

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Abstract This chapter offers background accounts on the use of various social media outlets in the Arab world with emphasis on YouTube. It also provides full details on the methodology and theoretical accounts on online religion, flaming, social movements, online activism, extremism, online communities, and selective exposure because of their relevance to the scope of this study.

Keywords Social media • Social networking sites • Middle East Arabic

Social media is growing rapidly in the Arab world with more than 125 million individuals using the Internet in the Arab region, and more than 53 million actively using social networking technologies (Dubai School of Government 2013). Also, Arabic language has become one of the fastest growing languages on Twitter with more than 2 million tweets posted everyday, which marks a great shift from few previous years (SemioCast 2011). In the Arab world where Internet penetration is over 52.2% of the total population (Internet World Stat 2015), Facebook reached a 20.9% penetration among Internet users with over 49 million users as of November 15, 2015 (Internet World Stat 2015). In 2017, Internet penetration in the Middle East was higher than the average around the world with some countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain reaching usage levels that are found in North America and

Western Europe (Internet World Stat 2017a, b). Other Arab countries—Iraq (36.2%), Syria (29.1%), Yemen (24.1%), Palestinian territories (44.7%), Algeria (36.8%), Egypt (36.5%), Libya (43.7%), Sudan (25.8%), and Somalia (5.8%)—have low Internet penetration rates in comparison to the other Arab countries (Internet World Stat 2017a, b). For this book, YouTube is chosen because it is the most popular online video platform, and it is ranked as the second and sometimes third most popular website on the Internet (Alexa 2017; SimilarWeb 2017). In fact, Facebook users are rapidly growing since it is the most popular social network site (SNS), followed by Google+ and then Twitter (Arab Social Media Report 2013, p. 4; Dubai School of Government 2013, p. 13). Indeed, YouTube is regarded as one very powerful social media outlet because it plays a major role in today's world. This is because it has become the most popular video platform online as it delivers two out of every five videos viewed around the world (Burgess and Green 2009). By October 2011, there were about 1.2 billion people age 15 and older [who] watched 201.4 billion videos online globally' (comScore 2011). Statistics published by YouTube reveal that more than 800 million unique users watch clips on YouTube every month, amounting to more than 3 billion hours of video clips. Almost every minute, 72 hours of video are uploaded online, and by 2011 YouTube had over 1 trillion views, making up 140 views for each person in the world (YouTube Statistics 2012). According to a study conducted by The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism in 2012, YouTube has become a news source for many people around the globe. The study, which lasted 15 months from January 2011 to March 2012, concluded the following:

Citizens are creating their own videos about news and posting them. They are also actively sharing news videos produced by journalism professionals. And news organizations are taking advantage of citizen content and incorporating it into their journalism. Consumers, in turn, seem to be embracing the interplay in what they watch and share, creating a new kind of television news. (*Journalism.org* 2012)

Several news corporations and public service broadcasting channels have built online audience by making use of their YouTube channels even more than political entities that use the same platform during election times (May 2010; Van Dijck and Poell 2014). For example, the majority

of Saudi princes and officials consult their publics about important policy issues by using Twitter and other social media outlets, and their audiences get actively engaged like the case of Omar Hussein who responds via his popular YouTube channel that has over 1.5 followers (Reuters 2016). Further, following the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), many Arab governments realized the growing need to be more visible online in order to counter the extremists' narrative. For example, the Jordanian Grand Mufti's office established an electronic department that is staffed by young and social-media-literate scholars who are more engaged with different online audiences in order to delegitimize their opponent's ideology (Casciani 2015).

Based on statistics offered by Alexa, the percentage of YouTube global visitors from the Arab world in relation to worldwide viewership is: Saudi Arabia (1.5%), Egypt (1.0%), and Algeria (0.7%). In Saudi Arabia and Algeria, YouTube is ranked the second most visited website and is the highest ranking worldwide (Alexa 2012). In the Arab region, 285 million videos are viewed every day and more than two hours of video are uploaded every minute, putting it in second position for video views in the world. Saudi Arabia leads the region with the most playbacks followed by Egypt, Morocco, and the UAE. In Saudi Arabia, 50% of all views are from mobile devices, while 40% of all views in the UAE are from mobile devices (Arab Social Media Repot 2013, p. 4). Indeed, YouTube's role in enhancing the public sphere and political activism is very significant since it is a platform for disseminating messages due to the easy manner of uploading and editing video clips and comments (Christensen 2007; Jarrett 2010; Thorson et al. 2010). YouTube is regarded as a "communicative space for deliberation and dissent" which allows civic cultures to have 'antagonism and inclusive political debate' (Uldam and Askanian 2013, p. 1185). In other words, YouTube enhances deliberative democracy and sustains the public sphere because it offers a venue for the powerful and those who are powerless. Before discussing the controversial issues that are linked to Islam, it is important to provide a theoretical framework and elaborate on the methodology followed in this study. In this research, a few theoretical concepts including online religion, online flaming, and selective exposure. The first theoretical concept discussed is online religion, which is one field of Internet Research.

It is important note here that YouTube is not unique as other social media outlets have also become popular in the Middle East. According

to the figures provided by Alexa, Facebook is the premier site in eight Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia) and the second in five other Arab countries (Morocco, Palestinian territory, Qatar, Sudan, and Yemen) and in the position in three other countries (Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). Bahrain is the only Arab country where Facebook is the fourth top website (Alexa 2014). According to a study conducted by Dubai School of Government, it was estimated that the “total number of Facebook users in the Arab world stands at 21,361,863 (Dec. 2010), up from 11,978,300 (Jan. 2010)” (2011, 4). Egypt comprises about 22% of the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world with around 4.7 million users. By the end of May 2013, the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world was about 54,552,875, which is higher than Facebook users in June 2012 that were estimated to be 45,194,452 with 68% of users being below 30 years old and females constituting around 33.4% (Arab Social Media Report 2013, p. 13). It is also worth noting that the highest age concentration remains between 15 and 29 years old, who constitute about 70 to 75% of users. On average, for every two male Facebook users there is one female user (Dubai School of Government 2011, 2012). As for the use of Arabic language on Facebook, it is regarded as one of the fastest growing languages (Dubai School of Government 2012, p. 7). The study by the Arab Thought Foundation revealed that among the top ten topics discussed on Facebook in the Arab world are arranged respectively as follows: social issues; literature, culture, and thought; education and learning; economy; media and free expression; sciences; political issues; security and crime; development; political organizations (2011, p. 29). In the following section, a discussion on online religion is presented and is linked to offline religious practices.

ONLINE RELIGION

Media and religion are both closely linked and are still playing important roles in most of our lives. Almost 64% of North Americans have used the Internet for religious or faith activities (Hoover et al. 2004). However, the academic study of religion and the media is still under-researched (Stout and Buddenbaum 2002, p. 5). This fact applies to the study of almost all types of media and religion aspects along various formats, including online media (Campbell 2010) and the “analysis of religious

content in editorial cartoons” (Kaylor 2012, p. 247). In her survey of research conducted on religion online, Campbell found five main research areas: “social practices, online–offline connections, community, identity, and authority online” (2013). Some of these areas especially online–offline connections, community and identity will be the focus of this study.

Previous empirical studies on the link between media and Islam are also few especially when it comes to online media, and most of them were limited to Islamic blogs, forums, and websites (Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). The focus of the previous studies was mostly on E-jihad and the role of YouTube was rarely mentioned despite its popularity and wide public reach. Bunt does make passing references to YouTube but with no elaborate discussion. For example, he refers to “Ummah Films,” which offer entertainment outlets in an acceptable Islamic manner and mentioned that they “gave an outlet to a number of speakers on popular issues via YouTube and other film sites, which generated interest through populist and at times humours approach to contemporary issues” (Bunt 2009, pp. 50–51).

Also, there are few studies that deal with the Arabs’ online response toward controversial issues related to Islam. For example, Douai and Nofal studied the Arab readers’ online responses on Al Arabiya.net and Al Jazeera.net toward the banning of minaret building in Switzerland and the Ground Zero Mosque controversy in the USA (2012). The study investigated 4539 comments and categorized them as either “support,” “opposition,” or “neutral.” The study revealed that 43% of Al Arabiya’s online readers opposed the Swiss government’s minaret ban, while 33% of them supported the decision. The remaining 24% of readers were neutral. As for the Al Jazeera online readers, 20% opposed the ban, while 56% supported it and the remaining 24% were neutral. In relation to Ground Zero Mosque controversy, 39% of Al Arabiya’s online readers supported the construction of the Mosque, while 35% rejected its idea, and 26% of the online readers expressed neutral voices. Regarding Al-Jazeera readers, 59% supported the idea of building the Mosque, while 20% opposed it, and 21% had neutral views (Douai and Nofal 2012).

In terms of political issues, Rasha Abdulla studied 752 message boards, on three Arab portals: Masrawy, Islam Online, and Arabia, that dealt with the Arabs’ reaction toward 9/11 attacks. Her study concluded that 43.1% of the respondents condemned the attacks, while 30.2% gave

a justification and somehow approved it (2007, p. 1072). The remaining responses (26.7%) contained various other reactions. Also, Conway and Mcinerney (2008) analyzed 50 jihadi videos on Iraq uploaded by 30 YouTube users. They also studied 1443 comments posted by 940 commenters and provided demographic details on the users for example, their age and geographic location as well as other relevant information like number of views, ratings, and number of comments. The study revealed that the majority of posters are under 35 years of age and mostly reside in the USA. The following section contains a discussion about the concept of social movements in relation to religious activism and the virtual Ummah.

VIRTUAL UMMAH AND ONLINE ACTIVISM

Among the important issues discussed in the above studies is the concept of Ummah (“Islamic” nation) (Saunders 2008) on the Internet, which is also termed “virtual Ummah” or “online Ummah” with a special focus on Muslim communities living in the diaspora (Mandaville 2001, 2003; Roy 2004; Al-Rawi 2015a, b, 2016, 2017). Indeed, the Internet has unified many Muslims from around the world in spreading their messages and consuming and producing Islamic materials. Most importantly, it has given some people a much needed collective identity that binds them together, especially in connection to issues of online religious activism and protests. In other words, the “[d]istributive and networked technologies are helping Muslims to forge and sustain distanciated links reminiscent of the umma concept” (Mandaville 2001, p. 190). Jon Anderson (2003) claims that the first Muslim bloggers were students who studied at Western universities who then created online communities for Muslim students’ Associations and uploaded religious texts. Indeed, The virtual Ummah constitutes what Benkler (2006) calls the “networked public sphere” or what Castells terms the “global network society” or the “global public sphere” that is “built around the media communication system and Internet networks, particularly in the social spaces of the Web 2.0, as exemplified by YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and the growing blogosphere” (Castells 1996–1998; Castells 2008, p. 90). In their study of Arabic blogosphere, Etling et al. (2010) found that Arab bloggers cluster around national political concerns, but the issue of Palestine unites the different clusters. Interestingly, bloggers mostly link to some SNSs especially YouTube followed by Al Jazeera (2010).

Al-Rawi (2016) discusses how social-media platforms like Facebook offer users some online venues to express religious thoughts. He studied the online reactions towards the “Innocence of Muslims” film on Facebook and theorized that this platform functions like a virtual mosque as Muslims periodically post virtual supplications and prayers similar to the way they practice their religion offline. Further, SNSs can be regarded as platforms for virtual collective prayers. For example, when some people are terminally sick, they post their videos or images on SNSs, hoping that they will receive collective prayers, encouragement, and love from their friends and families. A similar practice is manifested when an online announcement is made on the death of a friend or relative as the connected audiences are expected to react with compassion and sympathy that are often marked with religious sentiments. In other cases, some religious rituals and myths have become associated with SNS use. For instance, some people in the Middle East would post a message that is often associated with a sensational and religious image, commenting: “you will go to Hell” if you do not retweet, like, share, or comment (Abdallah 2016), prompting thousands of believers to react vigorously.

In the case of the Arab world as it is elsewhere, governments, major corporations, and some religious authorities own mainstream media channels and control the flow of news and messages, while the majority of people are left without a channel to voice their hopes, frustrations, and fears. Hence, social media networks function as an alternative media channel. Mandaville (2001) argues that the new Muslim intellectual often challenges the authority of his government and the mosque and situates himself in “spaces which institutionalised forms of politics cannot reach’ and online media helped him to achieve” (p. 190). Akou studied the online discussion of the Islamic Hijab on online forums and found that the platform allows ordinary users to be involved in *ijtihad* or interpretation of religious texts, stating: “By transcending some of the boundaries of space, time and the body, the Internet has emerged as a place where Muslims from diverse backgrounds can meet to debate ideas and flesh them out through shared experiences” (2010, p. 331).

Further, as the Internet crosses borders and allows people from different places to be interconnected (Papacharissi 2002; Volkmer 2003), it started to make up the foundations of the global public sphere by enhancing and strengthening the link among people sharing the same political or religious convictions (Castells 2001; Dahlberg 2007); these alternative media channels like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube

provided the platform for collective and connective self-expression (Price and Cappella 2002; Segerberg and Bennett 2011; Bennett and Segerberg 2011; Al-Rawi 2014b), especially for the oppressed and others who are not represented in politics or the mainstream media (Neumayer 2012). Philip Howard refers to the increasing importance of the civil society's role in the Islamic world in the sense that they "learned to use ICTs mostly to attract international media attention by sharing digital content that undermines local authority and strengthens civic ties to diasporas" (Howard 2011, p. 150). In this context, Douai and Nofal assert that "YouTube and social media have grown more popular, and gained more legitimacy because they are perceived to be autonomous from their authoritarian states, unlike the mass media landscape" (2012, p. 269). As a result, Arabs and Muslims from all over the world share views and opinions on different issues relevant to their region and religion including politics, fatwas, and basic guidance. In this study, I argue that the online users whose comments and videos are discussed here use YouTube as an alternative media channel because it provides a venue for free expression and is freely accessible and largely uncensored unlike mainstream media outlets. Those users can freely protest and express their views in relation to their religious activism, and thus create a collective and connective online social movement.

Many scholars regard social movements as "collective organized actions to bring about or resist change by means of various historically conditioned strategies" (West and Blumberg 1991, p. 4; Tilly 1978). These social movements seek to form what is called a collective identity as their members are "involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; [and they] share a distinct collective identity" (Della Porta and Diani 2006, p. 20). They emerge as a reaction against some "repressive conditions" that are found in a given social system, and they aim at mobilizing the public around a goal to create a favorable change (Tilly 1978; Zald and McCarthy 1987). Snow et al. (2008) further clarify that "collectivities give voice to their grievances and concerns about the rights, welfare, and well-being of themselves and others engaging in various types of collective action, such as protesting in the streets, that dramatize those grievances and concerns and demand that something be done about them" (p. 3). According to the resource mobilization theory, which focuses on how social movements are organized and developed, social activists must make use of the available resources around them (Jenkins 1981). In this case, this is

done by relying on SNSs channels, like YouTube, and reducing the time and effort invested on resources that they cannot access such as mainstream media channels, state funding, or massive social support. By making use of information technologies, many groups are organized online due to the speed, relative freedom, and ease of doing it, creating what is called “pressure from below” that circumvent the traditional hierarchies of power (Juris 2005 p. 341). McAdam et al. (1996) confirm that social movements need three components in order to emerge and develop: mobilizing structures, opportunity structures, and framing processes. Mobilizing structures refer to the mechanisms that allow activists to organize themselves and be involved in social action (McAdam et al. 2001). Again, SNSs play a major role here. Second, opportunity structures denote the importance of the context or circumstances in creating a social movement. Based on this hypothesis, I argue that the emergence of the controversial issues discussed in this book provide the necessary context for online protests. Finally, the framing processes refer to the way social movement organizers use culturally shared values to present, discuss, and frame their cause in a way that creates a desirable impact (McAdam et al. 2001).

Online social activism is another relevant concept that needs to be elaborated. The Internet has been a very effective platform for activism (Chadwick and Howard 2009), and SNSs in particular have attracted more people worldwide to join in public debates on different political or societal issues. Further, Segerberg and Bennet (2011) argue that the role of social media channels in today’s societies is growing so fast that they entered the phase of protest action in the sense that they have become part of the tools of social and political activism. As explained above, one of the reasons behind the popularity of social media channels stems from ordinary citizens’ frustration with “social control and manipulation by powerful political, corporate and media forces” (Keren 2006, 149). Another reason a result of the exclusion of many groups from mainstream media channels, so they resort to SNSs to freely express their views and organize their movement (Kahn and Kellner 2004; Carroll and Hackett 2006; Bennett 2003). As a result, SNSs have become the preferred medium, functioning as alternative media channels (Chang 2005). In his explanation of Islamism in connection to social movements, Bayat mentions that Islamists feel there is an ongoing struggle against the “universalising secular modernity” in some Islamic societies, so they seek “difference, cultural autonomy, alternative polity and morality” (2005,

p. 894). Indeed, SNSs do constitute the very fabric of the public sphere by enhancing deliberative democracy and social contention though the bonds that link protestors and activists together do not last long (Burgess and Green 2009, p. 77; Calhoun 2004).

Further, several previous studies highlighted the link between online and offline religious practices among Christians, but there is very little empirically derived evidence on Muslims' online and offline religious practices. Campbell asserts that the two spheres are both important and they seem to complement each other as a seemingly "new form of religious culture emerge both online and offline that is best described as 'networked religion'" (2010, p. 193). Other scholars, for example, Young (2004) and Herring (2005) emphasize the link between online and offline religions especially with the rise of cyberchurches, which allow the faithful to worship and perform religious practices online (Campbell 2012, p. 69). Further, Kluver and Cheong (2007) found evidence that traditional religious preachers are finding SNSs very helpful tools to spread their messages and connect with online audiences. In this study, YouTube is seen as an online platform wherein the faithful and others interested in Islam can gather to discuss important issues related to their religion similar to the way Muslims gather offline in a mosque to pray and then debate various issues. According to Resnick's normalization theory, offline activists are moving online to spread their messages and organize, making the Internet a polarized platform. Boyd and Ellison (2007) assert in their literature review on SNS use that "online and offline experiences are deeply entwined" (2007, p. 223; see also Boase et al. 2006). However, there are few studies that examined the connection between the two settings. Though they focused on a different topic related to social capital and online relationships, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe affirmed the existence of this link, but confirmed that it is still not clear "how online and offline modes of communication replace, complement, and facilitate one another" (2011, p. 874). Further, and in relation to media and political attitudes, Wojcieszak mentioned that "although researchers recognize the connection between online and offline activities, not many analyses have addressed the interplay between both milieus" (2010, p. 638). Hence, this study can shed some further light onto this important aspect of media and computer-mediated communication research area as the researcher attempts to link the wider ideological context and the offline protests that erupted with online practices and sentiments expressed.

It is important and relevant to mention here that there is no single Islam around the world since it is not and has never been a “monolithic entity.” Instead, there are many “Islams” (Al-Azmeh 2009) even when examining one specific doctrine in one country like Turkey (Gulalp 2003) or when studying any other religion. Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities” (1991), I argue that Islam itself is an imagined concept, similar to all other religions, since Muslims identify with Islam in various manners, shapes, and ways due to their varied cultural backgrounds and understanding of this religion. Anderson’s concept refers to online and offline members who are loosely linked to each other and whose idea seems to exist in the minds of the community members alone. This is an imagined community because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1991, 224). Similar to Islam, Muslims will never be able to know everyone else, yet many believe that they share some common values. Indeed, this “imagined community,” which is a term applied to communities in general rather than online communities alone, has several positive functions that include offering a sense of unity, hope, and strength to its individuals, which will ultimately provide psychological and social empowerment. This is directly linked to the concept of online Ummah that is discussed above. In interviews with a range of Muslims, Vox news (2016) asked the following question: What does it mean to be Muslim? The answer was simply relevant to who is talking as there can be 1.7 billion different answers. This notion of imagined religion is valid when one examines the way some European politicians argue that they need a customized Islam in their own countries, especially after the increasing terrorist attacks by ISIS. For example, the former French President, Francois Hollande, stated the following: “What we need to succeed in together is the creation of an Islam of France” (Hume and Said-Moorhouse 2016). In Germany, one of Angela Merkel’s close allies mentioned that the country needs to make a “German Islam” that is compatible with the values of “liberalism and tolerance” (Copley 2016). Many other EU countries are searching for common ground between Muslim immigrants and mainstream society in which mutual values can co-exist. Based on the empirical findings of this study, Muslims react differently to the issues explored here because they have different understandings of how and what they should say and possibly do when their religion is criticized. This is all

related to the sense of religious identity that they possess, which varies based on the differences in the cultural context.

Finally and in relation to the role of the diaspora, it is relevant to briefly discuss the impact Muslims living in the West have on strengthening the global public sphere that make up the basis of the virtual Ummah. Karim Karim argues that diasporic communities living in the West are among the most active members in producing cultural content. “There appears to be an attempt by diasporic participants in cyberspace to create a virtual community that eliminates the distances that separate them in the real world....Time and space are seemingly held in suspension in this effort to reconstitute the community and to exchange cultural knowledge held in the diaspora” (2007, p. 273). Indeed, Muslims living in the diaspora feel an urge to assert their identities and religious beliefs amid what some view as a threat to their core convictions. Olivier Roy argues that Islamic revival, or “re-Islamization,” in Europe and North America results from the efforts of westernized Muslims to retain their faith and identity in a non-Muslim context (2004). In some cases, this results in global networking efforts or what Olesen calls “Transnational Activism” to counter what is believed to be Western attacks against Islam like the case of the Muhammed cartoons controversy (Olesen 2009). Yet, Bayat, building on Benedict Anderson’s imagined-communities concept, rightly argues that some of these networks are built on what he called “imagined solidarities” because of the weak links and differences between the various clusters that form the basis of a social movement (2005). Alternatively, SNS and ICT use were employed by the civil society in many Islamic countries as tools “with which to respond to Islamic fundamentalism” (Howard 2011, p. 148). In general, social media networks are used by many Muslims in the diaspora for religious and faith-related issues that serve to keep them closely connected to other followers in their home countries and elsewhere. In the following section, a brief discussion is given on online flaming.

ONLINE FLAMING AND IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM

Flaming, which involves swearing and the use of obscene language, seems to be very common among YouTube and other social network users (Crystal 2001; O’Sullivan and Flanagan 2003; Alonzo and Aiken 2004). In one study on political expression, 32.7% of the YouTube online messages were found to be impolite in comparison 23% on

Facebook (Halpern and Gibbs 2013). In fact, YouTube comments are described as being “notorious dens of filth, racism, and misogyny” (Dunn 2013), and it was only recently that Google decided to run these comments through Google+ in order to decrease unruly comments, although it reversed its decision later. In his study on religion and YouTube, Theobald rightly observes:

despite the dynamic nature of the medium, the quality of interfaith relations online, particularly on YouTube, is neither new nor revolutionary, but, instead, reflects the centuries of animosity that characterised dialogue among the pious in the years before the nineteenth century. Historically, contact between the advocates of different religions typically resulted in a battle for souls; conversion was the aim, ridicule or polemic the method, apologetics the defence (2009, p. 326).

Based on empirical study on YouTube comments, religion seems to be the most discussed topic (Thelwall et al. 2011). Further, Strangelove asserts that a “considerable number of video bloggers on YouTube engage in debates over religion. Some of the larger areas of debate are focused on evolution, abortion, atheism, Scientology, Mormonism, Christianity, and Islam” (2010, p. 148). Unfortunately, many of these debates can develop into heated discussions that often involve insults and curses, mostly due to the anonymity that YouTube offers. Burgess and Green call it the flame war or “YouTube drama,” which occurs when a “flurry of video posts clusters around an internal ‘controversy’ or an antagonistic debate between one or more YouTubers” that “can sometimes be based around controversial debates (especially religion, atheism, or politics)” (2009, p. 97). Sometimes, online flaming is practiced due to other issues that concern the public. For example, Gully found in his study on “soccer nationalism” that YouTube contained a great deal of flaming videos and comments about the soccer competition between Algeria and Egypt (2012).

In this context, it is important to discuss the online disinhibition effect because it sheds light on some of the reasons behind online flaming. The disinhibition effect “releases deeper aspects of intrapsychic structure, that it unlocks the true needs, emotions, and self attributes that dwell beneath surface personality presentations” (Suler 2004, p. 324). Here, Lange’s ethnographic study reveals that YouTube manifests two types of relationships among the youth in relation to social

network behavior. The first one is the “publicly private” behavior in which video posters identities are disclosed but content access is limited to the public. On the other hand, the “privately public” behavior indicates that YouTube content is widely shared and accessible; however, personal details of the posters are often limited (2007). Since the identities of the posters are mostly hidden or are “privately public,” they seem to be dissociative in expressing their views. According to the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDEs) some people may experience what is called deindividuation or an enhanced sense of in-group when interacting online. “Deindividualization theory proposes that behavior becomes socially deregulated under conditions of anonymity and group immersion, as a result of reduced self-awareness” (Spears et al. 2002, p. 94). Further, Suler (2004) identifies six factors that lead to the disinhibition effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Two of the above factors are of relevance here: dissociative anonymity and solipsistic introjection. The former refers to the kind of behavior manifested when “people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out” (Suler 2004, p. 322). Additionally, solipsistic introjection is another psychological condition in which “People may feel that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion. Reading another person’s message might be experienced as a voice within one’s head, as if that person’s psychological presence and influence have been assimilated or introjected into one’s psyche” (ibid., p. 323). Many comments analyzed in this study seem to fall within these two concepts. In relation to the dissociative anonymity factor, some YouTube commenters who regularly insult Muhammed and Islam seem to act based on the fact that they remain anonymous; otherwise, they would be attacked online or even offline in many Muslim societies that prohibit insulting the prophet of Islam and/or his family members (Associated Press 2012). For instance, a Saudi journalist, Hamza Kashgari, was once accused of insulting Muhammed in one of his public tweets; as a result, he was forced to flee Saudi Arabia to Malaysia where he was later deported to his home country. Kashgari’s tweet generated over 30,000 angry responses and many death threats (BBC 2012). The journalist later apologized and asked for forgiveness. Others who were less restricted in revealing their identities got threats. For example, over 100 Arab-Christian Canadians who are mostly Egyptian Copts

living in the diaspora got threats from Al-Qaeda group who called them “dogs in diaspora” for their attempts to convert Muslims and for being “vocal about their opposition to Islam” in different online platforms (CBC News 2010). In other words, flaming often occurs when Islam’s extreme opponents and supporters interact online as these two groups share a binary vision of the world that is only black and white. Edward Said’s notion of the clash of ignorance is relevant here as each group practices one kind of othering viewing either Islam or Christianity as static and monolithic religions; each group believes that the other is inferior to them and their religious ideology is fundamentally flawed (Said 2001; Al-Rawi 2014d).

In connection to the above discussion, a report issued by the University of California Berkeley and the Council on American-Islamic Relations mentioned the names of 74 groups that contribute to Islamophobia in the USA. The majority of these groups is known for their far-right affiliations. From 2008 and 2013, about \$206 million was spent to promote Islamophobia including launching ongoing media campaigns and supporting other inflammatory efforts since the primary purpose of 33 of these groups “is to promote prejudice against, or hatred of, Islam and Muslims” (Kazem 2016). Some of these groups include: Abstraction Fund, Clarion Project, David Horowitz Freedom Center, Middle East Forum, American Freedom Law Center, Center for Security Policy, Investigative Project on Terrorism, Jihad Watch and Act! for America (Ibid.). Incidentally, many of the above groups are closely connected to conservative US politicians, especially those who are actively involved in the current Trump administration. During the 2016 US elections and the Brexit event in the UK, the link between various far-right groups has become clearer as they have shown strong connections between them, especially that they share similar goals and values. For example, the UK non-governmental organization (NGO), Hope not Hate, stated that “White nationalists and UK conspiracy theorists have helped spread fake news across the world,” citing the examples of 28 far-right groups that are active in the UK (Townsend 2017). For example, Paul Watson, who is the editor of the InfoWars conspiracy news website, is based in London, having more than 480,000 followers on Twitter and 760,000 YouTube subscribers. He is believed to be responsible for creating and disseminating news such as “Is Hillary Dying?” hoax (ibid.) as well as many fake news stories on Muslim immigrants. Other far-right groups that are known for their anti-Islamic stances include the English

Defence League and the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA), which has several branches in Western countries including Canada. For the former, the group's Facebook page administrator was interviewed by BBC with regard to his online and offline activities. The article stated:

Being an admin was possibly the most meaningful position [he] had ever held. People listened to him. He had some respect, power, affirmation. He loved it and spent most of the day there. He devoured articles that others in his group had posted, or that he found himself, about the danger Islam posed to the UK. He started attacking Muslims on other Facebook pages, and they attacked him back. Each side polarising and radicalising the other. Paul was living in an exciting Manichean world of friends and enemies, right and wrong – in which he was the chief protagonist. (BBC Magazine 2015)

This connection between different far-right and anti-Muslim groups can be further manifested in their joint efforts to protest and organize rallies such as the case of the Ground Zero Mosque controversy in New York, which garnered the attention of Daniel Pipes, Pamela Geller, and Robert Spencer who are known for their avid support for the far-right Dutch MP, Geert Wilders. In the Netherlands, the 2017 elections showed how some far-right members expressed sympathy and support for Wilders; for example, Pipes and the foundation he runs, the Middle East Forum, donated money in “six figures” to assist Wilders with the legal fees following the “Fitna” trial. He described Wilders as “the most important European alive today” (Hakim and Schuetze 2017). Further, David Horowitz, a US rightwing activist who opposes Muslim immigration, donated about \$150,000 to Mr. Wilders's Party for Freedom to support his Wilders in the 2017 Dutch election (Fang 2017), stating: “I think he's the Paul Revere of Europe. Geert Wilders is a hero, and I think he's a hero of the most important battle of our times, the battle to defend free speech” (Hakim and Schuetze 2017). Indeed, whenever a new controversial issue surrounding Islam emerges, the same groups and figures cited above appear in partisan and mainstream media to further promote their ideological stances and discuss the issue of free speech. There is no doubt that many racist, Islamophobic, white supremacist, and hateful comments can assist some right-wing politicians in their efforts in gaining more support from voters. For example, a US diplomatic cable

revealed before Wilders' release of his "Fitna" film in 2008 that he "himself appears to be using the commotion around the anticipated release of the film to attack his domestic political adversaries on the right and the left, as well as to focus extensive attention on his anti-Muslim message, which resonates with his own domestic constituency" (Wikileaks 2008a). In the following section, a discussion of the concept of selective exposure is presented because this theoretical framework can be helpful in explaining the way online communities gather on YouTube.

SELECTIVE EXPOSURE AND ONLINE COMMUNITIES

In order to explain why online users search for particular YouTube videos that either support or oppose their values and beliefs, it is important to discuss the concept of selective exposure, which is rooted in Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance; the latter states that human beings seek consistency when confronted with contradictory views (Zillmann and Bryant 2013). In other words, when there is some kind of inconsistency or dissonance, people tend to become intellectually and/or psychologically distressed or unstable, hence, they seek information that corresponds with their existing beliefs and values (Cooper 2007). This is because people are "seldom passive absorbers of data; rather, we selectively seek, choose, and screen information we use" (Cotton 2013, p. 11).

There seems to be a close correlation between selective exposure and partisan preferences, which largely affect the kind of media messages one searches for (Chaffee et al. 2001; Meffert et al. 2006). Over time analyses indicate that partisan selective exposure leads to polarization and people's political beliefs motivate their media use (Stroud 2010). In this context, Tsifti et al. (2013) found that opinion-climate perceptions have an influence on the selective exposure to some ideological media channels, and several other scholars found evidence that supports the above claim by investigating various media outlets (Donsbach 1991; Sunstein 2001; Mutz and Martin 2001; Galston 2003; Graf and Aday 2008). Further, Brundidge and Rice (2009) emphasize that selective exposure to similar media messages might lead to a "narrowed domain of political discourse" as the different parties engaged in discussions are more likely to exhibit rigid views. Indeed, this might automatically lead to creating audience enclaves (Sunstein 2009) who sometimes resort to flaming or

venting negative sentiments when encountered by opposing views as explained above.

It is important to mention here that the Internet plays a significant role due to the fact that it offers an “amplification in selectivity” (Brundidge and Rice 2009, p. 150). Johnson et al. (2009) found that blog users practice selective exposure when seeking political information especially among active users, who are highly educated, partisan, and politically active online and offline. Further, Johnson et al. (2011) studied how their respondents practiced selective exposure in viewing political websites, but there was no evidence of selective avoidance practiced. In the case of Facebook, An et al. (2013) investigated news articles shared on Facebook and found evidence that selective exposure does exist on social media since “users predominantly share like-minded news articles and avoid conflicting ones, and partisans are more likely to do that.”

On the other hand, there are other media studies that challenge the above theory. For example, Webster and Ksiazek used network analysis metrics and Nielsen data on television and Internet use and found overlapping patterns of public attention rather than enclaves of audiences who have distinct media preferences (Webster and Ksiazek 2012). In relation to social media use, Lee et al. (2014) found that “political discussion moderates the relationship between network heterogeneity and the level of partisan and ideological polarizations.” Further, Brundidge and Rice (2009) discuss how heterogeneous Internet users practice selective exposure to political disagreements since it is useful in enhancing democracy, the public sphere, and the whole political process (p. 145). The authors admit that studies examining “heterogeneous political discussion networks” are still under-researched (p. 149). Knoblach-Westerwick and Meng (2008), for example, studied how people who are politically active and engaged are more likely to seek views that oppose their beliefs since they are more certain that they can counter them. Johnson et al. (2011) basically agree with the previous study as they found that politically active respondents were significantly less likely to avoid information that opposed their beliefs. In this context, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) conducted a study on a Facebook group and found that there are two main online communities. The first one constitutes the majority of the group (73%) that expresses support for the stated position, whereas the minority (17%) expresses opposition to

the group's position. The authors did find evidence of flaming as 25% of online discussions were inflammatory.

As will be explained below, the theory of selective exposure in its two-fold arguments—the homogenous and heterogeneous views—seems to offer answers to the way SNS communities are formed and engaged in online discussions. Similar to traditional media viewership wherein audience fragmentation and ideological selectivity are well documented (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Feldman et al. 2012), SNS also function in a similar manner as there are multiple public spheres. Van Dijk (1998), for example, stressed that ideologies can distinguish between the different groups in a given society, and they mostly determine how “groups and their members view a specific issue or domain of society” (p. 65). Here, Turow's concept of “gated communities” (1997) or Gitlin's theory of public sphericules are linked to the selective exposure theory especially in explaining the existence of heterogeneous views on online platforms. In other words, the theory of selective exposure can be applied to the context of this study, which is related to online religious communities. However, the empirical findings of this study reveal that there is also a neutral online community rather than a polarized one, which often makes neutral comments. In the following section, the study's methodology is presented.

METHODOLOGY

For this book, both quantitative and qualitative content analysis is conducted on YouTube comments and video clips followed by a critical assessment of the overall results. First, the study employed inductive framing analysis to detect the most dominant issues used by online users and afterward determining how often and why these issues were highlighted. The rationale behind using an inductive approach is related to the fact that new frames can be detected and used, which might not be possible if a deductive approach had been followed. In other words, the deductive approach might be limiting because other studies might explore areas that are not relevant to the focus of this study. Frames are defined as the “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over times, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese 2001, p. 11). Since they are shared, frames are used by audiences as “interpretive schema” to make sense of and discuss an issue and by journalists to present interesting news reports (Nisbet

2010). Van Gorp whose research falls within the cultural approach in framing identifies two main elements in analyzing frames: framing and reasoning devices (Van Gorp 2010). This constructionist and inductive framing method is employed in order to design the framing packages instead of relying on the deductive approach. If there are any changes in the frames used the researcher attempts to link them to political or social events that occurred offline, which is investigated by examining news stories, poll surveys, and expert reports by (non)-governmental organizations. Indeed, in today's world, many online and offline events are inseparable as both complement each other.

In general, the framing process is basically focused on many areas such as the kind of frames transmitted by politicians and/or their parties, journalists and/or their news organizations, and the way audiences understand these frames (Carragee and Roefs 2004, p. 215; see also Gamson 1992). Reese affirms that one of the basic ways of understanding the overall process of framing is through the way audiences organize and make sense of events and issues (2001), and D'Angelo suggests in his multiparadigmatic model for news-framing process that audience frames that "generate opinions of ordinary people in mundane conversations" influence news making (D'Angelo 2002, p. 882). Further, Entman (1993) suggests that audiences are sometimes involved in "counterframing" of what is presented in the news by journalists and media organizations. In other words, it is very important to carefully study the way audiences frame events and issues and reproduce them because it is part of the framing process as a whole. In this context, Carragee and Roefs assert the importance of studying audience frames as they "can enrich scholarship on hegemony" (2004, p. 223).

Other scholars highlighted the importance of studying audience frames. For example, Scheufele mentions in his framing typology that audience frames that are regarded as dependent variables are like "feedback loop[s] from audiences to journalists" (Scheufele 1999). In his cascading framing model, Entman explains the power of audience frames, which is basically weaker than those used by the elites as these frames are located in the final level on the cascade. Though they constitute the "true mix of public sentiments moving from the bottom back up to policymakers," these frames still exert certain kinds of influence on journalists and policy makers (2003, p. 421). Entman claims that audience frames have bi-directional power in "spreading ideas from the public up to where they affect thinking of elites and the president, the main

road is through the media” (2003, p. 420). Cherribi applied Entman’s cascading network activation model to analyze the Al-Jazeera channel and found that there are many powerful sides involved like the Emir of Qatar, political elites, Al-Jazeera journalists, and Al-Qaradawi. On the other hand, the Arab publics, polls, and other indicators are thought to have the weakest influence factors (2006, p. 135). Still, (online) audiences have an impact, even if is a slight one, on the way this news organization frames events.

In this study, the focus is on online audiences as many previous studies relied on audience surveys and interviews with news readers to understand the way they frame events and issues, for example, risks from science (Hornig 1992) and the welfare state (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Sotirovic 2000). Matthew Nisbet mentions the importance of studying framing in social media, which marks a shift from traditional studies that are limited to the “transmission model of traditional news framing effects to a more interactive, social constructivist, and ‘bottom up’ model of framing.” In this way, ordinary citizens become “active contributors, creators, commentators, sorters, and archivers of digital news content” (2010, p. 75). Constantinescu and Tedesco recommend including “the Internet as a resource for quantitative research on audience frames” (2007, p. 444) as the frames transmitted by the online public are usually done through social media. Further, Matthew Nisbet mentions the importance of studying framing in social media which marks a shift from traditional studies that are limited to the “transmission model of traditional news framing effects to a more interactive, social constructivist, and ‘bottom up’ model of framing.” In this way, ordinary citizens become “active contributors, creators, commentators, sorters, and archivers of digital news content” (2010, p. 75). Further and in relation to Entman’s assumption of audiences’ counter-framing, Cooper refers to frames used by some news bloggers who sometimes talk “back to power” with the way they often oppose and criticize the dominant news frames. As indicated above, despite the fact that the influence of these frames might be weak, it is important to highlight their meanings, intentions, and types by which “an ordinary citizen question the veracity of factual assertions in the news products, [and] ...he or she could problematize the interpretations of facts routinely packaged with straight news reporting” (Cooper 2010, p. 136). Groshek and Al-Rawi call audience frames used on SNS “user generated framing” (2013), while I call it “computer-mediated framing” (Al-Rawi 2014c) and Meraz and Papacharissi call

it “networked framing,” which basically “aggregates the actions of the crowd in an organic, ad hoc manner” (2013) in order to sustain and amplify certain messages in the online information flows. In this study, I argue that computer mediated framing in relation to issues dealing with Islam functions as a bottom-up flow of information, which mostly attempts to provide alternative messages that counter the stronger information flows coming from some Western mainstream media outlets and/or some authoritative political powers in the region. This is done because YouTube offers a venue for those who are voiceless or under-represented in politics and/or mainstream media, as explained above.

In order to determine the most recurrent frames discussed, this study followed the inductive framing approach to investigate YouTube comments, as mentioned above. The first stage of the study involved conducting a pilot study on comments related to the Muhammed cartoons incident. This preliminary study examined over 700 comments and 50 video clips to find the most appropriate coding measures to be followed such as the classification of video clips’ tones as well as the main issues discussed in comments. A thorough examination of the most recurrent themes covered in the comments was conducted by focusing on any patterns or recurrent frames that were later linked to the over-reaching ideas. This was done by first identifying the framing and reasoning devices after which the main issues were determined following Van Gorp’s (2010) research approach.

In his analysis of framing, Entman mentioned that frames can be identified by examining certain words (Entman 1991, p. 7). Also, Tankard pointed out in his study on inductive framing the importance of finding “keywords, catchphrases and symbols to help detect each frame” in the text (Tankard 2003, p. 102). Other scholars like Gamson and Lasch (1983), and Pan and Kosicki (1993) emphasized that frames can be found by investigating the framing and reasoning devices in the texts such as looking for certain words or lexical choices, metaphors, and descriptions or specific statements used to explain or portray an event. In this context, Entman confirms: “The *text* contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman 1993, p. 52).

Further, Gamson and Modigliani discussed the media package in which they emphasized the identification of metaphors, visual images,

historical exemplars, catch-phrases, and depictions in order to locate the frames (1989). Van Gorp asserts the importance of identifying the frame package, which refers to every “reconstructed structure of framing devices and a logical chain of reasoning devices that demonstrates how the frame functions to represent a certain issue” (2010, p. 91). Among the other framing devices that Van Gorp recommends examining are “themes and subthemes, types of actors, actions and settings, lines of reasoning and causal connections, contrasts, lexical choices, sources, quantifications and statistics, charts and graphs, appeals” (ibid.). Finally, Tankard listed 11 framing mechanisms that guide identification of the dominant frames in texts that include: headlines, subheadings, photographs, photo captions, leads, source selections, quotes selections, pull quotes, logos (graphic identification), statistics, and concluding statements (2003, p. 101).

In this study, the reasoning and framing devices and framing mechanisms that are cited above were mostly taken into account in constructing the framing package that included identifying six main frames: (1) Pro-Islam, (2) neutral toward Islam, (3) threats and calls for jihad, (4) curses and insults, (5) boycotting Danish products, and (6) anti-Islam. Similar dominant frames were found by the researcher in another study on the Facebook page of “The global campaign to counter the hurtful film against the Prophet Muhammed” that was created to protest against the “Innocence of Muslims” film (Al-Rawi 2016). Two coders including the author of this book worked independently using the designed code-book to examine 700 comments. The second coder received training on coding the YouTube comments and videos, and the overall agreement was 0.756 (Cohen Kappa’s), which was “substantial” (Landis and Koch 1977). In relation to the Muhammed cartoons’ chapter, another coder, as well as the author of this book, independently analyzed 30 video clips and 450 comments. The Cohen Kappa’s test produced a score of 0.689 for YouTube comments and 0.750 for the videos, indicating a substantial agreement.

As for the analysis of the video clips, the same procedure cited above was followed but more emphasis was put on the visual aspects, which include the “video footage of the person, place, or event being covered” (Coleman 2010, p. 236). In visual communication analysis, one of the most important features of moving images is identifying the theme or idea that is being highlighted in a scene (Choi and Lee 2006). Messaris and Abrahams assert that journalists and media producers visually frame

events and people by “the simple act of selection – choosing one view instead of another when making the photograph, cropping or editing the resulting image one way instead of another, or simply choosing to show viewers one image out of the many others that may have been produced at the same place and time” (2001, 217). In this study, the videos were coded for valence by categorizing them as positive, neutral, or negative toward Islam or its prophet in relation to the Muhammed cartoon incident. By making use of the framing analysis techniques cited, the videos were mainly analyzed by observing the selection of visual cues, themes, verbal language, and written text (lexical choices) if available.

Afterward, the validation of the inductively reconstructed frames was made by soliciting the help of a second coder who is a native speaker of Arabic. The second coder independently analyzed 30 video clips and 450 comments from the Muhammed cartoons’ incident which constitute over 10% of the data investigated (Wimmer and Dominick 1994, p. 173). Cohen’s Kappa, which accounts for “chance agreement,” was employed since the data coded was nominal (Lombard et al. 2002), and the test which was conducted by SPSS 11.5 for Windows produced a score of 0.689 for YouTube comments and 0.750 for the videos which both indicate a “substantial” agreement (Landis and Koch 1977, p. 165).

The choice of using Arabic is related to the fact that it is widely used not only in the Arab world but elsewhere in the world with over 250 million speakers. Further, the majority of Arabic speakers are Muslims and the Quran, which is the Muslims’ holy book, is in Arabic. It is assumed that more reactions toward the Muhammed cartoons will be found among Arabic speakers. Also, the study is focused on Arabs’ reactions in particular because the search terms used in the webometric tool are all in Arabic to guarantee that the video posters and commentators are Arabs. If an Arabic speaker searches on YouTube for a particular incident such as “Fitna” film [فتنة ملف] the search term will show video clips that are either entitled or tagged with this term in Arabic. For English speakers, getting the same Arabic video clips is difficult if the search term is in English. As indicated, Arabs in general are among the majority groups in the Islamic world and Islam originated in Arabia. Many other Muslim nations like Iran, Indonesia, and Turkey do not speak Arabic as their mother tongue and may react similarly toward the same issues. However, since I am not familiar with the languages spoken in these countries, I limited myself to Arabic.

In general, the comments investigated in this study included those written in Arabic, Latinized Arabic, and English. Arabic language is the dominant language used here as explained above though other languages, especially English, is also popular in Arab Gulf countries, which contain large expatriate populations, and where citizens often use both Arabic and English media. For example, English websites are accessed more than Arabic websites in Qatar, Bahrain, Lebanon, and the UAE (*Northwestern University in Qatar* 2013, p. 11).

In order to mine the comments and information on the video clips, a webometric tool was used (Thelwall 2009) in different months of 2012 and 2013; there are very few studies that used this tool to harvest Arabic comments (Al-Rawi 2014a, b, 2015a, b). Further, detailed information on the video posters and the commenters was collected to help understand the demographic variations. This webometric tool has limitations in retrieving video clips, so different keyword searches were used and any duplicated clips were removed. Another limitation is that the webometric tool can only retrieve about 1000 comments per video. It is important to mention here that an updated YouTube API (application programming interface) limitations prevented the researcher from getting basic demographic information on YouTube users that was originally available in the beginning such as age and sex thus creating more limitations in the data gathered.

Also, all the videos collected from the four case studies ($n = 887$) were further mined using another webometric tool called YouTube Data Tools (YTDT). The data collection is meant to explore the “network of relations between videos via YouTube’s ‘related videos’ feature, starting from a search or a list of video ids” (Rieder 2015). The crawl depth “which specifies how far from the seeds the script should go” was set to 0 in order to find the social network connections between the above YouTube videos only. Afterwards, the results of this data mining were visually presented by using Gephi (<https://gephi.org/>): an open-source visualization software (Bastian et al. 2009). The graph is found in the conclusion and offers an insight into the clustering of different YouTube videos in relation to the four case studies examined here.

Finally, all the comments collected from the four case studies ($n = 10,054$) were analyzed in the conclusion using a computer-assisted approach called QDA Miner Wordstat software. The goal is to conduct a sentiment analysis of the overall comments. In sentiment analysis, it is relevant to investigate how the dominant words and phrases are

associated with other expressions because they assist in the overall generation of meaning (Pang and Lee 2008; Taboada et al. 2011). The manual classification of words and terms is done to examine sentiments in different contexts (Diakopoulos and Shamma 2010; O'Connor et al. 2010; Das and Chen 2001; Tong 2001) since it is assumed that “there are certain words people tend to use to express strong sentiments” (Pang et al. 2002, 2). This includes identifying the most recurrent words and phrases used in the comments as well as their associated terms (Xenos 2008; Groshek and Al-Rawi 2013; Al-Rawi 2015a, b).

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