its novelty as a data source and its relative accessibility for researchers. While important criticisms have been made about an over-emphasis on Twitter at the expense of other platforms (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021), in the context of our research Twitter retained significance precisely *because* of its accessibility: not just for academics, but journalists and activists. The UK riots – and subsequent events, particularly those associated with the commencement of Donald Trump's second term as US president – underline that X continues to be utilised extensively by elites such as journalists and politicians as well as

by the far-right. However, recent developments pose questions about the platform's ongoing value for researchers: not least because of changes to its terms and conditions that have restricted academic access.

This, concluding, chapter situates our findings in relation to both changes and continuities in the media landscape, which have arisen with Twitter's transformation into X, and the implications of these changes for both activism and academic knowledge production. We begin by elaborating on some of the key challenges in contesting Islamophobia online, as identified by our own research, and how these problems speak to recent criticisms of X. Revisiting key snapshots in time from our case studies – such as the long tail of hate after the Christchurch attacks, re-appropriation of counter-narratives against #stopIslam, reiterative racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the wider decline of hashtags – we draw out insights from the longitudinal perspective offered by our data to ask what they reveal about the ongoing capacity of the platform to sustain counter-narratives. Ultimately, we suggest that these shifts intensify pre-existing problems with Twitter/X, which have unsettled the platform's capacity to support networked counter-publics who are able to sustainably counter racism and Islamophobia.

We then reflect on how shifts in platform–user relations are entangled with changes in ownership, political economy and governance structures that impact upon academic research. More specifically, we ask what the increasing opacity of platforms – as typified by X – means for the future of research on digital hate (as well as other social issues) and what it means when platforms that have been the cornerstone of academic research due to their accessibility and prominence are no longer accessible to scholars. Before developing our analysis, however, we wanted to reflect briefly on the title of this chapter, specifically the reference to the platform's 'death'.

Becoming X: death of a platform for counter-narratives?

Our original research question asked: What are the dynamics of online counter-narratives against Islamophobia and what political potentials and/or limitations do they offer for mediated activism? Throughout the book it has become evident that there is not a straightforward answer for this question. As illustrated across our datasets, any potentials for counter-public activism and counter-narrative production are contingent on situated, entangled relationships between users, platforms and events. These entanglements make it important to reflect on the ways that Twitter's evolution into X might mediate user–event relations in new ways, with new political implications.

The initial proposal for this book was developed shortly after Musk purchased Twitter and rebranded it X, after which large numbers of left-leaning users left the platform and academic data-use was heavily restricted. Our intention was to use this chapter to reflect on the ramifications of these changes to the platform for future political engagements, alongside their implications for academic work. Yet, at the time of writing, claims about the ‘death’ of Twitter/X seem premature. When we wrote the initial draft of this chapter, the platform had been propelled back into political debate and legacy media headlines, not just due to the UK riots but other key events such as Donald Trump’s use of the platform for campaigning purposes (including participating in a livestreamed interview with Elon Musk [Murphy, 2024]). Between writing the first draft of this book and receiving reviewer comments, moreover, the relationship between Trump and Musk had evolved still further, as Musk became increasingly involved with the US government (spearheading the Department of Government Efficiency) before developing a more fractious relationship with Trump (see Wallace-Wells, 2025). In addition, Musk has continued to play an active role in UK politics, most notably by addressing a far-right rally in London in September 2025 where he called for the ‘dissolution of parliament’ and claimed that ‘violence is coming’ (Ahmed, 2025).

The fact that X has returned to news headlines, however, does not negate the sharp decline in its user-base that initially occurred after Musk’s takeover and rebranding: with market research claiming a 30 per cent drop in usage between 2023 and 2024 (Edison Research, 2024). Negative perceptions of X have also continued to intensify over the past two years; in a poll produced by YouGov in the wake of the UK riots, for instance, almost half of the public (48 per cent) felt there was ‘too much freedom to post on offensive or harmful content’ (Smith, 2024).

These developments speak to a ‘skewing’ of X’s user-base (Murthy, 2024: 183), in the wake of the ‘great Twitter migration’ (He *et al.*, 2023), as large numbers of self-identifying progressivist users migrated to alternatives such as Mastodon, BlueSky and Threads in the wake of Musk purchasing the platform (Jeong *et al.*, 2024). Such shifts effectively mirrored and reversed the migration of far-right users from Twitter to ‘dark platforms’ (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021), which arose after the post-Capitol purge. As Murthy suggests, the changing demographics of users means that X has become a useful case study for researching online polarisation (2024: 183), but perhaps undermine the platform’s capacity to facilitate the dialogue and discussion more characteristic of a Habermasian public sphere. Important questions need to be asked, therefore, about whether X can still play a role in counter-public activism if the users who typically constituted these publics have moved elsewhere.

While our Twitter analysis took place prior to Musk's purchase, our data nonetheless helps to answer these questions, by offering a unique perspective that situates recent events in relation to long-standing challenges the platform poses for activism.⁴ These problems include ephemerality, re-appropriation of counter-narratives by the far-right, and a decline in hashtags to anchor contestations of Islamophobia. We are not suggesting that these issues entirely undermine the importance of discursive activism to counter racist and Islamophobic narratives online, however, our findings do cast doubt on the capacity of this activism to coalesce as more sustained counter-public movements.

The ephemerality of counter-narratives and the long tail of hate

Although our events and thus datasets were heterogeneous, one trend emerged across our findings: high-profile instances of Islamophobia were met with a large-scale critical response, but this response dissipated rapidly to give way to a long tail of hate. This is not to say that the platform was entirely unable to provide a space for countering hate. Both the most retweeted posts and the largest proportion of tweets across our datasets, for instance, tended to be critical of Islamophobia (see [Chapter 4](#)). Aside from some notable exceptions, however, the tactics of countering that we identified tended to be reactive and short-lived, thus less equipped to combat more sustained manifestations of digital racism. In particular, there was a comparative dearth of alternative narratives that were linked to some form of social movement building.

Our pilot study's analysis of #stopIslam, for instance, initially revealed a robust attempt to counter Islamophobia through appropriating the hashtag's original meaning. However, counter-speech and narratives were relatively short-lived, peaking eight hours after the attacks. Forty-eight hours later, the hashtag had reverted back to its previous levels of usage ([Figure 6.1](#)), at which point any counter-narrative sentiment had given way to Islamophobia.

When we examined uses of #stopIslam in our subsequent datasets, likewise, there was little evidence of attempts to counter its meaning through critique or appropriation. While the hashtag continued to be used at very low levels, uses of and engagements with it were entirely Islamophobic. The hashtag was only used twenty-three times across our COVID-19 datasets, for example, and the most retweeted post was an Italian language tweet, which had been shared eighty-four times, and claimed Sunni Imams were celebrating the deaths of non-Muslims in the US, Israel and China, as well as Shia Muslims in Iran. The retweets accrued by subsequent posts were even lower, with only two additional tweets – one accusing Muslims of spreading

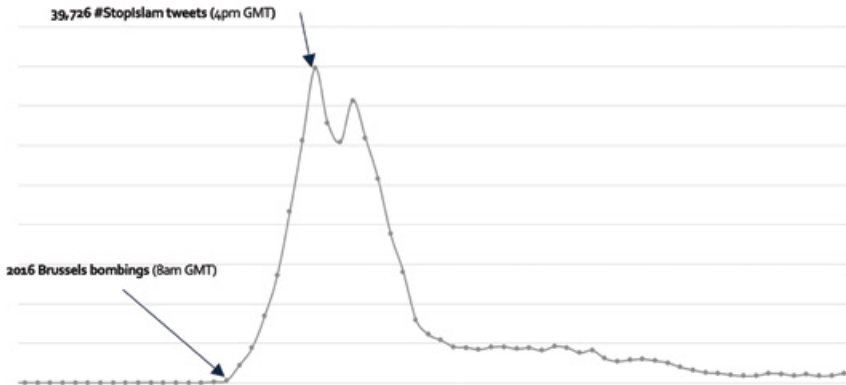


Figure 6.1 Timeline of #stopIslam after the 2016 Brussels bombings

COVID-19 and one referencing white supremacist Great Replacement theories (see below) – receiving retweets in double figures (twelve and eleven shares, respectively). Similarly, our Brexit or Christchurch datasets contained very few uses of the hashtag and – when it did feature – there was no evidence of attempts to contest or re-appropriate it. Here, again, the hashtag was dominated by Islamophobic themes, such as conspiracies about the Notre Dame Cathedral fire and critiques of US congresswoman Ilhan Omar (Brexit dataset), or suggestions Islamic terrorism was more frequent than white supremacist atrocities (Christchurch dataset).

Similar dynamics between initial counter-narrative responses and the long tail of hate were evident in perhaps the most significant instance of attempts to counter Islamophobia in our datasets: response to the Christchurch white supremacist terror attacks. As described in [Chapter 3](#), 3.1 million tweets were posted in the month after the attacks, the largest proportion of which were published in the forty-eight hours after the event ([Figure 6.2](#)).

Our quantitative content analysis suggested that the majority of tweets across the dataset (73 per cent) were supportive towards Muslims – expressing sympathy, condolences and outrage – while only 4.7 per cent were coded negatively.

As with #stopIslam, however, affective responses against Islamophobia were ephemeral, with our second and final Christchurch datasets – taken three and six months after the attacks (between 15–21 June and 15–21 September 2019) – offering little evidence of sustained engagement with the event from progressive users. In the final dataset, it was even challenging to develop a qualitative sample based on the most retweeted posts because

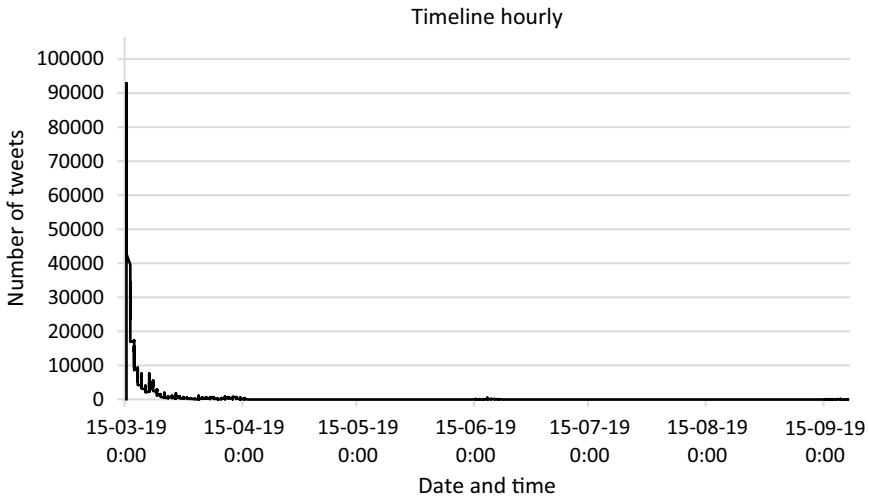


Figure 6.2 Hourly rate of tweets across the Christchurch dataset

only the first eighteen tweets in the dataset had more than ten retweets. This figure dwindled to two retweets once reaching the fifty-third most retweeted post in the dataset and, from the seventy-seventh tweet onwards, posts only received single retweets.

What was also notable was that, while the first Christchurch dataset consisted of by far our largest number of tweets in general, and most tweeted counter-narratives more specifically, the final two datasets contained a far larger proportion of Islamophobic content. The third dataset was dominated by users from the US, who reflected critically on new laws being implemented in New Zealand to restrict access to semi-automatic weapons. Numerous posts linked these legislative responses to conspiracies such as the ‘Great Replacement’ theory, which contends that ‘the indigenous European population is [being] replaced by non-European migrants’ (in [Feshami, 2018](#): 10). These tweets, in other words, replicated the arguments of the Christchurch perpetrator’s own seventy-four-page white supremacist manifesto, itself entitled ‘the Great Replacement’.

What makes the ongoing presence of the ‘Great Replacement’ narrative on a mainstream social media platform so disturbing, therefore, is that it perpetuates a conspiracy with a history of manifesting as real-life violence ([Iftikhar, 2020](#)). Indeed, the Christchurch manifesto was directly inspired by the 2011 actions of the Norwegian neo-Nazi terrorist (who we will again not name) who murdered seventy-seven people with a van bomb in Oslo and mass shooting at a youth camp associated with a progressivist political party. His 1500-page manifesto, which was widely circulated across white supremacist web fora, also alleges a ‘merciless and bloody genocide’ of white

Europeans that needs to be combated through ‘acts of resistance is to “secure the existence” of the white race against all those who are perceived of as threats to it, including people of color, Muslims, Jews, feminists, LGBTQ people, leftists, liberals, and so on’ (Feshami, 2018: 10), as well as so-called ‘Cultural Marxists’ coordinating this ‘genocide’ (Richardson, 2015).

Despite the nature of content in the final Christchurch dataset, in light of both the low-level usage of #stopIslam and lack of engagement with posts about Islamophobic conspiracy narratives, it might be tempting to dismiss the significance of users who post these materials. Though what they post is disturbing, its generally low uptake could also suggest that the activities of these users are fringe, marginal and politically irrelevant. Indeed, the lack of contestation of such narratives could be read as a positive sign: a form of deplatforming that starves these users of publicity, or at least indicates their failure to disseminate white supremacist ideas outside pre-existing networks. However, this conclusion is complicated when situating the long tail of hate in relation to large-scale affective responses to trigger events.

Re-appropriation and reiterative racism

An important feature of the relationship between narratives and counter-narratives is that, although they are entangled with one another, our data suggests that the dynamics of the networks that sustain these narratives differ significantly. Differences between underlying user networks, we suggest, play an important role in enabling (or constraining) the sustainability and visibility of narratives. The characteristics of attempts to contest #stopIslam by appropriating the hashtag for counter-narrative purposes, for instance, cohere with existing academic research on ‘ad hoc’ (Bruns and Burgess, 2015) or ‘affective’ publics, which ‘come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment ... convening across networks that are discursively rendered out of mediated interactions’ (Papacharissi, 2014: 2). These publics might initially have a dramatic impact, gaining visibility across legacy media and shaping wider political debate, but such impacts are often short-lived. Just as affective publics often emerge suddenly, they dissipate equally rapidly due to being held together by shared, affective responses to events, which are materialised through specific media, rather than grounded in pre-existing social ties and movements.

In contrast, users circulating #stopIslam for Islamophobic purposes conform far less to the characteristics of affective publics. Rather than loosely bound, ephemeral and event-specific networks, throughout our datasets accounts that propagated Islamophobia were much more tightly bounded (see Chapter 2, Figure 2.2). Significantly, these networks were anchored by precisely the types of users we identified as continuing to use #stopIslam beyond the immediate aftermath of trigger events: individuals

and organisations who posted Islamophobic content frequently and engaged with others who had far-right usernames, iconography or descriptors in their profiles. While, ordinarily, these users' posts might have little or no uptake, their close-knit relationships with one another and frequency of posting mean they are able to amplify narratives rapidly when conditions are right. Notably, a key tactic these users engage in to increase the visibility of their arguments is the *re-appropriation* of high-profile instances of counter-speech and counter-narratives.

Far-right users' pre-existing relationships with one another mean that they can coordinate rapidly to attack individuals who post widely shared counter-narrative tweets. Our pilot study, for instance, included a post from the account of a self-identified Muslim, who shared a quote from the Quran alongside the suggestion that those circulating #stopIslam should educate themselves. The post had been widely retweeted, thus, on one level, it could be interpreted as indicative of Twitter's capacity to provide space for Muslim self-representation in order to contest Islamophobic narratives. However, the widespread retweeting of the post also created more visibility for the comment thread beneath the post, which was saturated with the sort of reiterative racism we identified in our COVID-19 datasets.

In this instance, the user was swiftly inundated with disinformation, including graphs that ostensibly depicted the rates of terrorism per religion; links to news stories with headlines such as 'Murdered by the Cult of Peace'; and responses incorporating other hashtags such as #fakenews and #norapefugees. The users who engaged in these coordinated attacks not only shared similar iconography on their profile pictures/banners (stars and stripes flags, eagles, biblical references, images of Trump), but commented on one another's tweets with familiarity and often tagged each other into comments in order to encourage further responses (see [Poole et al., 2021](#)). There were also frequent instances of the same users commenting on multiple counter-narrative tweets with statements such as 'Muslims are terrorists: fact'.

These dynamics of the user networks that sustained Islamophobia, in other words, meant that they were able to re-appropriate counter-narrative posts as a platform to circulate Islamophobia. As noted above, reiterative racism was also one of the defining features of our COVID-19 datasets, particularly our first dataset – taken in the early stages of the pandemic – after lockdowns had been imposed in the UK and India in March 2020. While, in [Chapter 3](#), we focused on how this form of racism was manifested in primary tweets, some of the most explicitly Islamophobic content was again located in comment threads.

One of the most retweeted posts in the first COVID dataset, for instance, was by a prominent influencer (996.8k followers) who regularly

shares Hindutva content. The tweet itself claimed that Muslim spiritual leaders were actively encouraging people to attend mosques and avoid social distancing, thus perpetuated the wider Islamophobic narrative that Muslims were responsible for spreading COVID-19. The comment thread, moreover, not only reiterated this narrative but intensified it through circulating still more overt expressions of racism. There was consistent use of derogatory language by different users, with posts describing Muslims as ‘savages’ and ‘human viruses’, or claiming they were committing ‘bio-jihad’ by using mosques as ‘terrorist bunkers’. A large number of users also explicitly advocated violence, stating that Muslims had ‘forfeited their right to live in civilised society’, should be ‘identified and killed’ or ‘shot on site [*sic*]’.

The trope that Muslims were spreading the virus was reiterated by memes that recurred across comment threads. Typical images included a cartoon of an anthropomorphised virus that was emblazoned with the national flag of China, who greeted another anthropomorphised virus wearing a taqiyah, while a tiny figure representing India was being crushed by their handshake. These sorts of stigmatising narratives were commonplace, with similar memes including a cartoon of two men in Islamic dress who were hugging each other in greeting, while one said ‘Eid Mubarak’ and the other stated ‘COVID Mubarak’, and infographics that alleged suicide bombs were being replaced by spitting as a means of harming innocent citizens. Notably, some of the most extreme content paralleled Great Replacement conspiracies, such as a cartoon of men who were labelled ‘population jihad’, ‘love jihad’ and ‘COVID jihad’ and were depicted as pushing forward the boundaries of Pakistan to take over India.

Still more commonplace than memes were photographs that ostensibly depicted a lack of social distancing, such as images that appeared to be of busy mosques and crowds of people praying. The reiteration of these images was such that other – less overtly extreme – Twitter users regularly made comments suggesting that, although they do not want to ‘sound racist’, it is becoming necessary to avoid Muslims because ‘the internet is filled with videos of people still going to mosques’.

There were, conversely, also consistent attempts to contest and challenge Islamophobic narratives that held Muslims responsible for the spread of COVID-19. Fact-checking websites and activists, for example, frequently contested the location of images (pointing out they were often not from India), highlighted that photographs were taken from misleading perspectives (which made it look as though socially distanced people were crowded together) or revealed that images of prayer had been taken pre-COVID-19. As with #stopIslam, however, attempts to contest Islamophobic narratives were often re-appropriated via reiterative racism in comment threads.

A prominent activist, for instance, criticised Islamophobic statements made by a minister from the ruling BJP, who claimed that the replacement of a mosque with a Hindu temple would reduce COVID-19. In response, they received rapid, repetitive replies that included graphic content such as images of excrement alongside the slogan ‘sacrifice children, not animals’ (in reference to cow protectionism discourse; see [Narayanan, 2023](#)).

Narratives that linked Muslims to the spread of COVID-19 were also particularly difficult to contest, due to being perpetuated by legacy media and within mainstream political discourse. One of the most shared tweets in our first COVID-19 dataset, for instance, was a Reuters article that linked an outbreak in Malaysia to a specific mosque. As noted in [Chapter 4](#), in our third COVID-19 dataset similar claims were made by a UK politician from the (then) ruling Conservative Party, during a radio interview in which he stated that a new COVID-19 lockdown was due to ‘BAME’ and ‘Muslim communities’ ‘not taking this seriously enough’ (see also [Giraud *et al.*, 2025](#)).

Counter-narrative posts often tried to foreground the hypocrisy of blaming Muslims for COVID-19 by sharing a contrasting set of images. In response to the UK politician’s radio interview, for instance, locations filled with white-majority crowds (such photographs of busy beaches and pubs, or VE Day anniversary street parties from May 2020) were repeatedly used to contest the pandemic’s racialisation. In addition, sub-threads by locals from rural areas in the UK such as Cornwall included phrases such as ‘gammon tourists’ to criticise white holidaymakers for not wearing masks.⁵ Similar counter-narratives were also shared by Indian users, alleging that thousands of worshippers gathered in temples to celebrate the Hindu festival of Rama Navami, or ‘about [Hindu] 61,000 pilgrims had darshanam’ just before lockdown, in contrast to both Makkah and the Vatican already being ‘closed’. This counter-narrative, however, again had limitations and failed to contest the premise of suggesting racialised minorities were spreading COVID-19, because the only counterpoint it offers is that social distancing wasn’t being adhered to by other people either. In making this argument, moreover, would-be allies often inadvertently reinscribed – rather than contested – racialised Othering. In the UK, for instance, counter-narratives often perpetuated narrow conceptions of who participates in stereotypically ‘British’ activities such as national celebrations and seaside holidays.

There were a small number of tweets that made more purposeful attempts to debunk tropes about social distancing and actively contest disinformation: For instance, a tweet from Miqdaad Versi on 1 August 2020, which challenged a widely shared image of a crowd outside a mosque, by offering an alternative camera angle that illustrated the gathering was socially distanced.⁶ These tweets, however, were the exception. Thus, even while our third COVID-19 dataset was dominated by counter-narrative content,

the tactics used in these posts ultimately failed to disrupt overarching frames that depicted Muslims as failing to socially distance.

The challenges facing counter-narratives were not only due to their content, however, but wider changes to how users were engaging with the platform, notably the decline of hashtags that had historically played such a significant role as gathering points for counter-publics.

The decline of hashtags and (un)sustainability of counter-publics

There were a small number of prominent counter-narrative hashtags in our data. As described in [Chapter 4](#), for instance, #helloworld was a significant hashtag in our Christchurch datasets (appearing 25,476 times), which gained transnational purchase and offered a space for self-representation that was not evident in relation to the other events we examined. Perhaps a still more striking example was #peacefulmosques (used 25,904 times in the same datasets), which troubled long-standing tropes about peaceful versus radical mosques. The hashtag did this, however, not by engaging with this discourse directly but through inviting users to construct an alternative narrative of ‘painfully mundane’ experiences in their own mosques. As we have described previously ([Chapter 4](#)), this request led to the construction of a crowdsourced narrative with users sharing everything from stories of bad parking to inappropriate comments made by children during prayer. This narrative, moreover, received positive engagement from non-Muslim users who drew comparisons with their own experiences of worship (see [Richardson et al., 2024](#)).

Another prominent hashtag we encountered that generated a distinctive narrative of its own was not a counter-narrative but the Islamophobic discussion surrounding #Tablighijamat and #Tablighijamaat. As noted previously, these hashtags were used regularly in our initial COVID-19 datasets and fed into wider discourses about Muslims spreading the virus in India by providing a specific focal point for these accusations. The images and text associated with this narrative straightforwardly perpetuated tropes of Muslims ostensibly ‘hiding’ in mosques and ignoring lockdown rules.

In general, though, while hashtags were still used, they were often treated as semiotic markers – descriptors that signified the general meaning of individual tweets – which were used with other descriptive hashtags and had limited wider uptake. Aside from #helloworld and #peacefulmosques, for instance, the top ten most used hashtags in the Christchurch data were #christchurch, #newzealand, #christchurchmosqueattacks, #newzealandterroristattacks, #newzealandmosqueshooting, #islamophobia, #terrorism and #nzmosqueshooting. The hashtags used across our Brexit and COVID-19 datasets were, again, almost entirely descriptive – referring

to events discussed in the tweets (such as #ge2019 and #bbcleadersdebate or #coronavirus and #india) rather than offering a frame for a shared (counter-)narrative. This usage, therefore, contrasted with more purposeful uses of hashtags to coordinate across tweets, bind users together and create distinctive narratives that framed topics in specific ways. However, while hashtags were not used to anchor counter- or alternative narratives with regularity across our datasets, this is not the same as saying that there was no evidence of any form of narrative that sought to contest Islamophobic content. Though hashtag use had declined, other tactics of countering were still apparent and went beyond condolences or counter-speech, to hint at more complex critiques of Islamophobia.

The first Christchurch dataset, for instance, illustrated how other users were able to use tactics of appropriating highly visible tweets by prominent users – from then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to US politician Hillary Clinton – to critique Islamophobia in ways that went beyond condemning initial attacks (see [Richardson et al., 2024](#)). These responses often manifested as accusations of hypocrisy, wherein users foregrounded politicians' prior participation in Islamophobic narratives (in the case of Johnson) and the promotion of foreign policy that caused long-term harm in Iraq and Afghanistan (Clinton). On one level, these accusations could be read as personal attacks on high-profile figures whose sentiments might be sincerely felt. However, these criticisms also helped to draw an important distinction between personally held beliefs (which politicians might have held individually) versus actions that perpetuate institutional Islamophobia in the context of political culture and policy.

Likewise, there were attempts to reframe media discourse about Islam in ways that echo previous research about the capacity of Twitter to critique existing media representation of issues (e.g. [Rambukkana, 2015b](#)). Jackson and Foucault Welles' work on #Ferguson, for instance, illustrates how users contested the language used by broadcasters to describe protests (such as mob) to replace it with terms that better reflected protesters' commitment to social justice (community) ([2016](#): 407). Likewise, a key theme of the Christchurch sample were criticisms of terms such as 'shooter' to recast it instead as a white supremacist *terrorist* attack.

More broadly, the persistence of attempts to counter hate elucidates the complexity of the picture offered by our data. On one hand, our comparative, longitudinal approach shows the challenge of sustaining counter-narratives over time; within individual datasets, attempts to contest hate rapidly gathered force, but dissipated equally rapidly. Taken individually, therefore, the datasets suggest a pattern wherein counter-narratives were ephemeral, particularly in comparison with the long tail of hate evidenced by more organised far-right groups. On the other hand, looking across our datasets

shows that – even as event-specific counter-narratives dissipated rapidly – counter-narratives were consistently present in relation to every event (and sub-event) in our samples. Echoing [Rambukkana \(2015b\)](#), therefore, there was a persistent political voice that worked to destabilise the status quo. Our longitudinal approach, in other words, illustrated that whenever digital racism and hate arose, attempts were made to contest it. A glimmer of hope can thus be found, perhaps, in the existence of counter-narratives across all of our datasets. Our COVID-19 datasets, in particular, suggest potential for more sustainable counter-narratives to emerge. Despite the problem of reiterative racism and the appropriation of attempts to contest hate, counter-narratives were nonetheless more consistent across this dataset than in relation to our other case studies. This dataset, in other words, suggests that – when conditions are right – more sustainable counter-narratives can emerge (for elaboration see [Poole et al., 2023](#)).

It is important, however, not to be overly optimistic about the potentials of these attempts to contest hate. While they appeared to inform frames in legacy media and often dominated Twitter in terms of volume, the way these frames were manifested – and even attempts at allyship themselves – were often broad, post-racial attempts to condemn hate in general, rather than grappling with the specificities of Islamophobia. Likewise, high-profile critiques of racialised Islamophobia by celebrities, politicians and other figures often appeared to be part of a political *performance* as opposed to a *performative* discourse that coalesced as something that made a material difference to political institutions. Nevertheless, as we argue elsewhere ([Poole et al., 2023](#)), the affective and networked dynamics of social media ([Papacharissi, 2014](#)), in combination with discursive content and practices, provide a context in which solidarities can be produced through complex socio-technical assemblages ([de Blasio and Selva, 2019](#)). These factors created a digital environment that, in many cases, produced more pro-than anti-Muslim narratives even on topics commonly associated with xenophobic nationalism, such as Brexit.

Despite these more optimistic potentials, and although key users who consistently sought to contest Islamophobia and counter-narratives routinely appeared across our datasets, there also appeared to be a lack of enduring coordinates for counter-publics that could enable them to move beyond short-lived pockets of contestation in relation to specific incidents. Musk's purchase of the platform is likely to have compounded these issues, in light of the ensuing 'great migration' of leftist and liberal users. In contrast, far-right engagements with Twitter – whose networks were already more enduring and tightly knit – have been given a boost with the platform's weakening of moderation policies in the name of free speech.

Changing moderation practices

Perhaps the most high-profile shift in the wake of Musk's purchase of Twitter has been the rebranding of the platform to emphasise a particular model of freedom of speech, which rolled back some of the changes to moderation practices the platform had implemented to mitigate hate speech and disinformation.

On 12 January 2021, Twitter issued a statement in the wake of the US Capitol attacks, judging statements made by then President Donald Trump had violated its 'Glorification of Violence' policy and suspending him from the platform along with 70,000 Twitter accounts associated with conspiracy group Q-Anon ([Twitter Safety, 2021](#); [Twitter Inc., 2021](#)). At the same time, Twitter revised its content moderation policy against 'coordinated harmful activities' in order to combat, firstly, 'technical manipulation' of the platform to amplify particular messages (such as multiple accounts run by single users) and, secondly, 'social manipulation' such as 'an individual using Twitter to incite their followers to say or do a specific thing, such as reply to another person with abusive messaging' ([Twitter, 2021](#)).

The coordinated harmful activities policy defined harm in three ways ('physical', 'psychological' and 'informational') and according to three levels of severity ('low', 'moderate', 'high'), identifying harmful behaviour through both human and automated review ([Twitter, 2021](#)). These different forms of harm were present in many of the Islamophobic tactics we observed, particularly in relation to #stopIslam or COVID-19. As detailed above, these datasets included threats of physical violence, coordinated attacks – where those propagating Islamophobia deliberately tagged influencers with high follower accounts to encourage them to bombard users posting counter-narratives – and disinformation. Despite the ongoing presence of these materials, our findings do suggest that the Coordinated Harmful Activities policy had some success in removing a significant volume of Islamophobic content from Twitter.

When conducting qualitative analysis of our third Christchurch dataset, for instance, we regularly followed links from our Excel spreadsheets to view tweets in their original context to find that the most explicitly Islamophobic tweets had been deleted. Originally, the second most retweeted post in the dataset was posted by an individual whose username referenced the US war of independence and who criticised the decision to confiscate the guns of '5 million people' due to 'one nutjob'. Although the tweet only received 159 retweets and twenty-four comments, what was notable was that not only had the original tweet been removed but the majority of replies – which surrounding comments indicated agreed with the original post – were from suspended accounts. Other tweets in the dataset had quote-tweeted the

deleted post, adding additional Islamophobic commentary that suggested gun control was part of a wider conspiracy wherein Muslims were ‘taking over’. In other words, even though reference to Great Replacement theories were still present in our datasets (as became apparent when looking at #stopIslam), a large number of tweets or accounts that were connected with this conspiracy had been moderated.

The Coordinated Harmful Activities policy was given a separate webpage and updated specifically in the wake of the Capitol attacks ([Twitter Safety, 2021](#)). However, this dedicated policy webpage now appears to have been removed. Coordinated harmful activities are still labelled a breach of the platform’s terms and conditions on X’s ‘rules and policy’ webpage, but, in this context, harmful activities are grouped with other forms of platform manipulation, for example, for commercial purposes, spam or to boost user popularity (X, n.d.b). In other words, hate speech is treated on a par with other deliberate attempts to ‘amplify or suppress information’; what matters is less the content of what gets said, but more whether this content is ‘artificial’ and disrupts the natural flow of conversation (X, n.d.b). Thus, as Dhiraj [Murthy \(2024\)](#) outlines in his overview of Twitter/X research for the *Annual Review of Sociology*, since becoming X the platform has focused on ‘promotion of a libertarian free-speech ethos’ (172), wherein measures to restrict hate speech have been rolled back. Perhaps the most notable outcome of these changes has been the reinstatement of ‘previously banned users’ ([Murthy, 2024: 172](#)), including far-right accounts who were ‘purged’ after the 2021 Capitol insurgency, not least that of President Donald Trump. In practice, if not in intent, therefore, these changes thus enable racist, anti-migration and Islamophobic discourse to be treated as legitimate topics of debate on the platform.

Yet, while Twitter appears to have undergone rapid changes, it is important to recognise that the issues facing attempts to counter racialised Islamophobia are not reducible to the platform becoming X or are an issue that could be resolved through improved moderation. Indeed, we contend that there are significant continuities between existing literature, our own data about Twitter and more recent uses of X during events such as the UK riots.

Firstly, the platform’s ongoing role as a journalistic news source have long led to it being tactically used by the far-right for the purposes of media manipulation, with evidence of coordinated attempts to leverage news events in order to naturalise xenophobia ([Marwick and Lewis, 2017](#)). Indeed, as [Siapera’s \(2019\)](#) work underlines, the 2024 UK riots are not the first instance where X (then Twitter) has been used to spread rumours about who was responsible for a violent attack and disseminate disinformation from far-right platforms to wider audiences.

Secondly, hashtags used in the riots, such as #riotsnotprotests, hint at longer histories of social justice movements using Twitter to sustain counter-publics, particularly those associated with feminist, racial justice and queer activism (Jackson *et al.*, 2020). These movements have been adept at manipulating Twitter algorithms to increase the visibility of counter-narratives (Rambukkana, 2015b; Treré, 2020). In addition, the platform has routinely been used to trouble long-standing Islamophobic discourses within legacy media, as when users' critiques of #stopIslam were reported by prominent press and broadcast outlets (Poole *et al.*, 2019). Thus, even though throughout this chapter we have complicated more optimistic narratives about Twitter's capacity to support progressivist counter-publics, its use during the riots suggests that perhaps not all hope has been extinguished and further research needs to be conducted into Twitter's ongoing legacies (though these hopes have only dwindled further between writing and editing this book).

Thirdly, threats by politicians and progressivists to quit Twitter and demands for greater regulation of social media are not novel. Our interviewees in the [previous chapter](#), for instance, often retained a sense of hope about the platform's value for contesting hate, but this sentiment was frequently tempered with concern about Twitter's demise in the wake of rising levels of hostility and questioned whether they would be able to remain. It should also be underlined that moderation has always been a complex issue for social media companies, who have often struggled to respond to societal and regulatory pressures to reduce disinformation and hate speech. Platforms' economic models are contingent on maintaining a flow of content, thus heavy-handed moderation could restrict income streams; in addition, an overly interventional moderation approach could legally redefine platforms as publishers and make them liable for defamatory or inflammatory user content (Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021).

A further long-standing challenge facing platform regulation is that the corporations who own and manage platforms are often based in particular national contexts (such as the US) that have rules about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable speech, which differ from other national contexts. Perhaps most famously, Safiya Noble (2018: 44) has shown how this has led to differences between the EU and US in how platforms such as Google have negotiated issues such as antisemitism. In our data, we uncovered similar unevenness in terms of how Twitter dealt with Islamophobic content between national contexts. While – as we have just outlined – conspiratorial content, hate speech and disinformation had been removed from some of the Christchurch datasets, with the banning of a subset of US users, extreme materials that clearly contravened the Coordinated Harmful Activities policy persisted in materials from India.

Investigative journalists and academics have begun to explore reasons for these regional differences in moderation and their consequences. For instance, NGO investigations into Facebook's role in the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar contend that the platform was directly culpable for violence due to a series of failings ([Amnesty International, 2022](#)). Notably, Meta did not employ sufficient numbers of Burmese-speaking moderators who could understand posts that were advocating – and coordinating – acts of extreme violence ([Solon, 2018](#)). In addition, 'in their attempt to stay "objective" and "neutral" with regard to the political movements erupting across the country, Facebook allowed government aligned content dedicated to fanning ethnic strife to thrive while suppressing content showcasing minority concerns' ([Sablosky, 2021](#): 1021).

In a context directly relevant to our own research, Ghasiya and colleagues ([2023](#): 11) have illustrated similar disparities between how posts are moderated across cultural and linguistic differences. In particular, they found that Hindu language tweets had higher levels of toxicity than English language tweets while also suggesting that further research needs to be undertaken to understand the reason for this discrepancy. Again, the issue could be owing to moderation policies that are targeted at US audiences, a lack of expertise amongst moderation teams employed by platforms or algorithmic content moderation being trained on English language tweets. However, there have also been reports of political pressures placed on moderators in India; former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, for instance, alleged that in 2020 Twitter's offices were raided by government officials, though this claim was denied by officials ([Mateen, 2023](#)).

Beyond the challenge of implementing effective moderation, moreover, hard questions need to be asked about whether moderation practices enacted by commercial social media platforms can ever meaningfully contest hate. Or, conversely, whether these practices are so mired in neoliberal models of governmentality that they are fundamentally irreconcilable to more expansive goals of social justice ([Viejo Otero, 2024](#)).

To reiterate, therefore, there are continuities and changes between earlier research on Twitter; our own data; contemporary uses of X in relation to the UK riots; and recent research about how moderation practices relate to rising polarisation on the platform. In particular, what both our own and recent, allied, scholarship underlines, is that more research needs to be done about X to deepen understanding of its changing dynamics and the socio-political significance of these dynamics. It is precisely the task of conducting further research, however, that has been rendered difficult by changes to Twitter's terms and conditions, which perhaps mark the most decisive change in the platform's orientation to knowledge production after becoming X.

Death of a platform for research?

Twitter was formally launched in July 2006 and – as outlined throughout this book – the platform has never been a stable entity, with some of its most prominent affordances arising through user engagement and intervention. [Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym's \(2020\)](#) biography of Twitter, for instance, uses the platform to underline the value of understanding social media in historical terms, orienting the book around the emergence of three – now ubiquitous – features: the @ (first used in 2006), the hashtag (first proposed in 2007, incorporated formally into the platform in 2009 when lists of trending hashtags were embedded) and the retweet (gaining prominence over alternative signifiers in 2009, formally added to the platform via the retweet button in 2009). Other features could, of course, be added to this list, such as the addition of timestamps or capacity to send direct messages to friends and delete posts (2006); the ability to add photos to a tweet (2011);⁷ the ability to easily quote-tweet (2015); or the possibility of threading tweets together without the laborious process of numbering them manually (2017) (see [van Dijck, 2013](#); [Weller et al., 2014](#); [Mohr, 2017](#)).⁸

What is notable about the features that characterise Twitter's affordances – and give the platform its meaning – is that they were pioneered by users, often coalescing due to crowdsourced wisdom, before being stabilised and incorporated formally into the platform. As Burgess and Baym point out, for instance, the use of @ as instigator of user interaction was 'key to Twitter's role as a medium for conversation, and ... essential for creating, maintaining, and enlivening connections among users' (2020: 39). The retweet, likewise, emerged through a process of mutual learning in which users developed – and debated – the best ways to attribute credit for ideas. Perhaps most famously, the hashtag's origins as a tool for facilitating 'news, information, and professional promotion' alongside its 'conversational and sociable' roots allowed it to 'help people navigate real-time events such as disasters, protests, and conferences and to expand and solidify social connections and community' ([Burgess and Baym, 2020](#): 67).

Twitter's socio-technical features led to the platform being understood as an important site to explore digital culture and the relationship between social media and society. In part, the platform became so prominent in this regard due to its comparative accessibility. Since the year of its origin Twitter allowed access to its data through free APIs, enabling researchers to collect vast amounts of real-time data (something that was not possible/as simple on more closed social media sites such as Facebook). As we elucidated in [Chapter 2](#), accessing data was still not straightforward but the Twitter APIs offered established routes for doing so and research that engaged

with Twitter proliferated. Indeed, as of June 2024, over 36,000 academic publications contained the phrase ‘Twitter API’ on Google Scholar.

Its (comparative) accessibility and affordances led to early digital research – across a range of disciplines – treating Twitter as a naturally occurring source of sociological data (Tinati *et al.*, 2014), or form of ‘nowcasting’ that could be used to shed light on the dynamics of society and the public mood (Lansdall-Welfare *et al.*, 2012; Mejova *et al.*, 2015). In computer science, for instance, researchers examined whether Twitter discussions could be predictors or monitors of social issues including flu and hayfever outbreaks (de Quincey and Kostkova, 2010; de Quincey *et al.*, 2016), earthquake damage (Mendoza *et al.*, 2019), election outcomes (Ceron *et al.*, 2016), commodity prices (Kim *et al.*, 2017), sales performance (Bughin, 2015) and the likelihood of snow in the UK (UKSnow, n.d.). Echoing the premise of our own research, moreover, Twitter was understood both as a source of racism, hate speech and toxicity, and a means of combating it. In providing a repository of – relatively accessible – data that approximated ‘naturally occurring’ online speech acts, the platform could be utilised for training or testing tools to measure linguistic toxicity or detecting harmful content (Ayo *et al.*, 2020; Lighthart *et al.*, 2021).

Likewise, research in media studies and sociology – some of which has been pivotal to our arguments in this book – has engaged with Twitter to trace how far-right and conservative movements, alongside the banal racism and xenophobia propagated by different right-wing actors, are often more successful at gaining visibility on commercial media platforms (Schradie, 2019; Ozduzen *et al.*, 2021). As we foregrounded in the introduction to this book, however, Twitter has also been central to social movement media studies due to its role in supporting the emergence of ‘networked counterpublics’ (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016) who are able to contest oppression by moving ‘debates about identity politics, inequality, violence, and citizenship from the margins to the center’ (Jackson *et al.*, 2020: xxxii; see also Rambukkana, 2015a; Kuo, 2018). As such, the platform’s role in relation to prominent counter-public movements has been studied extensively: from Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015; Treré, 2018), to #MeToo (Mendes *et al.*, 2019) and #BlackLivesMatter (Ince *et al.*, 2017; Nartey, 2022). Examinations of Twitter’s specific role in protest is quite aside from wider sociological explorations of the platform’s role in mediating everyday communication.

As well as supporting social scientists in gathering data, and computer scientists in building models or creating new analysis techniques, Twitter’s affordances also enabled cross-disciplinary research, as Twitter sat in the intersection of a multitude of different areas: from politics and health, to

sport studies and economics, due to the range of users and topics they posted about. In addition, the platform played a significant role in research communication, enabling academics to promote their work to one another and to wider publics (Guenther *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, in contexts such as science communication, researchers have relied on Twitter to such an extent that its migration of users triggered a series of think-pieces and reflections about how to move forwards now the platform is in ‘turmoil’ (for example, Stokel-Walker, 2022). These questions, however, are not limited to science communication; as underlined by Murthy (2024), the shift from Twitter to X has had significant implications for academic work that relied on the platform more broadly.

After Musk’s purchase, the cost of acquiring data through X increased significantly and accessing data for free (for example, via APIs) became a breach of the platform’s terms and conditions. As a result, at the time of writing, the type of research that underpins this book can no longer be undertaken or is now prohibitively expensive for many academics. These changes were gathering force even prior to the platform’s rebranding, with costs and logistics shifting even during the course of our own research in this area. In 2017, for instance, we paid Twitter US\$1,250 for ~500,000 tweets. By 2019, costs had risen and to access the majority of tweets used in this project we paid Twitter ~GBP£15,000 for ~4 million tweets. Things had changed slightly by 2021 when, as part of the Academic Research product track, we were given free access to ten million tweets/month. It should also be underlined that, even when we paid to access ‘full’ datasets, it was still possible to access data for free via the APIs and that this was the route taken by large numbers of academic research projects.

In 2023, however, the Academic Research Track was stopped, and access to the Twitter API was reportedly US\$42,000 a month or more for an enterprise account (Calma, 2023). In 2024, the platform now charges US\$5000 for one million tweets/month. Although there is still an option for ‘qualified researchers’ to apply for free data access under Article 40 of the Digital Services Act (the main legislation in the EU to protect against illegal materials and disinformation), X notes that ‘this application is only for a narrow subset of EU research related to the DSA’ and states: ‘[f]or general academic research, please enrol in one of our X API access tiers’, that is, the paid subscription (X Developer Platform, n.d.b). In sum, therefore, to recreate the work for this project, at this time of writing it would take four months to collect the data and cost US\$20,000, whereas accessing a large proportion of this data would have been free just a year previously. The implications of these developments are that if you are a student or under-funded researcher, you can no longer do the kind of work that underpins this book and there is no comparable data source available (University of Washington, 2023).

The restrictions to academic research imposed by X resulted in the European Commission writing to the platform in July 2024, with preliminary findings that the platform has breached the Digital Services Act. As well as stating that the platform deceives users (by allowing anyone to pay for ‘verified’ status and give the impression of authority) and is insufficiently transparent with regards to advertising, the Commission made two specific criticisms about X’s relationship with academia. Firstly, the Commission was critical of X restricting ‘eligible researchers from independently accessing its public data, such as by scraping, as stated in its terms of service’. Secondly, it was critical of ‘X’s process to grant eligible researchers access to its application programming interface (API)’ on the basis that it ‘appears to dissuade researchers from carrying out their research projects or leave them with no other choice than to pay disproportionately high fees’ (European Commission, 2024). As evoked by these findings, X’s new terms and conditions mean that a platform that was once a go-to data source for academic research is now severely limited. Such developments are significant for academic freedom in general terms, but have particular ramifications for research into racism and hate speech in light of social media platforms’ ongoing imbrication in these issues.

As with other changes arising under X, however, it is important not to construct an overly idealistic before/after picture. Indeed, the kernel of Twitter’s marketisation were present even in the early, user-centred, years of the platform. As Burgess and Baym argue:

Features that enable popular participation also enable large-scale exploitation. What began as a me-centered culture of sociality, in which people announced what they were doing primarily to people they knew, largely lost out to the culture of global news and professionalism. The still-emerging idea of a public space that had once been represented by a global feed showing all tweets posted to the service became something more personalized, measured, and targeted, and simultaneously more organized around media industry advertising logics than interpersonal communication. (Burgess and Baym, 2020: 111)

It is also important not to construct an overly nostalgic picture of Twitter’s use in academic contexts. The platform’s utility for science communication might have been embraced by some, but others pointed out that – in practice – Twitter often fostered top-down communication that foreclosed rather than encouraged public dialogue (see [Pearce et al., 2015](#)). In relation to the subject-matter of this book, moreover, there have been extensive debates about whether large social media datasets can (or should) be used to identify – let alone address – address complex social problems, such as racism and xenophobia ([Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021](#)). This

scholarship has foregrounded the risk of tracing patterns at a macro-scale at the expense of careful contextualisation: particularly when using automated tools that are essential for managing large datasets (Nikunen, 2021), and are increasingly promoted as a means of detecting and removing hate speech (Thylstrup and Talat, 2020).

While these criticisms of Twitter's relationship to academic research are vitally important, it is also important not to discount the value of scholarship about the platform, which has now been rendered almost impossible through 'legitimate' routes. Although some of the changes arising with Twitter's transition to X in the context of counter-narratives have been incremental and foreshadowed by earlier developments (some of which were evident in our own data), restrictions on the platform's APIs have been decisive and dramatic. In part, restrictions to academic research are worrying because, in empirical terms, deeper understanding is needed of X's ongoing relationship with political extremism, particularly in certain national contexts, and the rising polarisation of the platform, as our own data and allied scholarship has underlined (Ghasiya *et al.*, 2023). As Murthy (2024) argues, in such contexts it is especially important to find ways of developing mixed methods research that can combine larger-scale data analytics with sensitive, context-specific qualitative approaches that can contextualise this data.

Conclusion

As events such as the UK riots and US Capitol attacks underscore, it is important to recognise that the role of social media platforms is constantly shifting and ask what happens when platforms become what Jodi Dean (2010) terms 'displaced mediators' or phenomena that precipitate socio-political transformation, but are ultimately displaced by the forces of that transformation. What does it mean, for instance, when a platform such as Twitter is treated by journalists and members of the political establishment as though it is somehow reflective of a public sphere but, in practice, this role has been displaced by other platforms, compromised by technical changes, or complicated by shifting user demographics and practices? What are the socio-political implications of these displacements, and what do they mean for how platforms should be understood and researched in academic contexts?

In this chapter we have sought to approach questions about Twitter/X's ongoing socio-political role, by identifying lessons that can be learned from our own datasets and experiences. These reflections have enabled us not just to reflect back on our most significant findings, but have provided

a platform to make sense of the implications of Twitter's transformation into X for both activism and academia. In reflecting on the implications of Twitter's transformation, we are not suggesting that the platform wholly determines the shape of political action or academic research. After all, these changes are themselves imbricated in user activities – such as the migration of specific demographics to and from the platform – and the product of wider political contexts: from the enrolment of freedom of speech discourses into culture wars debates, to changes to platform terms and conditions. At the same time, we are also not claiming the socio-technical changes that occurred when Twitter became X are irrelevant, more that such changes are co-constitutive of political potentials rather than wholly determining them.

At a juncture when the type of research that underpins this book is increasingly difficult, it is important to reflect on the legacies Twitter has had, both technical and conceptual. Just as, in the context of activism, tactics and features originating on Twitter have spread to other platforms – from connective action as feminist hashtags are used on Weibo ([Zeng, 2020](#)) to ad hoc publics coalescing around anti-racist hashtags on TikTok ([Lee and Lee, 2023](#)) – Twitter research has significant academic legacies. To reflect on lessons learned from our own research, for instance, techniques for analysing data, or lessons for developing interdisciplinary projects in which different expertise is brought together in mutually supportive ways, can inform future research about other social media platforms or ecologies. Likewise, theoretical frameworks we have advanced or patterns we have identified – from reiterative racism to the long tail of hate – can be applied to other contexts to further understanding of the messy, co-constitutive relationships between platforms, users and issues. Even if recent events truly do mark the death of a platform, therefore, Twitter's legacies might persist in uneven, ambivalent – but sometimes also hopeful – ways.

Notes

- 1 This exchange was quoted widely in print and broadcast media, see for instance [Cecil \(2024\)](#).
- 2 'Tommy Robinson' is a pseudonym, which was originally used to hide Robinson's real identity – or Stephen Yaxley-Lennon – before this was uncovered by anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*.
- 3 See [Burnell \(2025\)](#).
- 4 While our data was gathered/analysed prior to Musk's purchase of Twitter, the interviews were undertaken during a period of time immediately before and after this event.
- 5 Gammon is a derogatory term used to describe older white men in the UK.

- 6 Versi is Director of Media Monitoring for the Muslim Council of Great Britain and, at the time of data collection, had a verified account as a public figure.
- 7 See [AFP \(2011\)](#).
- 8 For a useful timeline of key events in Twitter's development, see [Lee \(2013\)](#).

Appendix 1: Coding schedule (Brexit)

Case No:

Date

Time

Times retweeted

Suspended account?

01 Yes

02 No

Deleted/unavailable tweet?

01 Yes

02 No

Tweet type

01 Original tweet

02 Retweet

03 Quote-tweet

04 Reply

[If quote-tweet] **Response to original tweet**

01 Agreement/endorsement

02 Disagreement

03 Mixed/qualification

04 Other

Gender

01 Male

02 Female

03 Other

04 Unidentified

Religion

01 Christian

02 Muslim

03 Hindu

04 Sikh

05 Buddhist

- 06 Jewish
- 07 Other
- 08 Atheist
- 99 Unidentified

Position on Muslims/Islam

- 01 Anti-Muslim
- 02 Supports Muslims
- 03 Mixed
- 04 Neutral/no view

Position on Brexit

- 01 Anti-Brexit
- 02 Pro-Brexit
- 03 Mixed
- 04 Neutral/no view

Affiliation

- 01 Individual
- 02 State institution/politician/party
- 03 Leftist or social justice advocacy groups
- 04 Alt/far-right group
- 05 Mainstream media organisation/journalist
- 06 Blogger/alternative media organisation/journalist
- 07 Independent political analyst/commentator/author
- 08 NGO
- 09 Celebrity
- 10 Parody account
- 11 Academic
- 12 Mixed
- 13 Pressure group
- 14 Charity
- 15 Artist/musician
- 16 Religious representative
- 98 Other
- 99 Unidentified

Location

- 01 UK
- 02 US/North America
- 03 Europe
- 04 South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh)
- 05 Other Asian countries
- 06 MENA region
- 07 Other African countries
- 08 Australasia/Oceania
- 09 South/Central America

- 10 Russia
- 11 Mixed (two or more locations are mentioned)
- 12 Other
- 99 None mentioned

Primary topic

Secondary topic

[Note: As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), these topic values were specific to each trigger event, and were tailored to their specific dimensions.]

- 01 Anti-Muslim, general ('Muslims are [negative trait]')
- 02 Anti-Muslim, specific (extremism, evil, radicalisation, anti-Quran, anti-Islamic scripture, and so on)
- 03 Terrorism
- 04 Islamification/spread of Islam (cultural clash, censorship, Islam taking over the world, conversion, attacks on 'our' culture, country, sharia law, references to the movement of refugees, Muslim problem, cultural deviance)
- 05 Scapegoating Muslims for Brexit
- 06 Islamophobia is denied/exaggerated
- 11 Pro-Muslim, general ('Muslims are [positive trait]')
- 12 Pro-Muslim, specific (contribution to society, acts of kindness, religion of peace, scientific endeavours, etc.)
- 13 Muslims are victims/discrimination/racism/Islamophobia
- 14 Brexit and anti-Muslim politics (e.g. blame politicians, globalisation, economics, social structures, etc.)
- 15 Racism in British politics
- 16 Racism in US politics
- 21 Politics, general
- 22 Pro-Conservative/right agendas
- 23 Anti-Conservative/right agendas
- 24 Pro-Labour/left agendas
- 25 Anti-Labour/left agendas/anti-'woke'
- 26 Pro-far-right agenda
- 27 Anti-far-right agenda
- 28 Pro-white-supremacy
- 29 Anti-white-supremacy
- 30 Immigration
- 31 Community relations/cohesion
- 32 Relating Brexit to Indian politics
- 33 Relating Brexit to US politics
- 34 Pro-LibDem
- 35 Anti-LibDem

- 41 Left-wing criticism of mainstream media
- 42 Right-wing criticism of mainstream media
- 43 Tweet disseminates/premised on conspiracy theory
- 44 Tweet identifies/alleges conspiracy theory
- 45 Accusation of antisemitism
- 46 Antisemitism in content
- 99 Other
- Hashtags – only coding content of tweet
- Hashtag 1
- Hashtag 2
- Hashtag 3

[These hashtags were specific to each trigger event, with lists generated using the ‘big data’ sets.]

- 1 antisemitism
- 2 bagdad
- 3 bbc
- 4 bbcdebate
- 5 bbcleadersdebate
- 6 borisjohnson
- 7 brexit
- 8 brexitday
- 9 brexitparty
- 10 britain
- 11 corbyn
- 12 crimes
- 13 danger
- 14 dehors
- 15 eu
- 16 ge2019
- 17 generalelection2019
- 18 happybrexitday
- 19 hidalgo
- 20 islam
- 21 islamogauchos
- 22 islamophobia
- 23 jeremycorbyn
- 24 jeremyvine
- 25 johnson
- 26 leadersdebate
- 27 lies
- 28 london
- 29 londonbridgeattack
- 30 macron
- 31 mexico

32 muslim
33 muslims
34 nevercorbyn
35 nexit
36 nhs
37 notmygovernment
38 paris
39 politicslive
40 pologne
41 racism
42 sadiqkhan
43 salopard
44 scrapthelicencefee
45 tories
46 trump
47 uk
48 ukelection
49 votefaiza
50 votelabour
51 Other
52 None

URL? [in original content]

01 Yes
02 No

Image(s)? [in original content]

01 Yes
02 No

Icons/emojis? [in original content]

01 Yes
02 No

URL? [in quoted content]

01 Yes
02 No
03 N/A
04 Unknown

Image(s)? [in quoted content]

01 Yes
02 No
03 N/A
04 Unknown

- Icons/Emojis?** [in quoted content]
01 Yes
02 No
03 N/A
04 Unknown

Appendix 2: Interview questions/discussion points

Introduction to project and team – we are interested in the participants' usage, aims and objectives more generally but specifically in relation to combating Islamophobia – and their opinions on Twitter as a platform where counter-narratives and solidarities can form.

Section 1: use of social media

How much do you access Twitter? Do you use other platforms? What is the main reason for using Twitter? Do you manage/monitor it yourself?

When/where do you use it? What tools do you use? Do you automate it? Do you have multiple accounts? Secret accounts?

Section 2: engagement

Are there particular people you follow and why? Do you follow/engage with people you disagree with?

What do you mainly use it for (aims/objectives – are they clear)? Do you ever reply to responses to your posts or tags? Do you tag people – in what cases? Do you follow any particular hashtags? Do you use lists?

What is the motivation/drive to post in general and in particular cases, for example, if you posted condolences, who are they for, who do you consider your main audience to be? Recent examples?

What do you hope to gain from engagement? Do you think about the consequences?

Section 3: strategies/tactics

Do you think you are strategic in your use of Twitter or is it more intuitive? (Do they follow specific rules or decide things on a case-by-case basis)?

Do you use tagging/#/RT/QT/or blocking as a strategy? Can they provide an example – when would you QT rather than replying?

What resources do you use as evidence/to circulate? (Maybe linked to specific case). (For us to reflect on – do these actions seem to be collective or individual?)

Do they use techniques or content to bolster visibility?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Twitter for you, for activism?

Do you think that meaningful activism can take place on Twitter? Does your activity create meaningful solidarities/connections? Are they a useful place for counter-narratives? Or are you more likely to start your own narrative rather than react to someone else's? Examples.

What are the nature of your connections – transnational/mixed politics, etc. (Maybe show a network visualisation of a case they were involved in to show patterns).

Have you experienced Islamophobia/hate speech yourself online – how have you dealt with this? Have any of your posts been appropriated in ways you weren't expecting? How do you respond to disinformation?

Do you know how Twitter deals with hate speech?

Do you think Twitter does enough to deal with hate speech?

Would you have any recommendations in developing a guide for best practice?

Journalists – did you write about this on other platforms? Related stories

Section 4: individual cases (to be adapted depending on story/case)

Introduce specific examples to individuals (tweets they produced) – what do they remember about it – would they deal with it differently in hindsight? Discuss our findings that most of the reaction was political rather than engaging with Islamophobia – response to that? Do they read, engage with replies? Did it develop in ways they weren't expecting?

What was the main objective for responding to this? Did you think strategically about your use of Twitter and its capabilities?

Was it mainly to say something about Brexit or Islamophobia or both? Have you engaged in Twitter to take part in debates about Brexit/Islamophobia in other ways? Is it a useful place to campaign on these issues? What were the outcomes? How long did you engage with this story?

Did you participate in any other stories on this matter – debates about video sharing/gun laws after the Christchurch attack for example?

References

- AFP (2011) Twitter launching photo-sharing service. *Phys Org*, 1 June. Available: <https://phys.org/news/2011-06-twitter-photo-sharing.html>
- Ahmed, S. (2004) *The cultural politics of emotions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ahmed, A. (2025) Elon Musk calls for dissolution of parliament at far-right rally in London. *The Guardian*, 13 September. Available: www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/sep/13/elon-musk-calls-for-dissolution-of-parliament-at-far-right-rally-in-london
- Alfonzo, P. (2021) A topology of Twitter tactics: Tracing the rhetorical dimensions and digital labor of networked publics. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211025514>
- Alfonzo, P. and Foust, C. (2019) Campus activism in the digital age: An ecological chronology of# Concernedstudent1950. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 9(3/4): 87–111.
- All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018) *Report on the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred*. London: HM Government
- Amarasingam, A., Umar, S. and Desai, S. (2022) ‘Fight, die, and if required kill’: Hindu Nationalism, misinformation, and Islamophobia in India. *Religions*, 13(5): 380. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050380>
- Amnesty International (2022) Myanmar: Facebook’s systems promoted violence against Rohingya; Meta owes reparations – new report. 29 September. Available: www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebook-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/
- Anderson, E. (2023) *Hindu Nationalism in the Indian diaspora: Transnational politics and British multiculturalism*. London: Hurst.
- Antonakis-Nashif, A. (2015) Hashtagging the invisible: Bringing private experiences into public debate: An #outcry against sexism in Germany. In N. Rambukkana (ed.) *#HashtagPublics: The power and politics of discursive networks*. New York: Peter Lang, 101–114.
- Aschwanden, C. (2020) How ‘superspreading’ events drive most COVID-19 spread. *Scientific American*, 23 June. Available: www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-superspreading-events-drive-most-covid-19-spread1/
- Asen, R. (2000) Seeking the ‘counter’ in counterpublics. *Communication Theory*, 10(4): 424–446.
- Askanius, T. (2021) On frogs, monkeys, and execution memes: Exploring the humor-hate nexus at the intersection of neo-Nazi and alt-right movements in Sweden. *Television & New Media*, 22(2): 147–165.

- Asturiano, V. (2022) vasturiano/force-graph. Available: <https://github.com/vasturiano/force-graph>
- Awan, I. and Khan-Williams, R. (2020) *Coronavirus, fear and how Islamophobia spreads on social media*. Project Report. Research Briefing Report, Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group.
- Awan, I. and Zempi, I. (2015) *We fear for our lives: Offline and online experiences of anti-Muslim hostility*. Report. Available: www.tandis.odihr.pl/bitstream/20.500.12389/22288/1/08624.pdf
- Awan, I. and Zempi, I. (2017) 'I will blow your face off': Virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(2): 362–380.
- Ayo, F.E., Folorunso, O., Ibharalu, F.T. and Osinuga, I.A. (2020) Machine learning techniques for hate speech classification of twitter data: State-of-the-art, future challenges and research directions. *Computer Science Review*, 38: 100311.
- Badouard, R., Mabi, C. and Sire, G. (2016) Beyond 'points of control': logics of digital governmentality. *Internet Policy Review*, 5(3): 1–13.
- Bakardjieva, M. (2020) 'Say it loud, say it clear...': Concerting solidarity in the Canadian refugees welcome movement (2015–2016). *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 57(4): 632–655.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018) *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barassi, V. (2015) *Activism on the web: Everyday struggles against digital capitalism*. London: Routledge.
- Barassi, V. and Treré, E. (2012) Does Web 3.0 come after Web 2.0? Deconstructing theoretical assumptions through practice. *New Media & Society*, 14(8): 1269–1285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812445878>
- Bennett, W.L. and Segerberg, A. (2012) The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5): 739–768.
- Bennett, W.L. and Segerberg, A. (2013) *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berelson, B. (1952) Content analysis in communications research. In B. Berelson and M. Janowitz (eds) (1966) *Reader in public opinion and communication* (2nd edition). New York: The Free Press, 260–266.
- Bernard, A. (2019) *Theory of the hashtag*. Trans. V.A. Pakis. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bhatia, K.V. (2022) Hindu Nationalism online: Twitter as discourse and interface. *Religions*, 13(8): 739. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080739>
- Billig, M., Deacon, D., Downey, J., Golding, P. and Richardson, J.E. (2006) *Britishness in the last three general elections: From ethnic nationalism to civic nationalism*. Research Report for the Commission for Racial Equality.
- Blevins, J.L., Lee, J.J., McCabe, E.E. and Edgerton, E. (2019) Tweeting for social justice in #Ferguson: Affective discourse in Twitter hashtags. *New Media & Society*, 21(7): 1636–1653. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819827030>
- Bonilla, Y. and Rosa, J. (2015) #Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States. *American Ethnologist*, 42(1): 4–17.
- Bonini, T. and Treré, E. (2024a) *Algorithms of resistance: The everyday fight against platform power*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bonini, T. and Treré, E. (2024b) *Algorithms of resistance: The everyday fight against platform power*. Talk at School of Media and Communication, University of

- Leeds, hosted by the School's Media and Civil Resistance Reading Group, 20 November.
- Bouvier, G. (2020) Racist call-outs and cancel culture on Twitter: The limitations of the platform's ability to define issues of social justice. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100431>
- boyd, d. (2010) Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (ed.) *Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. London: Routledge, 39–58.
- boyd, d. and Crawford, K. (2012) Critical questions for big data. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5): 662–679.
- Breen, D. and Awan, I. (2025) Muslims and the COVID-19 pandemic: Myth-busting the demonisation of Muslim communities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2582667>
- Brock, A. (2016) Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, 20(3): 1012–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816677532>
- Brock, A. (2020) *Distributed Blackness: African American cybercultures*. New York: New York University Press.
- Brooker, P., Barnett, J., Cribbin, T. and Sharma, S. (2016) Have we even solved the first 'big data challenge?' Practical issues concerning data collection and visual representation for social media analytics. In H. Snee, C. Hine, Y. Morley, S. Roberts and H. Watson (eds) *Digital methods for social science*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 34–50.
- Bruns, A. and Burgess, J. (2015) Twitter hashtags from ad hoc to calculated publics. In N. Rambukkana (ed.) *Hashtag publics: The power and politics of discursive networks*. New York: Peter Lang, 13–27.
- Bucher, T. and Helmond, A. (2017) The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, T. Poell and A. Marwick (eds) *The SAGE handbook of social media*. London and New York: SAGE, 233–253.
- Bughin, J. (2015) Google searches and Twitter mood: Nowcasting telecom sales performance. *Netnomics*, 16: 87–105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11066-015-9096-5>
- Burgess, J. and Baym, N. (2020) *Twitter: A biography*. New York: New York University Press.
- Burnell, P. (2025) Taxi driver who stoked Southport riots jailed. *BBC News*, 6 January.
- Butler, J. (2015) *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly* (Vol. 1). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Calma, J. (2023) Twitter just closed the book on academic research. *The Verge*, 31 May. Available: www.theverge.com/2023/5/31/23739084/twitter-elon-musk-api-policy-chilling-academic-research
- Carmi, E. (2020) Rhythmedia: A study of Facebook immune system. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37(5): 19–138.
- Carthy, S. (2021) *Lessons learned from alternative narrative campaigns*. Luxembourg: European Commission. Available: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/ran_lessons_learned_from_alternative_narrative_campaigns_032022_en_1.pdf
- Castells, M. (1996) *The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. and Cardoso, G. (eds) (2005) *The network society: From knowledge to policy*. Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University.

- Cecil, N. (2024) Elon Musk ramps up war of words against Keir Starmer. *Evening Standard*, 6 August. Available: www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/elon-musk-twitter-riots-britain-civil-war-keir-starmer-muslim-b1174901.html
- Ceron, A., Curini, L. and Maria Iacus, S. (2016) *Politics and big data: Nowcasting and forecasting elections with social media* (1st edition). London: Routledge.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2006) *The spectatorship of suffering*. London: SAGE.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2013) *The ironic spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cockbain, E. and Tufail, W. (2020) Failing victims, fuelling hate: Challenging the harms of the 'Muslim grooming gangs' narrative. *Race and Class*, 61(3): 3–32.
- Collier, P. (2014) *Exodus: Immigration and multiculturalism in the 21st century*. London: Penguin Books.
- Conley, T.L. (2021) Hashtag archiving. In N.B. Thylstrup, D. Agostinho, A. Ring, C. D'Ignazio and K. Veel (eds) *Uncertain archives: Critical keywords for big data*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 271–278.
- Costanza-Chock, S. (2014) *Out of the shadows, into the streets! Transmedia organizing and the immigrant rights movement*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Couldry, N. (2010) Theorising media as practice. In B. Bräuchler and J. Postill (eds) *Theorising media and practice*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 35–54.
- Couldry, N. (2012) *Media, society, world*. London: Polity.
- Courea, E. (2024) Labour MPs begin quitting X over 'hate speech and disinformation'. *The Guardian*, 12 August. Available: www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/aug/12/labour-mps-begin-quitting-x-over-hate-and-disinformation
- Cowburn, A. (2019) Brexit Party founder forced to resign over Islamophobic comments endorses Boris Johnson's Tories. *The Independent*, 11 December. Available: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-brexit-party-islamophobic-boris-johnson-conservatives-blaiklock-a9242046.html
- Craddock, E. (2019) Doing 'enough' of the 'right' thing: The gendered dimension of the 'ideal activist' identity and its negative emotional consequences. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(2): 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1555457>
- Dai, L. (2024) Affective (counter)publics as a critical concept: Rethinking affective publics from the history of Chinese Americans in the Exclusion Era. *Communication Theory*, 35(1): 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae024>
- Dawes, S. (2017) #JeSuisCharlie, #JeNeSuisPasCharlie and ad hoc publics. In G. Titley, D. Freedman, G. Khiabany and A. Mondon (eds) *After Charlie Hebdo*. London: Zed Books, 180–191.
- Dean, J. (2009) *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dean, J. (2010) *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Dearden, L. (2024) 'People just like rioting': Why swift justice may blur real motivations behind UK rampage. *The Guardian*, 11 August. Available: www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/aug/11/rioting-swift-justice-real-motivations-behind-uk-rampage
- De Blasio, E. and Selva, D. (2019) Emotions in the public sphere: Networked solidarity, technology and social ties. In B. Fox (ed) *Emotions and loneliness in a networked society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 13–44.
- De Certeau, M. (1984) *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- De Latour, A., Perger, N., Salag, R., Tocchi, C. and Otero, P.V. (2017) *We can! Taking action against hate speech through counter and alternative narratives* (revised edition). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Delgado, R., Stefancic, J. and Harris, A. (2012) *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd edition). New York: New York University Press.
- de Quincey, E. and Kostkova, P. (2010) Early warning and outbreak detection using social networking websites: The potential of Twitter. In P. Kostkova (ed) *Electronic healthcare*. Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-11745-9_4
- de Quincey, E., Kyriacou, T. and Pantin, T. (2016) #hayfever: A longitudinal study into hay fever related tweets in the UK. In *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Digital Health Conference (DH '16)*. New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 85–89. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2896338.2896342>
- de Zeeuw, D., Hagen, S., Peeters, S. and Jokubauskaite, E. (2020) Tracing normification: A cross-platform analysis of the QAnon conspiracy theory. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.10643>
- D'Ignazio, C. and Klein, L.F. (2020) *Data feminism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ditum, S. (2014) Bad faith justice ethics of the call out. Available: <http://sarahditum.com/2014/02/23/bad-faith-justice-ethics-of-the-call-out/>
- Driscoll, K. and Walker, S. (2014) Working within a black box: Transparency in the collection and production of big Twitter data. *International Journal of Communication*, 8: 1745–1764.
- Dutta, M. (2024) Digital platforms, Hindutva, and disinformation: Communicative strategies and the Leicester violence. *Communication Monographs*, 92(1): 20–48. Doi: [10.1080/03637751.2024.2339799](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2024.2339799)
- Earl, J., Hunt, J., Garrett, R.K. and Dal, A. (2014) New technologies and social movements. In D. Della Porta and M. Diani (eds) *The Oxford handbook of social movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 355–366.
- Eckert, S., Metzger-Riftkin, J., Kolhoff, S. and O'Shay-Wallace, S. (2021) A hyper differential counterpublic: Muslim social media users and Islamophobia during the 2016 US presidential election. *New Media & Society*, 23(1): 78–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819892283>
- Edison Research (2024) Twitter/X usage sees sharp decline. *Edison Research: Weekly Insights*, 6 March. Available: www.edisonresearch.com/twitter-x-usage-sees-sharp-decline/
- Elahi, F. and Khan, O. (eds) (2017) *Islamophobia still a challenge for us all*. London: Runnymede Trust.
- Elgot, J. (2024) No 10 criticises Elon Musk for 'civil war is inevitable' posts on England riots. *The Guardian*, 5 August. Available: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/05/no-10-criticises-elon-musk-post-x-riots
- El-Nawawy, M. and Hasan, B.A. (2022) Terrorism, Islamophobia and white supremacy: Comparing CNN and the BBC coverage of the Christchurch mosque shooting. *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research*, 15(1): 65–85. https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00041_1
- Emejulu, A. and Sobande, F. (2019) *To exist is to resist: Black feminism in Europe*. London: Pluto Press.
- Engles, P. (2017) Racialized slacktivism: Social media performances of white antiracism. In T.M. Kennedy, J.I. Middleton and K. Ratcliffe (eds) *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial hauntings in popular culture, social media and education*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 92–111.

- Ernst, J., Schmitt, J.B., Rieger, D., Beier, A.K., Vorderer, P., Bente, G. and Roth, H.J. (2017) Hate beneath the counter speech? A qualitative content analysis of user comments on YouTube related to counter speech videos. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 10: 1–49.
- European Commission (2024) Commission sends preliminary findings to X for breach of the Digital Services Act. *European Commission Press Corner*, 12 July. Available: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_24_3761
- Evolvi, G. (2019) #Islamexit: inter-group antagonism on Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(3): 386–401.
- Farkas, J., Schou, J. and Neumayer, C. (2018) Cloaked Facebook pages: Exploring fake Islamist propaganda in social media. *New Media & Society*, 20(5): 1850–1867.
- Farokhi, Z. (forthcoming) *Digital Islamophobia: A transnational comparison of right-wing extremist groups in Canada, the US, and India*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Farrimond, H. (2023) Stigma mutation: Tracking lineage, variation and strength in emerging COVID-19 stigma. *Sociological Research Online*, 28(1): 171–188.
- Feagin, J.R. (2020) *The white racial frame: Centuries of racial framing and counter-framing* (3rd edition). New York: Routledge.
- Feigenbaum, A. and Alamalhodaie, A. (2020) *The data storytelling workbook*. London: Routledge.
- Feigenbaum, A., Frenzel, F. and McCurdy, P. (2013) *Protest camps*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Feshami, K.A. (2018) Voices of white resistance: Democratic theory and the task of contending with white nationalist voice. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2). Available: <https://olh.openlibhums.org/article/id/4533/>
- Fielitz, M. and Marcks, H. (2021) When counter-speech backfires: The pitfalls of strategic online interaction. In *Insights*, Global Network on Extremism and Technology. Available: <https://gnet-research.org/2021/07/26/when-counter-speech-backfires-the-pitfalls-of-strategic-online-interaction/>
- Figenschou, T.U. and Thorbjørnsrud, K. (2023) Interpretive communities of resistance: Emerging counterpublics of immigration alarmism on social media. *New Media & Society*, 27(3): 1607–1624. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231198790>
- Flick, U. (2009) *An introduction to qualitative research* (4th edition). London: SAGE.
- Foucault Welles, B. and Jackson, S.J. (2019) The battle for #Baltimore: Networked counterpublics and the contested framing of urban unrest. *International Journal of Communication*, 13: 1699–1719.
- Franklin, B. and Richardson, J.E. (2002) A journalist's duty? Continuity and change in local newspaper reporting of recent UK general elections. *Journalism Studies*, 3(1): 35–52.
- franzke, a.s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C. and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020) *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. Available: <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Fraser, N. (1990) Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26: 56–80.
- Frątczak, M. (2022) Can data visualisations mobilise people to act? *Significance*, 19(2): 6–7.
- Fuchs, C. (2017) *Social media: A critical introduction*. London: SAGE.
- Fuller, M. and Goffey, A. (2012) *Evil media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Ganesh, B. and Faggiani, N. (2024) The flood, the traitors, and the protectors: Affect and white identity in the Internet Research Agency's Islamophobic propaganda on Twitter. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 47(5): 982–1008.
- Gao, G., Tsao, H.-S.J. and Wu, Y. (2003) *Testing and quality assurance for component-based software*. Boston: Artech House.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2012) *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gerrard, Y. (2018) Beyond the hashtag: Circumventing content moderation on social media. *New Media & Society*, 20(12): 4492–4511.
- Ghasiya, P. and Sasahara, K. (2022) Rapid sharing of Islamophobic hate on Facebook: The case of the Tablighi Jamaat controversy. *Social Media + Society*, 8(4): 205630512211291.
- Ghasiya, P., Ahnert, G. and Sasahara, K. (2023) Identifying themes of right-wing extremism in Hindutva discourse on Twitter. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3): 20563051231199457.
- Giglietto, F. and Lee, Y. (2017) A hashtag worth a thousand words: Discursive strategies around #JeNeSuisPasCharlie after the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting. *Social Media + Society*, 3(1): 2056305116686992. doi: [10.1177/2056305116686992](https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116686992)
- Gillespie, T. (2010) The politics of 'platforms'. *New Media & Society*, 12(3): 347–364.
- Gillespie, T. (2018) Platforms are not intermediaries. *Georgetown Law Technology Review*, 2: 198–216.
- Giraud, E. (2015) Subjectivity 2.0: Digital technologies, participatory media and communicative capitalism. *Subjectivity*, 8: 124–146. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2015.5>
- Giraud, E. (2018) Displacement, 'failure' and friction: Tactical interventions in the communication ecologies of anti-capitalist food activism. In T. Schneider, E. Karin, D. Catherine and S. Ulijaszek (eds) *Digital food activism*. New York and London: Routledge, 48–68.
- Giraud, E.H. (2019) *What comes after entanglement?* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Giraud, E.H. and Wright, T. (2024) Digital archives as resisting displacement. *Cultural Politics*, 20(2): 305–324.
- Giraud, E.H., Poole, E., de Quincey, E. and Richardson, J. (2025) Learning from online hate speech and digital racism: From automated to diffractive methods in social media analysis. *The Sociological Review*, 73(6): 1388–1407.
- Giroux, H.A. (1993) Living dangerously: Identity politics and the New Cultural Racism: Towards a critical pedagogy of representation. *Cultural Studies*, 7(1): 1–27. doi:[10.1080/09502389300490021](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389300490021).
- Goldberg, D.T. (2015) *Are we all postracial yet? Debating race*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gross, B. and Gavin, S.M. (2023) *Framing the police on Twitter: Public discourse on abolishing police, defunding police, and community policing*. New York: Routledge.
- Guenther, L., Wilhelm, C., Oschatz, C. and Brück, J. (2023) Science communication on Twitter: Measuring indicators of engagement and their links to user interaction in communication scholars' tweet content. *Public Understanding of Science*, 32(7): 860–869.
- Halford, S. and Savage, M. (2017) Speaking sociologically with big data: Symphonic social science and the future for big data research. *Sociology*, 51(6): 1132–1148.

- Hall, S. (1997) *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London and Thousand Oaks: Open University.
- Hamm, M.S. and Spaaij, R. (2017) *The age of lone wolf terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hands, J. (2010) *@ is for activism*. London: Pluto.
- Harcup, T. and O'Neill, D. (2017) What is news? News values revisited (again). *Journalism Studies*, 18(12): 1470–1488.
- He, J., Zia, H.B., Castro, I., Raman, A., Sastry, N. and Tyson, G. (2023) Flocking to mastodon: Tracking the great Twitter migration. In *Proceedings of the 2023 ACM on Internet Measurement Conference*, Montreal, 24–26 October. DOI: [10.1145/3618257.3624819](https://doi.org/10.1145/3618257.3624819)
- Hill, A. (2024) The case against 'alt-right': A review and typology of scholarly approaches. *The Communication Review*, 27(4): 411–440. DOI: [10.1080/10714421.2024.2383813](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2024.2383813).
- Hutchby, I. (2001) Technologies, texts and affordances. *Sociology*, 35(2): 441–456.
- Hutchby, I. (2003) Affordances and the analysis of technologically mediated interaction: A response to Brian Rappert. *Sociology*, 37(3): 581–589.
- Iftikhar, A. (2020) Christchurch anniversary: The Islamophobic 'great replacement' theory. *Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative*, 14 March. Available: <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/christchurch-anniversary-the-islamophobic-great-replacement-theory/>
- Ince, J., Rojasa, F. and Davis, C.A. (2017) The social media response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter users interact with Black Lives Matter through hashtag use. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 40(11): 1814–1830.
- Institute of Data (2023) Uncovering data patterns and trends with data science. Institute of Data, 27 October. Available: www.institutedata.com/blog/uncover-data-patterns-with-data-science/
- Jackson, S.J. and Foucault Welles, B. (2015) Hijacking #myNYPD: Social media dissent and networked counterpublics. *Journal of Communication*, 65(6): 932–952.
- Jackson, S.J. and Foucault Welles, B. (2016) #Ferguson is everywhere: Initiators in emerging counterpublic networks. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(3): 397–418.
- Jackson, S.J. and Kreiss, D. (2023) Recentering power: Conceptualizing counterpublics and defensive publics. *Communication Theory*, 33(2–3): 102–111.
- Jackson, S.J., Bailey, M. and Foucault Welles, B. (2020) *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jeong, U., Sheth, P., Tahir, A., Alatawi, F., Bernard, H.R. and Liu, H. (2024) Exploring platform migration patterns between twitter and mastodon: A user behavior study. In *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, Washington, DC, 7–14 February 2023. Available: <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/download/31348/33508>.
- Juris, J. (2008) *Networking futures: The movements against corporate globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Juris, J. (2012) Reflections on occupy everywhere: Social media, public space and emerging logics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist*, 39(2): 259–279.
- Kalsnes, B., Larsson, A.O. and Enli, G. (2017) The social media logic of political interaction: Exploring citizens' and politicians' relationship on Facebook and Twitter. *First Monday*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i2.6348>

- Kaplan, A. (1943) Content analysis and the theory of signs. *Philosophy of Science*, 10(4): 230–247.
- Karlsen, R., Steen-Johnsen, K., Wollebæk, D. and Enjolras, B. (2017) Echo chamber and trench warfare dynamics in online debates. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(3): 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323117695734>
- Kavada, A. (2015) Creating the collective: Social media, the Occupy Movement and its constitution as a collective actor. *Information, Communication and Society*, 18(8): 872–886. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1043318>
- Kavada, A. (2016) Social movements and political agency in the digital age: A communication approach. *Media and Communication*, 4(4): 8–12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i4.691>
- Kavada, A. and Poell, T. (2021) From counterpublics to contentious publicness: Tracing the temporal, spatial, and material articulations of popular protest through social media. *Communication Theory*, 31(2): 190–208. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa025>
- Kelion, L. (2020) Excel: Why using Microsoft's tool caused COVID-19 results to be lost. *BBC News*, 5 October. Available: www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-54423988
- Kennedy, H., Hill, R.L., Aiello, G. and Allen, W. (2016) The work that visualisation conventions do. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(6): 715–735.
- Kim, J., Cha, M. and Lee, J.G. (2017) Nowcasting commodity prices using social media. *PeerJ Computer Science*, 3: e126. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj-cs.126>
- Kleres, J. (2018) Emotions in the crisis: mobilising for refugees in Germany and Sweden. In D. della Porta (ed.) *Solidarity mobilizations in the 'refugee crisis'*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 209–241.
- Knorr Cetina, K. (1999) *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Krafft, P.M. and Donovan, J. (2020) Disinformation by design: The use of evidence collages and platform filtering in a media manipulation campaign. *Political Communication*, 37(2): 194–214.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004) *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Krzyżanowski, M. and Ledin, P. (2017) Uncivility on the web: Populism in/ and the borderline discourses of exclusion. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4): 566–581.
- Kumar, D. (2021) *Islamophobia and the politics of empire: Twenty years after 9/11*. New York: Verso.
- Kundnani, A. (2014) *The Muslims are coming! Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic war on terror*. New York: Verso.
- Kuo, R. (2018) Racial justice activist hashtags: Counterpublics and discourse circulation. *New Media & Society*, 20(2): 495–514.
- Laaksonen, S.M., Haapoja, J., Kinnunen, T., Nelimarkka, M. and Pöyhtäri, R. (2020) The datafication of hate: Expectations and challenges in automated hate speech monitoring. *Frontiers in Big Data*, 3. DOI: [10.3389/fdata.2020.00003](https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2020.00003)
- Lansdall-Welfare, T., Lampos, V. and Cristianini, N. (2012) Nowcasting the mood of the nation. *Significance*, 9(4): 26–28.
- Latour, B. (1987) *Science in action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2007) *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Law, I., Easat-Daas, A. and Sayyid, S. (2018) *Counter-Islamophobia kit: Briefing paper and toolkit of counter-narratives to Islamophobia*. Leeds: University of Leeds.
- Law, J. and Singleton, V. (2000) Performing technology's stories: On social constructivism, performance, and performativity. *Technology and Culture*, 41(4): 765–775.
- Lee, D. (2013) How Twitter changed the world, hashtag by hashtag. *BBC News Online*, 7 November. Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-24802766>
- Lee, J.J. and Lee, J. (2023) #StopAsianHate on TikTok: Asian/American women's space-making for spearheading counter-narratives and forming an ad hoc Asian community. *Social Media + Society*, 9(1): 20563051231157598.
- Leidig, E., Ganesh, B. and Bright, J. (2021) New forms of cultural nationalism? American and British Indians in the Trump and Brexit Twittersphere. *Nations and Nationalism*, 28(1): 302–321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12781>
- Leites, N.C. and de Sola Pool, I. (1942) *On content analysis*. Library of Congress, Experimental Division for Study of War-Time Communications, Document 26.
- Lezaun, J. (2018) The public's two bodies: food activism in digital media. In T. Schneider, K. Eli, A. Lighthart, C. Catal and B. Tekinerdogan (2021) Systematic reviews in sentiment analysis: A tertiary study. *Artificial Intelligence Review*, 54: 4997–5053. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10462-021-09973-3>
- Lim, M. (2017) Freedom to hate: Social media, algorithmic enclaves, and the rise of tribal nationalism in Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 49(3): 411–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2017.1341188>
- Littler, J. and Rottenberg, C. (2021) Feminist solidarities: Theoretical and practical complexities. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(3): 864–877. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12514>
- Lorenz, T. (2025) The UK's Online Safety Act is a licence for censorship – and the rest of the world is following suit. *The Guardian*, 9 August. Available: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/09/uk-online-safety-act-internet-censors-hip-world-following-suit
- Manovich, L. (2011) Trending: The promises and the challenges of big social data. *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 2(1): 460–475.
- Marantz, A. (2018) Inside the *Daily Stormer's* style guide. *The New Yorker*, 8 January. Available: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/15/inside-the-daily-stormers-style-guide
- Marres, N. (2015) Why map issues? On controversy analysis as a digital method. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 40(5): 655–686.
- Marres, N. (2017) *Digital sociology: The reinvention of social research*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Marres, N. (2018) Why we can't have our facts back. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 4: 423–443.
- Marres, N. and Moats, D. (2015) Mapping controversies with social media: The case for symmetry. *Social Media+Society*, 1(2): 2056305115604176.
- Martin, J. (2021) Breonna Taylor: Transforming a hashtag into defunding the police. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 111(4): 995–1030.
- Marwick, A.E. (2018) Why do people share fake news? A sociotechnical model of media effects. *Georgetown Law Technology Review*, 2(2): 474–512.
- Marwick, A.E. and Lewis, R. (2017) *Media manipulation and disinformation online*. Available: https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf

- Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2017) Platformed racism: The mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6): 930–946.
- Matamoros-Fernández, A. and Farkas, J. (2021) Racism, hate speech, and social media: A systematic review and critique. *Television & New Media*, 22(2): 205–224.
- Mateen, Z. (2023) Jack Dorsey: India threatened to shut Twitter and raid employees. *BBC News*, 13 June. Available: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-65886825
- Mattoni, A. (2016) *Media practices and protest politics: How precarious workers mobilise*. London: Routledge.
- McGregor, S.C. (2019) Social media as public opinion: How journalists use social media to represent public opinion. *Journalism*, 20(8): 1070–1086.
- Meghji, A. and Niang, S.M. (2022) Between post-racial ideology and provincial universalisms: Critical race theory, decolonial thought and COVID-19 in Britain. *Sociology*, 56(1): 131–147.
- Mejova, Y., Weber, I. and Macy, M.W. (eds) (2015) *Twitter: A digital socioscope*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mendes, K., Ringrose, J. and Keller, J. (2018) #MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(2): 236–246.
- Mendes, K., Ringrose, J. and Keller, J. (2019) *Digital feminist activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mendoza, M., Poblete, B. and Valderrama, I. (2019) Nowcasting earthquake damages with Twitter. *EPJ Data Science*, 8: 3. <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-019-0181-0>
- Milan, S. and Treré, E. (2019) Big data from the South(s): Beyond data universalism. *Television & New Media*, 20(4): 319–335.
- Mills, C.W. (1997) *The racial contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mohr, V. (2017) Twitter threads and supervernaculars. *Diggit Magazine*, 12 April. Available: www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/twitter-threads-supervernaculars
- Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2020) *Reactionary democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. London: Verso.
- Murphy, J. (2024) Musk X talk with Trump hit by tech glitches. *BBC News*, 13 August. Available: www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1k3mwy1ww30
- Murthy, D. (2024) Sociology of Twitter/X: Trends, challenges, and future research directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 50: 169–190.
- Nærland, T.U. (2020) From pleasure to politics: Five functions of watching TV-series for public connection. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(2): 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119894481>
- Nanditha, N. (2022) Exclusion in #MeToo India: Rethinking inclusivity and intersectionality in Indian digital feminist movements. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(7): 1673–1694.
- Narayanan, Y. (2023) *Mother cow, mother India: A multispecies politics of dairy in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Nartey, M. (2022) Centering marginalized voices: A discourse analytic study of the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 19(5): 523–538.
- Nasir, R. (2025) Communalizing COVID-19: Scapegoating Muslims through *Tablighi Jamaat*. *Social Identities*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2025.2542380>

- Nikunen, K. (2019) *Media solidarities: Emotion, power and justice in the digital age*. London: SAGE.
- Nikunen, K. (2021) Ghosts of white methods? The challenges of Big Data research in exploring racism in digital context. *Big Data & Society*, 8(2): 205395172111048964.
- Noble, S. (2018) *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ong, J.C. and Cabañes, J.V. (2018) *Architects of networked disinformation: Behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake news production in the Philippines*. Report. Available: <https://newtontechfordev.com/newton-tech4dev-research-identifies-ad-pr-executives-chief-architects-fake-news-production-social-media-trolling/>
- Ozduzen, O., Korkut, U. and Ozduzen, C. (2021) 'Refugees are not welcome': Digital racism, online place-making and the evolving categorization of Syrians in Turkey. *New Media & Society*, 23(11): 3349–3369.
- Ozduzen, O., Aslan Ozgul, B. and Ianosev, B. (2023) 'Institutions of governance are all corrupted': Anti-political collective identity of anti-lockdown protesters in digital and physical spaces. *Social Movement Studies*, 23(6): 1–19.
- Packer, J. and Stoneman, E. (2021) Where we produce one, we produce all: The platform conspiracism of QAnon. *Cultural Politics*, 17(3): 255–278.
- Pain, P. (2021) 'It took me quite a long time to develop a voice': Examining feminist digital activism in the Indian #MeToo movement. *New Media & Society*, 23(11): 3139–3155.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2014) *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. and de Fatima Oliveira, M. (2012) Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on #Egypt. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2): 266–282.
- Passy, F. (2001) Political altruism and the solidarity movement: An introduction. In M. Giugni and F. Passy (eds) *Political altruism? Solidarity movements in international perspective*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1–38.
- Pearce, W., Brown, B., Nerlich, B. and Koteyko, N. (2015) Communicating climate change: Conduits, content, and consensus. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 6(6): 613–626.
- Pearce, W., Özkula, S.M., Greene, A.K., Teeling, L., Bansard, J.S., Omena, J.J. and Rabello, E.T. (2020) Visual cross-platform analysis: Digital methods to research social media images. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(2): 161–180.
- Pickerrill, J. (2003) *Cyberprotest: Environmental activism online*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Poell, T. and van Dijck, J. (2015) Social media and activist communication. In C. Atton (ed.) *The Routledge companion to alternative and community media*. London: Routledge, 527–537.
- Poole, E. (2002) *Reporting Islam: Media representations of British Muslims*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Poole, E. (2012) The case of Geert Wilders: Multiculturalism, Islam, and identity in the UK. *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 162–191. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187489212X639181>
- Poole, E. and Giraud, E. (2021) Mediated activism as a response to misinformation and populism. In H. Tumber and S. Waisbord (eds) *The Routledge companion to misinformation and populism*. Routledge.

- Poole, E. and Richardson, J.E. (eds) (2006) *Muslims and the News Media*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Poole, E., Giraud, E. and de Quincey, E. (2019) Contesting #StopIslam: The dynamics of a counter-narrative against right-wing populism. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.406>
- Poole, E., Giraud, E.H. and de Quincey, E. (2021) Tactical interventions in online hate speech: The case of #stopIslam. *New Media & Society*, 23(6): 1415–1442.
- Poole, E., Giraud, E., Richardson, J.E. and de Quincey, E. (2023) Expedient, affective, and sustained solidarities? Mediated contestations of Islamophobia in the case of Brexit, the Christchurch terror attack, and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305123119945>
- Prasad, A. (2020) The organization of ideological discourse in times of unexpected crisis: Explaining how COVID-19 is exploited by populist leaders. *Leadership*, 16(3): 294–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020926783>
- Pratt, R. and Woodlock, P. (eds) (2016) *Fear of Muslims? International perspectives on Islamophobia*. Cham: Springer.
- Rajan, B. and Venkatraman, S. (2021) Insta-hate: An exploration of Islamophobia and right-wing nationalism on Instagram amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in India. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 14(1): 71–91.
- Rambukkana, N. (2015a) #Hashtagpublics: The power and politics of discursive networks. New York: Peter Lang.
- Rambukkana, N. (2015b) From #RaceFail to #Ferguson: The digital intimacies of race-activist hashtag publics. *The Fibreculture Journal* 26. Available: <http://twenty-six.fibreculturejournal.org/>
- Rashidi, Y., Kapadia, A., Nippert-Eng, C. and Makato, N. (2020) ‘It’s easier than causing confrontation’: Sanctioning strategies to maintain social norms and privacy on social media. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4 (CSCW1) article 23: 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3392827>
- Rattansi, A. (2007) *Racism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rice, R.E., Evans, S.K., Pearce, K.E., Sivunen, A., Vitak, J. and Treem, J.W. (2017) Organizational media affordances: Operationalization and associations with media use. *Journal of Communication*, 67(1): 106–130.
- Richardson, J.E. (2004) *(Mis)Representing Islam: the racism and rhetoric of British broadsheet newspapers*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Richardson, J.E. (2006) Who gets to speak? A study of sources in the broadsheet press. In E. Poole and J.E. Richardson (eds) *Muslims in the news media*. London: I.B. Tauris, 103–115.
- Richardson, J.E. (2007) *Analysing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Richardson, J.E. (2008) Readers letters. In B. Franklin (ed.) *Pulling newspapers apart*. London: Routledge, 58–69.
- Richardson, J.E. (2015) ‘Cultural Marxism’ and the British National Party: A transnational discourse. In N. Copsey and J.E. Richardson, *Cultures of post-war British fascism*. London: Routledge, 202–226.
- Richardson, J.E., Huckerby, S. and Williams, M. (2008) Nation, culture and identity in a French language Corsican newspaper. *Journalism Studies*, 9(5): 561–577.
- Richardson, J.E., Giraud, E.H., Poole, E. and De Quincey, E. (2024) ‘Hypocrite!’: Affective and argumentative engagement on Twitter, following the Christchurch terrorist attack. *Media, Culture & Society*, 01634437241229322.

- Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019 (2020) *Ko tō tātou kāinga tēnei. Report: Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019*. Available: <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>
- Ruiz, P. (2014) *Articulating dissent*. London: Pluto.
- Ruiz, P. (2024) Not forgetting Black Lives Matter: Memory, protest and counterpublics. *Javnost – The Public*, 31(2): 253–269.
- Sablosky, J. (2021) Dangerous organizations: Facebook's content moderation decisions and ethnic visibility in Myanmar. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(6): 1017–1042.
- Saeed, T. (2024) Hindutva and the Muslim problem: An exploration of gendered Islamophobia in India. In A. Easat-Daas and I. Zempi (eds) *The Palgrave handbook of gendered Islamophobia*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 353–376.
- Santos, S.F. (2024) Musk's X banned in Brazil after disinformation row. *BBC News Online*, 30 August. Available: www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y3rnl5qv3o
- Savage, M. and Burrows, R. (2007) The coming crisis of empirical sociology. *Sociology*, 41(5): 885–899.
- Schrader, J. (2019) *The revolution that wasn't: How digital activism favors conservatives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sen, M. (2023) Corona-Jihad memes: The shifting iconology of Islamophobia from Hindu nationalists. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 11(3): 362–388.
- Sharma, S. (2013) Black Twitter? Racial hashtags, networks and contagion. *New Formations*, 78: 46–64.
- Sharma, S. and Brooker, P. (2016) #notracist: Exploring racism denial talk on Twitter. In J. Daniels, K. Gregory and T.M. Cottom (eds) *Digital sociologies*. Bristol: Policy Press, 463–485.
- Shea, P., Nottley, T., Burgess, J. and Ballard, S. (2015) Entanglements: Activism and technology. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 26. Available: <http://twentysix.fibreculturejournal.org/>
- Siapera, E. (2019) Organised and ambient digital racism. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.405>
- Siapera, E. (2022) Platform governance and the 'infodemic'. *Javnost – The Public*, 29(2): 197–214. doi: [10.1080/13183222.2022.2042791](https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2022.2042791).
- Siapera, E. and Viejo-Otero, P. (2021) Governing hate: Facebook and digital racism. *Television & New Media*, 22(2): 112–130.
- Siapera, E., Hunt, G. and Lynn, T. (2015) #GazaUnderAttack: Twitter, Palestine and diffused war. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(11): 1297–1319. doi: [10.1080/1369118X.2015.1070188](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1070188).
- Siapera, E., Boudouris, M., Lenis, S. and Suiter, J. (2018) Refugees and network publics on Twitter: Networked framing, affect, and capture. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1): 1–21. <http://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764437>
- Sills, L. (2017) Hashtag comedy: From Muslim rage to #MuslimRage. *ReOrient*, 2(2): 160–174. DOI: [10.13169/reorient.2.2.0160](https://doi.org/10.13169/reorient.2.2.0160)
- Smith, M. (2024) Elon Musk's favorability remains unchanged after the riots but X's reputation continues to decline. *YouGov*, 16 August. Available: <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50340-elon-musks-favourability-remains-unchanged-after-the-riots-but-xs-reputation-continues-to-decline>
- Solon, O. (2018) Facebook's failure in Myanmar is the result of a blundering toddler. *The Guardian*, 16 August. Available: www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/16/facebook-myanmar-failure-blundering-toddler

- Sombatpoonsiri, J. and Mahapatra, S. (2024) *Regulation or repression? Government influence on political content moderation in India and Thailand*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/india-thailand-social-media-moderation?lang=en>
- Srnicek, N. (2016) *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity.
- Star, S.L. (1990) Power, technology and the phenomenology of conventions: On being allergic to onions. *The Sociological Review*, 38(1): 26–56.
- Stephansen, H. (2016) Understanding citizen media as practice: Agents, processes, publics. In M. Baker and B. Blaagaard (eds) *Citizen media and public spaces* (1st edition). London: Routledge, 25–41.
- Stephansen, H. and Treré, E. (2019) *Citizen media and practice: Currents, connections, challenges*. London: Routledge.
- Stokel-Walker, C. (2022) Twitter changed science – what happens now it's in turmoil? *Nature*, 22 December. Available: www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-04506-6
- Suler, J. (2004) The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behaviour*, 7(3): 321–326.
- Suzuki, T. and Velasquez, A. (2025) Theorizing networked counterpublics sanctions. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251363940>
- Therwath, I. (2012) Cyber-Hindutva: Hindu nationalism, the diaspora and the Web. *Social Science Information*, 51(4): 551–577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018412456782>
- Thylstrup, N. and Talat, Z. (2020) *Detecting 'dirt' and 'toxicity': Rethinking content moderation as pollution behaviour*. Available: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3709719>
- Tiao, S. (2024) What is Big Data? *Oracle*, 11 March. Available: www.oracle.com/uk/big-data/what-is-big-data/
- Tierie, S. and Ranjan, A. (2023) Covid-19, communalism, and Islamophobia: India facing the disease. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 29: 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2023.2207460>
- Tilley, L. and Ajl, M. (2023) Eco-socialism will be anti-eugenic or it will be nothing: Towards equal exchange and the end of population. *Politics*, 43(2): 201–218.
- Tilly, C. and Tarrow, S. (2015) *Contentious politics* (2nd edition). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tinati, R., Halford, S., Carr, L. and Pope, C. (2014) Big data: Methodological challenges and approaches for sociological analysis. *Sociology*, 48(4): 663–681.
- Titely, G. (2019) *Racism and media*. London and Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Townsend, L. and Wallace, C. (2016) Social media research: A guide to ethics. *University of Aberdeen*, 1(16). Available: https://resource.ppls.ed.ac.uk/leethics/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Media_487729_smxx.pdf
- Treré, E. (2016) The dark side of digital politics. *IDS Bulletin*, 47(1): 127–138.
- Treré, E. (2018) *Hybrid media activism: Ecologies, imaginaries, algorithms*. London: Routledge.
- Treré, E. (2020) The banality of WhatsApp: On the everyday politics of backstage activism in Mexico and Spain. *First Monday*, 25. <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/10404>
- Tsing, A.L. (2005) *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Twitter (2021) Coordinated harmful activities. *Twitter Help Center*. Available: <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/coordinated-harmful-activity>
- Twitter Inc. (2021) Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump. *Twitter Blog*, 8 January. Available: https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension

- Twitter Safety (2021) An update following the riots in Washington, D.C. *Twitter Blog*, 12 January. Available: https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2021/protecting-the-conversation-following-the-riots-in-washington-
- Udupa, S. (2018) Enterprise Hindutva and social media in urban India. *Contemporary South Asia*, 26(4): 453–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1545007>
- Udupa, S. and Dattatreya, E.G. (2023) *Digital unsettling: Decoloniality and dispossession in the age of social media*. New York: New York University Press.
- UKSnow (n.d.) #UKSnowmap. Available: <https://uksnowmap.com/>
- University of Washington (2023) Twitter's API access changes could mark the 'end of an era' in academic research on the platform. Center for an Informed Public, University of Washington, 2 February. Available: www.cip.uw.edu/2023/02/02/twitters-api-access-changes-academic-research/
- Urman, A. and Katz, S. (2022) What they do in the shadows: Examining the far-right networks on Telegram. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(7): 904–923.
- van Dijck, J. (2013) *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Eemeren, F.H. and Grootendorst, R. (1992) *Argumentation, communication and fallacies: A pragma-dialectical perspective*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Vicari, S. and Kirby, D. (2023) Digital platforms as socio-cultural artifacts: Developing digital methods for cultural research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(9): 1733–1755.
- Viejo Otero, P. (2024) *Platform governance and social justice*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing.
- Vis, F. and Goriunova, O. (eds) (2015) *The iconic image on social media: A rapid research response to the death of Aylan Kurdi*. Visual Social Media Lab. Manchester Metropolitan University.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019) *Emotions, media and politics*. London: Polity.
- Wallace-Wells, B. (2025) What did Elon Musk accomplish at Doge? *New Yorker*, 16 June. Available: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/06/23/what-did-elon-musk-accomplish-at-doge
- Weikmann, T. and Lecheler, S. (2023) Visual disinformation in a digital age: A literature synthesis and research agenda. *New Media & Society*, 25(12): 3696–3713.
- Weller, K., Bruns, A. and Burgess, J. (2014) *Twitter and society*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Wittel, A. (2001) Toward a network sociality. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6): 51–76.
- X Developer Platform (n.d.a) Success story: Hate Lab. X. Available: <https://developer.twitter.com/en/blog/success-stories/hatelab>
- X Developer Platform (n.d.b) Do research. X. Available: <https://developer.x.com/en/use-cases/do-research>
- Yin, S. and Sun, Y. (2021) Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(7): 1176–1192.
- Zeng, J. (2020) #MeToo as connective action: A study of the anti-sexual violence and anti-sexual harassment campaign on Chinese social media in 2018. *Journalism Practice*, 14(2): 171–190.
- Zeng, J. and Schäfer, M.S. (2021) Conceptualizing 'dark platforms': Covid-19-related conspiracy theories on 8kun and Gab. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9): 1321–1343.
- Zuberi, T. and Bonilla-Silva, E. (eds) (2008) *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.

Index

Page numbers in **bold** refer to figures; page numbers in *italic* refer to tables.

- account holders 66–68
- account users 75–76
- actors 144, 146
 - affiliations 153–154, 156, 171
 - followers 160
 - geographical distribution 145, 146, 147, 148, 149
 - key 149, 150, 151, 152, 153–155, 169
 - most persistent tweeters 155, 157
 - network-building 179–183
 - platform knowledge 172–174, 175
 - platform manipulation 175–177
 - professional identity 172–174
 - religious affiliations 154–155, 156
 - surveillance tactics 177–179
 - tactical interventions 175, 183
 - Twitter usage 171–172
- ad hominem* attacks 118
- addressivity markers 135
- advocacy and advocacy groups 7–8, 170, 172, 180
- affective engagement 13–14, 104
- affective publics 13–14, 28, 117, 149, 158, 159, 193
- agency 181, 182–184
- Alfonzo, P. 166
- algorithmic agency 183–184
- algorithmic enclaves 115–116, 120
- All Party Parliamentary Group (UK) 7
- alternative narratives 12–13, 104, 129, 131–132, 141, 166, 178
- anti-immigration narratives 8, 186–187
- Askanius, T. 2
- Associated Press 100
- Asturiano, Vasco 160
- Awan, Imran 14, 18
- Badouard, R. 16
- Banet-Weiser, S. 174
- Baym, Nancy 204
- Bennett, W. Lance 11, 162
- Berelson, B. 63
- bias 43, 58, 106–107, 133–134
- big data 39–40, 45, 47–48, 60n3, 166
- Black Twitter 141
- black-boxing 49–53
- #BlackLivesMatter 10
- Blaiklock, Catherine 70
- body politics 158
- Bonilla-Silva, E. 43
- Bonini, T. 173, 183–184
- Bouvier, G. 139
- Brexit 6, 15, 16, 23, 68–81, 94, 101, 117, 170, 199
 - actors 146
 - anti-racism 136
 - appropriation 163
 - Brexit Day 68–69, 69, 71, 72, 73, 73, 74, 75–76, 78, 79, 79, 80, 80, 81, 109, 113–116, 133, 134, 155, 162–164, 162
 - chi-square test 74–76, 75
 - coding manual 65, 66
 - counter-narratives 27, 107, 107, 108–116, 108, 109, 140
 - data gathering 35
 - data visualisation 160–162, 161

- Brexit (*continued*)
 datasets 20
 deleted tweets 137–138
 distribution of tweets 71–73, 72, 73, 73
 emojis 69–70, 70
 ephemerality of counter-narratives 191
 and gender 76
 general election, 2019 68–71, 69, 70, 72, 73, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, 79, 80, 80, 81, 108–113, 108, 115–117, 160–162, 161, 181
 hashtags 197–198
 key actors 149, 149, 151, 153, 154
 lists 133, 133–134
 most persistent tweeters 155
 national location of tweets 145, 146, 147
 network analysis 162–164, 162
 and network-building 181
 outbreeding narrative 70
 platform manipulation 176
 polarisation 74
 position on Brexit 73–81, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81
 position on Islam/Muslims 73–81, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 107, 107, 108–116, 108, 109, 154
 quantitative content analysis 71–3, 72, 73, 73
 quote-tweets 80–81, 81, 160–161
 racism 136–139
 retweets 79–80, 79, 80, 103, 107, 108, 115–117, 134, 160
 as right-wing project 78–79
 samples 68–69, 69
 #stopIslam use 191
 tactical interventions 132–133
 topics 77–78, 77
 tribal nationalism 115–116
 trigger events 26, 62
 triumphalism 116
 tweet contents 73–81, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81
 uncivil discourse 114–115
 Warsi's tweet 109–111
 Brock, A. 106–107, 113, 141, 174, 184
 Brooker, P. 7, 38, 138
 Bruns, A. 105
 Brussels bombings, 2016 18, 21, 56, 105, 191
 Bucher, T. 17
 Burgess, J. 105
 Burgess, Jean 204
Byline Times 178
 capacity-building 176–177
 Carthy, S. 13, 104
 Castells, M. 182
 censorship 133, 134
 Centre for Media Monitoring 133
 Cetina, Karin Knorr 41
 child sexual exploitation narrative 71, 134, 137
 Chouliaraki, L. 159
 Christchurch terrorist attacks 15, 16, 23, 81–91, 94, 101, 170, 188
 actors 146
 American tweets 85, 87, 118–119, 123–124, 145, 147, 151, 192
 the attack 81–82
 code values 66
 counter-narratives 110, 111, 112, 116–126, 140
 data gathering 35
 datasets 20, 82–83, 83, 191–193, 200–201
 emojis 83–84, 84, 119
 ephemerality of counter-narratives 191, 191–192, 192
 first victim 119
 hashtags 197
 #helloworldbrother 23, 89, 113, 119–122, 146, 154–155, 165, 166, 197
 initial responses 83, 89–90
 key actors 149, 150, 151, 153–154, 154–155
 lists 133
 manifesto 192–193
 media language 122–123
 most persistent tweeters 157
 national location of tweets 87, 120–121, 145, 146, 147, 148
 network analysis 164–166, 164, 165
 #peacefulmosques 197
 position on Islam/Muslims 88, 89–90, 90, 107, 107, 110, 111, 112, 116–126, 147, 148, 191

- quantitative content analysis 85, 85–86, 86, 191
- quote-tweets 82, 83, 166, 200–201
- racism 137, 139
- retweets 82, 83, 85, 87, 89–90, 90, 107, 118, 120, 151, 166, 200
- right-wing appropriation 124–126
- singularity of 27
- #stopIslam use 191, 193
- tactical interventions 133, 134–135
- tagging 135–136
- topics 90–91, 91
- trigger events 26, 62, 85–86
- tweet appropriation 198
- tweet contents 86–87, 87, 88, 89–91, 90, 91
- Christian victimhood narratives 90, 92
- clicktivism 158
- Clinton, Hillary 118, 198
- coalition campaigns 180
- Cockbain, E. 71
- collective power 166
- collectivity 184n4
- community interventions 129
- connective action 11–12, 162
- connective publics 158
- content management 172–173
- contention 140–141
- contentious action, role of 173–174
- contentious politics 131–132
- contentious publicness 106
- #ContestingIslamophobia 18, 20
 - case studies 19–20, 23
 - datasets 20, 25
 - findings 30
 - focus on events 22
 - objectives 20
 - pilot study 18–19, 20–21, 23
- #ContestingIslamophobia:
 - Representation and Appropriation in Mediated Activism* 1, 4
- context specific communication
 - patterns 131–132
- #coronajihad 61
- Couldry, N. 170
- counter-narratives 4, 9, 12–13, 14, 29, 103–104, 140–142, 184
 - affective dynamics 28
 - appropriation of 193–194
 - appropriation of #stopIslam 19
 - circulation 177
 - comparative approach 27–28
 - conceptualisation 104–107
 - deficit approach 176–177
 - effectiveness 106
 - entanglements with hate speech 21, 30
 - ephemerality of 190–193, 191, 192
 - Muslim NGOs 23
 - productive friction 140–141
 - re-appropriation 193–197
 - right-wing appropriation 124–126
 - spectrum of 12, 104
 - sustainability 112, 182, 193
 - tactical interventions 132–136
 - transnational dynamics 21
 - trigger events 15
 - see also case studies*
- counter-productive behaviour,
 - avoidance of 179
- counter-publics 10–12, 122, 170, 205
 - conceptualisation 10
 - formation 180
 - sustainability 197–199, 202
 - tensions 173–174
 - Twitter activism 10–12
- counter-speech 12, 112
- COVID-19 pandemic 15, 16, 23, 27, 41, 55, 92–101, 178–179, 188, 194, 200
- actors 146
- celebration of police violence 127
- community interventions 129
- context specific communication
 - patterns 131–132
- counter-narratives 27, 114, 115, 116, 126–132, 141, 194–197, 199
- criminal discourse 97–98
- data gathering 35
- data visualisation 47
- datasets 20, 33, 56–57, 92, 93–94, 141, 194–195, 196, 199
- emojis 127, 128, 130
- hashtags 197–198
- key actors 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156
- mainstream media reports 128–129
- most persistent tweeters 155

- COVID-19 pandemic (*continued*)
 Muslim blame narratives 44, 61, 93, 94, 96–98, 99, 101, 126–129, 194–197, 197
 national location of tweets 126, 145, 146, 147, 167
 network analysis 166–170, 167, 168
 platform manipulation 175–176
 position on Islam/Muslims 95–96, 95, 96, 107, 107, 114, 115, 116, 126–132, 169
 quantitative content analysis 94–95, 94, 145
 quote-tweets 132, 166
 racialisation 44
 racism 138, 139
 retweets 57, 96, 96, 99–100, 100, 107, 126, 130, 151, 154, 166, 190–191, 194–195
 #stopIslam use 190–191, 191
 #Tablighijamaat 95, 100, 107, 117, 127, 145, 155, 197
 tactical interventions 133, 135–136
 tagging 135–136
 topics 96–98, 99–100, 100
 trigger events 26, 62
 tweets 44, 95–100, 95, 96, 97, 100
 UK context 130–131, 132
 Craddock, E. 174
 Critical Technocultural Discourse
 Analysis 106–107, 184
 culture wars 23, 114
Daily Stormer 2
 dark platforms 1, 147, 189
 data frictions 26, 32, 33, 53–54
 bots and spam 55–57
 files and formatting 54–55
 data visualisation 45–47, 45, 46, 160;
see also case studies
 datasets
 cleaning 56
 longitudinal approach 198–199
 management 207
 pattern identification 33
 Twitter/ X 3, 4, 34, 38, 40, 51–53
see also case studies
 De Blasio, E. 158
 De Certeau, M. 175
 De Latour, A. 104, 106
 Dean, Jodie 182, 208
 Dearden, L. 186
 defensive publics 15
 deficit approach 176–177
 deleted tweets 137–138
 Denmark 2
 digital affect culture 117
 digital media landscape 1–2
 Digital Services Act (EU) 4–5, 206, 207
 digital storytelling 129
 disciplinary identity 58–59
 discursive space, expansion of 3
 disinformation 31n3
 disinhibition 84
 displaced mediators 208
 Ditung, S. 114
 Dorsey, Jack 203
 Driscoll, K. 49–50
 Dundalk stabbing 14
 echo chambers 46–47, 48, 141
 Eckert, S. 122
 #EidatHome 56–57, 93
 emojis
 Brexit 69–70, 70
 Christchurch terrorist attacks 83–84, 84, 118–119
 COVID-19 pandemic 129, 130, 131
 encrypted messaging apps 1
 Engles, P. 12
 entanglements 177, 183, 188
 epistemic cultures 41–49, 45, 46
 Ernst, J. 104
 ethnographic research 10
 European Commission 4–5, 207
 Evolvi, G. 105
 Facebook 1, 2, 50, 134–135, 203
 fact-checking 133
 fake news 98, 123, 129–130, 138, 176
 Farkas, Johan 6, 42–43
 far-right 9, 194, 201, 205
 conceptualisation 8–9
 defensive publics 15
 renewal of 29
 solidarity 163
 far-right narratives, trigger events 15
 Feagin, Joe 139
 Feshami, K.A. 191
 Fielitz, M. 12, 106

- Figenschou, T.U. 114–115
 flak 105, 113–114, 123, 128, 135
 Foucault Welles, B. 11, 12, 21, 122, 160, 162, 163, 169, 198, 205
 4chan 14
 Foust, C. 166
 Fraser, Nancy 3
 freedom of speech 200
 frictions 32, 58, 140–141, 182–183, 183. *see also* data frictions; interdisciplinary frictions; platform
 Fuller, Matthew 53
 gender 15, 65, 66–67, 68, 76, 147, 174
 Ghasiya, P. 134, 203
 Gillespie, Tartleton 15–16
 Giraud, E. 182
 Global Justice Movement 10
 Goffey, Andrew 53
 good Muslim tropes 122
 Google 50
 governance 4–5
 Great Replacement narrative 70, 192–193, 195, 201
 grooming gangs 71, 134, 137
 Grootendorst, R. 119
 Habermas, Jurgen 178
 Hall, Stuart 7, 139
 Harcup, T. 82
 Hasan, Mehdi 103, 135, 160–161
 hashtag campaigns 3
 hashtags 3, 13–14, 20–21, 22, 56, 119–120, 166, 188, 193, 197–199, 202, 204
 hate
 conceptualisation 5–6, 9–10
 long tail of 191
 hate crime 14
 hate speech 5
 circulation 30
 conceptualisation 7
 counter-narratives' entanglements with 21, 30
 detection 6–7, 43–44
 normalising 4
 hegemonic assumptions 119
 hegemonic narratives, challenging 140
 #helloworld 23, 89, 113, 119–122, 122–123, 146, 154–155, 165, 166, 197
 Helmond, A. 17
 Hindu nationalism 23, 126, 141, 163–164, 203
 Hindutva activists and ideology 16, 127, 137, 147, 163–164, 169
 Holocaust denial 2
 humour 2, 138–139
 hybrid media ecologies 1–2, 121, 175
 hyper differential counter-publics 122
 hyper-situational responses 122
 imagined audience 113, 128
 Indian American Muslim Council 129, 136, 175
 indignados/15M 11–12
 Indonesia 2
 information warfare 132
 Instagram 1
 instrumentalisation 89
 interdisciplinarity 39–40
 interdisciplinary digital research 23–24
 interdisciplinary frictions 26, 32, 32–33, 39–41
 disciplinary differences 41
 epistemic cultures 41–49, 45, 46
 network diagrams 46
 retweet network 45
 terminology 39–40
 interdisciplinary mixed methods research 57–58
 Internet, value 10
 interruptive engagement 178
 irony, use of 134
 Islamicat account 138
 Islamophobia
 conceptualisation 7–9
 critiques of 19
 mobilisation 23
 Jackson, S.J. 3, 10, 11, 12, 15, 21, 121, 122, 160, 162, 163, 169, 176, 198, 205
 Johnson, Boris 69–70, 72, 94, 108, 110, 111, 118, 119, 136, 198
 Juris, J. 165

- Karlsen, R. 105
 Kavada, Anastasia 11–12, 103–104, 105–106, 120, 131, 132, 140–141, 178
 Kawczynski, Daniel 71
 Kennedy, Helen 45
 Kirby, Danny 22
 Kreiss, Daniel 15
- Lammy, David 71, 162–163, 162
 Latour, Bruno 16, 50
 Law, I. 184
 Lewis, R. 8
 Lezaun, J. 175
 Lim, M. 115, 120
 linguistic content, focus on 6
 lists 133–134
 Littler, J. 159
 London Bridge terrorist incident 79
- McIntyre, Andrew 187
 MAGA 163
 malicious accounts 56
 Manovich, Lev 60n3
 Marcks, H. 12, 106
 marginalised users 181–182
 Marres, Noortje 22, 58
 Marwick, A.E. 8
 Matamoros-Fernández, Ariadna 6, 42–43
 material-semiotic entanglement 123
 media landscape, shifts in 28–29
 memes 2, 6, 195
 Meta 203
 #MeToo 3, 10
 Mills, Charles 139–140
 Mincher, David 70
 misogyny 174
 moderation practices 200–203
 Mondon, A. 138, 139
 Mouffe, C. 105
 multiculturalism 85
 Murthy, Dhiraj 189, 201, 206, 208
 Musk, Elon 5, 24, 28, 33, 144, 186, 189, 199
 Muslim blame narratives 44, 61, 93, 94, 96–98, 99, 101, 194–197, 197
 Muslim invasion narrative 137
 Muslim men, racist narrative 71
 Muslim threat narrative 14
- Muslims
 confrontation avoidance 105
 othering 8
 self-representation 112–113, 194
- Myanmar 2
 #myNYPD 12
- narrative formation 13
 narratives 193
 network analysis 143–144, 160, 183–184
 Brexit 162–164, 162
 Christchurch terrorist attacks 164–166, 164, 165
 COVID-19 pandemic 166–170, 167, 168
 quote-tweets 160–161
 network dynamics 28
 network-building 179–183
 networked collectivity 158
 networked disinformation 2
 networked individualism 158–159
 networked publics 13–14
 networks
 formation dynamics 170
 of solidarity 157–160
 news values, inventory of 82
 Nikunen, Kaarina 40, 43, 58, 159
 Noble, Safiya 202
 Nordic Resistance movement 2
- Occupy 11–12, 183, 205
 O'Neill, D. 82
 Online Safety Act, 2025 (UK) 5
OpIndia 166, 169
 Othering 8, 38
 outbreeding narrative 70, 192–193, 195, 201
- Papacharissi, Zizi 13–14, 28, 158, 161, 193
 Passy, F. 158
 #peacefulmosques 197
 peer-to-peer interaction 181
 platform affordances 15–18
 platform capitalism 106
 platform frictions 26, 32, 33, 49–53
 platform governance 106
 platform manipulation 175–177
 platform regulation 202

- platforms
 - as black-boxes 49–53
 - conceptualisation 15–16
 - mediation 16
- Poell, T. 103–104, 105–106, 120, 131, 132, 140–141
- political performance 199
- Poole, E. 14
- populism 117
- power relations 141
- practice theory 172
- productive friction 140–141
- public/ counter-publics 105–106
- public knowledge deficit 176
- quantitative content analysis 20, 36, 41, 48, 62, 62–64
 - Brexit 71–3, 72, 73, 73
 - Christchurch terrorist attacks 85, 85–86, 86, 191
 - COVID-19 pandemic 94–95, 94, 145
- quote-tweets 20–21, 80–81, 81, 160, 204
 - Brexit 80–81, 81, 160–161, 163
 - Christchurch terrorist attacks 82, 83, 166, 200–201
 - COVID-19 pandemic 131, 166
- race, conceptualisation 7, 139–140
- racial capitalism 44
- racialisation 38, 44
- racism 140
 - banal 139–140, 147, 205
 - collective 137–138
 - conceptualisation 7
 - covert 138
 - cultural 137–138
 - detection 6–7, 38, 44
 - first-hand experiences of 138–139
 - indirect 138
 - individualised 136–137, 139
 - normalisation 2, 8, 139
 - overt 137–138
 - persistence 139–140
 - reiterative 9, 13, 97, 193–197, 199
 - and Twitter/ X 7
 - types of 136–140
 - White Racial Frame 139–140
- racist denial 128, 131, 138
- Rambukkana, N. 140, 199
- Rees-Mogg, Jacob 136
- regulation 4–5
- reiterative racism 9, 13, 97, 193–197, 199
- research design and methods 18, 18–25, 25–26, 32
 - coding 36, 39, 41
 - coding manual, variables 64–68, 66
 - data gathering 34–36, 34, 35, 37, 38–39
 - disciplinary differences 41
 - frictions 25–26
 - interviews 28, 170–171
 - methodological frictions 32–33
 - network analysis 28
 - qualitative analysis 38, 42
 - search terms 34–36, 34, 35, 37, 38–39
 - terminology 39–40
- retweets 36, 46, 46, 175, 186, 204
 - Brexit 79–80, 79, 80, 103, 107, 115–117, 134, 160
 - Christchurch terrorist attacks 82, 83, 85, 87, 89–90, 90, 107, 118, 120, 150, 151, 166
 - COVID-19 pandemic 57, 96, 96, 99–100, 100, 107, 126, 130, 151, 154, 166, 190–191, 194–195
- Rogan, Joe 103, 135
- Rottenberg, C. 159
- Ruiz, P. 9
- Russian Internet Research Agency 56
- Sasahara, K. 134–135
- Schradie, J. 10, 11
- Seeff, Geoff 70
- Segerberg, Alexandra 11, 162
- self-censorship 136
- self-motivating movements 11–12
- self-representation 112–113
- Selva, D. 158
- Shaheen, Faiza 70, 136, 160
- Sharma, S. 7, 38, 138
- Shea, P. 183
- Siapera, Eugenia 14, 15, 18, 184, 201
- slacktivism 12
- Smith, M. 189
- social distancing 38, 44
- social justice movements 10, 11

- social media 170
 - economic models 202
 - intensification of Islamophobia 9
 - as intermediaries 16
 - landscape 1–5
 - limitations 106
 - regulation 4–5, 202
 - role of 30
 - technical architecture for democratic potential 104–105
 - value of 28
- social media companies, opacity 49–53
- social media platforms, affordances 11, 15–18, 30
- socio-technical relations 9
- software limitations 55
- solidarity 170
 - activities 157
 - ephemerality 159
 - far-right 163
 - fragility of 179
 - mediated 159
 - multidimensional potentials 170
 - network-building 179–183
 - networks of 157–160
 - transnational 159
 - typologies 157
- Starmer, Keir 186, 187
- Stephansen, H. 176–177
- stereotypes, reinforcing 122
- #stopIslam 4, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 105, 128–129, 147, 163, 184, 188, 190–191, 191, 193–194, 200, 202
- subaltern counter-publics 3, 12, 15
- surveillance tactics 177–179
- #Tablighijamaat 95, 100, 107, 117, 127, 145, 155, 167–169, 168, 197
- tactical interventions 132–136, 175
- tagging 135–136, 180–181
- Tarrow, S. 132, 140
- technological determinism 17
- Telegram 186, 187
- terminology 15–18, 39–40, 58
- Thompson, E.P. 173
- Thorbjørnsrud, K. 114–115
- TikTok 1, 209
- Tilly, C. 132, 140
- Tinati, Ramine 47–48
- Titley, G. 121
- transnationalism 21, 149
- Treré, Emiliano 12, 56, 173, 175, 183–184
- tribal nationalism 115–116
- trigger events 13–15, 18, 21, 26–27, 61, 193
 - Brexit 62
 - Christchurch terrorist attacks 62, 85, 85–86
 - COVID-19 pandemic 62
- trolling 113–114, 173
- Trump, Donald 18, 21, 117, 147, 187–188, 189, 200
- Tsing, Anna 32, 183
- Tufail, W. 71
- tweets
 - account holders 66–68
 - data gathering 34–36, 35, 38, 49
 - IDs 54–55, 63–64
 - labels 24
 - linked material 63–64
 - quantitative content analysis issues 63–64
 - shared 19
 - textual analysis 33
 - topics 65–67, 66
 - usernames 25
 - see also case studies; quote-tweets; retweets*
- Twitter storms 180
- Twitter/ X 1, 5, 23, 29–30, 170
 - academic legacies 209
 - Academic Research Track 206
 - affordances 17, 179–180, 204–205, 205–206
 - algorithms 202
 - Application Programming Interfaces 50–51, 53, 206, 207, 208
 - bias towards 43
 - changes in ownership 29
 - as conflictual environment 173
 - Coordinated Harmful Activities policy 200–201, 202
 - counter-public activism 10–12
 - critiques of 2, 144, 187
 - data accessibility 33, 204–205, 206
 - datasets 3, 4, 34, 34, 38, 40, 51–53
 - death of 189, 202
 - drop in usage 189

- economic models 202
- elite profile 144
- and encouragement of violence 187
- evolution 24
- far-right use 201, 205
- influential role 2, 3–4
- language-oriented 5–6
- limitations of 140
- and mainstream media 21–22
- and marginalised users 181–182
- marketisation 206–207
- as mediator 16–17
- moderation practices 200–203
- negative perceptions of 189
- parallel discursive arenas 12
- power 184
- and racism 7
- research accessibility 6
- research engagement 6, 204–208, 209
- role of 32, 186–188, 208–209
- significance 187–188
- socio-technical landscape 28
- structural dynamics 157, 184
- technical architecture for democratic potential 104–105
- toxicity 174, 205
- transformation into X 188, 188–190, 208, 209
- usage 171–172
- user-base 24, 189
- value for research 204–208
- value of 3, 28
- see also* tweets
- uncivil discourse 114–115
- United Kingdom, riots, 2024 186–187, 189, 201–202, 203, 208
- United States of America 85, 87, 87
 - Capitol attacks, 2020 187, 201, 208
 - Department of Government Efficiency 189
 - MAGA 163
 - presidential election, 2016 6, 21, 117
 - state-sanctioned Islamophobia 8
- URL sharing 135
- user–event–platform relations 182–183, 184
- usernames 25
- users 143–144
- Van Eemeren, F.H. 119
- Vicari, Stefania 22
- visual disinformation 6
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K 163
- Walker, S. 49–50
- Warsi, Baroness 69–70
- Warsi, Sayeeda 109–111, 114, 160
- Weibo 209
- Werleman, C.J. 178
- WhatsApp 12
- White Racial Frame 139–140
- white supremacism 18, 23, 166, 198
- white victimhood narratives 90
- Whittaker, Craig 99
- Winter, A. 138, 139
- YouTube 1, 50
- Zempi, Irene 14, 18
- Zuberi, T. 43