

Summer 2010

Warblog without end: online anti-Islamic discourses as persuadables

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Munksgaard, Daniel Carl. "Warblog without end: online anti-Islamic discourses as persuadables." PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) thesis, University of Iowa, 2010.
<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.xw414rni>

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WARBLOG WITHOUT END:
ONLINE ANTI-ISLAMIC DISCOURSES AS PERSUADABLES

by

Daniel Carl Munksgaard

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Communication Studies
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Timothy Havens

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a critical discourse analysis of how anti-Islamic rhetoric in prominent online forums is articulated within the context of popular discourses of multiculturalism and tolerance. According to Melanie McAlister, perceptions of Muslims within the United States are unique in comparison to other minority groups in that they are almost entirely mediated, whether it is the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the terrorist attacks of September 11th, or the various Muhammad cartoon controversies. While much work has been done analyzing how Islam and Muslims are mediated in popular film and television, very little attention has been given to how these perspectives are mediated through the Internet.

Using Erving Goffman's theory of performativity and Kristine Fitch's notion of persuadables, I examine how both prominent bloggers and pseudonymous commentators work in a "back stage" context to bring Islamophobic norms and premises within the sphere of acceptable opinions for the "front stage" of mainstream media discourses. In particular, I examine how these discourses have evolved over the past few years on three prominent weblogs: the anti-jihadist Little Green Footballs, the liberal-atheist advocacy blog One Good Move, and the popular news aggregate Fark. In light of increasing evidence that weblogs exert a high level of influence over popular media discourses disproportionate to their readership, these websites offer a glimpse "back stage" into how contemporary American discourses on Islam and Muslims are articulated across a broad array of political perspectives, particularly in relation to norms and premises regarding multiculturalism, tolerance, and freedom of expression.

While Islamophobic rhetoric has become firmly embedded within discourses of the American Right, each of the three sites examined show a steady integration of anti-Islamic perspectives within the American Left. Leftist anti-Islamic discourses are frequently articulated within the context of general anti-religious sentiment, misanthropy, and a belief that the values of “the Islamic world” are inherently incompatible with the liberal, democratic, and multicultural values of “the West.” While by no means universal, these perspectives have become sufficiently common, recognizable, and sensible to be granted the status of persuadables within these particular web forums, which in turn helps to move them into the realm of popular American cultural persuadables.

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Thesis Supervisor

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

I think our motto should be, post-9-11: raghead talks tough, raghead faces consequences.

Ann Coulter

Bomb Mecca 2009-06-18 01:58:14 AM: I know you guys mean well with your wearing of green and protesting in local cities [supporting Iranian protesters] but don't you realize how pointless it is? It's kinda like marching for aids or walking for cancer, it makes you feel good and like you're doing something but it accomplishes nothing.

Markoff_Cheney 2009-06-18 02:03:24 AM: obvious troll is obvious.

VwlssWndr 2009-06-18 02:10:01 AM: I don't know, with a name like "Bomb Mecca," he could be a concerned poster.

Whatever the state of racism, sexism, homophobia, or any other forms of bigotry may be in the contemporary United States, there is no denying that the rules of public discourse regarding such matters has changed significantly in the past several decades. Where organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan were once able to operate openly and with impunity, they now lay broken and impotent, lacking both the financial and cultural capital necessary to have any meaningful influence over policy or opinions. While public individuals could once make bold declarations supporting policies of segregation and discrimination, now a popular mainstay of radio like Don Imus is fired in disgrace over the use of a racially pejorative term. It is certainly the case that bigoted, regressive ideas of the Other are still deeply embedded within American culture, but it is also the case that hate speech certainly is much more quiet (at least in public, mass mediated discourses) than it once was.

The election of Barack Obama as United States president in 2008 appears to offer organized racism a new recruiting tool, and indeed, a marked rise in the official

membership rolls of groups such as Aryan Nations occurred following his election. More disturbingly, high profile hate crimes such as the shooting of a security guard at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. have also made a marked increase. But these violent attacks in particular are a sign of organized racism's *decline* in political power rather a new lease on life. Such actions suggest a profound feeling of disenfranchisement felt within such movements – it is a general rule that terrorism is not a common tactic of the politically powerful.

This relative silence – punctuated by occasional high-profile acts of violence – has a profound impact on the persuasiveness of bigoted arguments. In a culture where it is considered taboo to even say out loud a word like “nigger” in any context, much less indicate support for the racist sentiments embedded in the word, persuasion becomes unlikely. The association of such acts with domestic terrorist activities during a time defined by the “War on Terror” serves to make persuasion virtually impossible. To borrow a term from Fitch (2003), overtly bigoted opinions cannot be considered as *persuadables* within contemporary American popular culture, where “persuadables” are defined as “matters that people perceive to be neither inevitable nor impossible, but rather more or less likely, acceptable, or desirable... that take form within the unspoken premises of a cultural system” (pp. 110-111). Under the cultural logics of diversity, privacy, and freedom of speech, hate speech is largely understood to be a barely tolerated pathology that may be spoken, but not heard. The views of neo-Nazis, the Klan, and other similar groups are treated as separate cultures with their own bizarre logics, people to be ridiculed, pitied, and feared. Declining memberships within such groups are a more visible sign that their

views have become so inconceivable to mainstream American culture as to be unintelligible, going against unspoken premises such as the inherent equality of all human beings, the strength of diversity, and the socially progressive narrative of American history. While the advent of the World Wide Web has permitted them public “spaces” of their own, this has arguably done more to help form contemporary opinions about the Internet being a haven for social outcasts than it has helped them repair their popular image within the larger culture.

Just as American culture has pushed such talk from the center to the periphery within a few short decades, however, the possibility remains for hate speech to be worked back into the mainstream. Indeed, it is my contention that exactly such a shift is occurring. While the overt bigotry of the past is a cultural anachronism that goes against our cultural premises, new forms of hate speech are being situated *within* these premises. Specifically, reactionary voices within the wake of 9/11 have had some success in making anti-Muslim discourses persuadable.

My dissertation makes use of three separate online forums as case studies in how this shift in persuadables is occurring: the (initially) conservative, vocally anti-Islamic blog *Little Green Footballs*, the left-leaning atheist blog *Onegoodmove.org*, and the popular news and entertainment aggregator *Fark.com*. Choosing these three in particular serves two different purposes. First, the three can be considered to represent a spectrum of political opinions (right-center-left), thereby allowing me to demonstrate how similar Islamophobic discourses are reproduced and reinterpreted within a variety of political ideologies. Second, the subtle differences

in the underlying structure of the forums gives each one a unique discursive “flavor.” The relatively closed forums and consistent pseudonymity of *Little Green Footballs* lends itself to a more “back stage rehearsal” geared more towards community insiders. *Onegoodmove’s* forums are more easily accessed and have a greater degree of anonymity, making it less community-focused and placing a greater emphasis on argumentation and other persuasive appeals. Finally, *Fark’s* tiered system of registered and unregistered users creates a mix of both pseudonymity and anonymity, which promote ongoing community discussions that are consistently “interrupted” by a vast array of voices.

Using techniques of discourse analysis and theories of persuasion, argumentation, and online communities, I will examine how discourses on each site work to situate Islamophobic opinions and policies within the realm of persuadables for a variety of political and social contexts.

Islamophobia and Traditional Media: the Coulter Example

Unlike their counterparts in the traditional racist Right, who are often marginalized by their fellow conservatives, many of these Islamophobes hold positions of significant cultural influence within the traditional media. Syndicated columnist and pundit Ann Coulter, for example, is infamous for her proposal that American forces should respond to the 9/11 attacks by retaliating against Muslim nations in general, stating, “We should bomb their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity” (Coulter 2001). Initially, it appeared that Coulter’s remarks were still considered beyond the pale of acceptable public discourse, as her

editors at the *National Review Online* first requested that she omit the more inflammatory statements of her column, then eventually dropped her column and terminated her editorship position after her refusal to do so.

Yet Coulter continues to write columns read by millions to this day, and has since written several *New York Times* bestseller books and made numerous paid appearances at prominent conservative gatherings, and her statements regarding Muslims have not toned down. For example, during a speech regarding Iran that she delivered to the Conservative Political Action Conference in February of 2006, Coulter commented, "I think our motto should be, post-9-11: raghead talks tough, raghead faces consequences." In response to protests over the comment, Coulter simply offered a modified version of the same statement in one of her columns, then directly attacked her detractors:

I believe our motto should be after 9/11: Jihad monkey talks tough; jihad monkey takes the consequences. Sorry, I realize that's offensive. How about 'camel jockey'? What? Now what'd I say? Boy, you tent merchants sure are touchy. Grow up, would you? (Coulter 2006)

Far from marginalizing herself, Coulter's comments simply propelled her further into popular discourse. While it may be argued that print and television media continued to offer her a voice simply for her "shock value," the same media showed a distinct lack of tolerance when she crossed another line a year later at the same conference. While commenting on the various contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination, Coulter joked, "I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate, John Edwards, but it turns out that you have to go into rehab if you use the word 'faggot.'" Within weeks of the comment, three major advertisers pulled their ads from her website, eight newspapers

dropped her column, and the three leading Republican nominee contenders publicly denounced her (AP 2007).

The varying reactions to Coulter's statements offer insight into what is persuadable and what is not within the realm of public discourse over hate speech. Where nationally recognized figures like Coulter can be publicly censured, however, new media technology offers the opportunity for individuals to make statements every bit as inflammatory or worse without the likelihood of public censure or retaliation. Internet blogs, chat rooms, and discussion forums all serve as an outlet for numerous hate groups to share their points of view. Most such discourses are heavily marginalized by mainstream American society because of how far beyond the realm of persuadable they are, and are frequently pointed to as examples of how the Internet should not be seen as a "legitimate" medium for public discourse.

A few of these sites, however, are more careful in their presentation. "Hateful" speech is often labeled as such due to tone as much as content – a simple shift in wording, appeals, or style allows a speaker to make an otherwise deplorable attitude more acceptable. Many white supremacist organizations have employed this tactic for decades. Some members of the Ku Klux Klan, for example, describe their organization as being "pro-white" rather than "anti-black," attempting to present their movement as equivalent to minority advocacy groups such as the NAACP or the ADL. Prominent racist figures such as David Duke work on presenting themselves as educated, well-spoken, and upper-middle class as a contrast to the stereotypical image of uneducated white "rednecks" popularly associated with organized bigotry. Even more mainstreamed are what is sometimes called the "dog

whistle” politics of the post-Civil Rights era, where overtly racial terms like “nigger” and “spic” are substituted with supposedly “race-free” concepts such as “welfare cheat” and “illegal immigrant” that are implicitly understood in racial terms. Such speech muddies the waters sufficiently to escape the category of “hate speech” much of the time, and to refer to it as such becomes problematic for researchers who wish to avoid appearing biased against popular political figures and groups.

Hate Speech and Islamophobia

Consequently, hate speech research tends to focus on overtly racist organizations that are routinely condemned within popular American discourse. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis are both immediately recognizable and typically shunned in the public view. Discourses surrounding the groups – whether they take place within the academic arena or in popular news and entertainment venues – generally spend little time debating whether their views are correct or not. Instead, the primary concern is whether such groups should be permitted to express their opinions at all.

In academic discourses, issues of hate speech are understood to be primarily a matter of law, where the tension is considered to be between the liberal free speech tradition (*Doe vs. University of Michigan*, 1989) and the capacity for hate speech to do harm to its targets (Cornwell & Orb, 1999). Implicit in such a dichotomy is that hate speech is not a persuadable: the concerns are broken down between the speaker (who already maintains a bigoted perspective) and the person or group being attacked (who are not expected to be persuaded by their attackers).

Another key audience, however, is rarely mentioned – other whites, men, heterosexuals, Protestants, etc.

While much has been said regarding the internalizing effects of hate speech upon its subjects as well as the constitutive effect of verbally separating one's group from the Other, it is reasonable to presume that a primary goal of hate speech is to persuade people *that the speaker potentially values* to adopt his or her opinion. As Leets' (2001) study on the acceptance of racist Web pages by average readers shows, however, such persuasive attempts are largely unsuccessful:

[P]eople assessed the value of the white supremacist Web pages and found them lacking in serious literary, artistic, political and scientific worth... Generally, people expressed minimal acceptance and low tolerance for hate sites... The respondents did not find the hate pages persuasive... [they] reported that the message did not change their opinions and they indicated virtually no agreement with the content of the Web pages (Leets 2001, pp.309-310).

The one notable exception to Leets' findings is perhaps the most telling, however, as the one white supremacist website that study participants did not view as a "hate site" was the National Association for the Advancement of White People (N.A.A.W.P.), a group that Leets says "is often described as a 'Klan without robes'... the group is known for trying to appear mainstream and moderating in its hate rhetoric" (Leets 2001, p. 308). Rather than explore the implications of this deviation, however, Leets instead chooses to omit the N.A.A.W.P.'s website from the rest of the study's analysis. Leets' concerns are with how people respond to blatantly offensive hate speech – a concept that is much easier to measure quantifiably, but is less useful for the purposes of this dissertation.

Critical cultural researchers, on the other hand, focus their efforts on the racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic ideologies that subtly pervade popular discourses. For such critics, studying overt bigotry such as the speech acts of contemporary white supremacists serves little purpose. Because the bigots' ideological assumptions are made explicit rather than implicit, they are marginalized by an ideology that "privatizes" hate speech:

Representations of race and difference are everywhere in American society, and yet racism as both a symbol and condition of American life is either ignored or relegated to an utterly privatized discourse, typified in references to individual prejudices, or psychological dispositions such as expressions of 'hate' (Giroux 1993).

Since they are marginalized, they have little influence over dominant elite culture, making critiques against them pointless. At the same time, their marginal status is not sufficient to make them a legitimate focus for studies in resistance, as the positive implications of "resistance" within neo-Marxist and post-modernist thought – which celebrates the liberating nature of the disempowered challenging dominant authorities – are incongruent with the blatantly reactionary ideologies of overt bigots.

What is lost within this dichotomy is a detailed exploration of situations where overt hate speech blurs the lines between marginal and acceptable public discourse. What occurs within these borders is an opportunity for persuasion. The subtle, pervasive bigotry of popular ideologies are rarely challenged in any but the most advanced academic environments, as they are understood at such an implicit level as to be "common sense," and not subject to persuasion. Similarly, the overt bigotry of hate speech is rarely persuasive to people such as Leets' research

subjects, who recognize it as an unacceptable violation of the rules of polite discourse. The responses of the same subjects to the N.A.A.W.P.'s website indicates that there are degrees of acceptability in hate speech, however. "Respectable" hate speech – bigoted speech that works carefully to stay within the bounds of acceptable discourse – has, for perhaps the first time in decades, brought certain racialized discourses back within the sphere of American cultural persuadables.

While this dissertation focuses primarily on discourses about the United States, it is necessary to address European Islamophobic discourses, as the transnational nature of the Web leads to a steady cross-pollination between both sets of discourses. Stefano Allievi (2006) argues that the rise of Islamophobia in the European Union is a direct consequence of the formation of the Union itself, which has resulted in a loss of identity for individual Europeans that can only be regained through a negative process of Othering:

The debate on Islam, with the historical and symbolic overload it carries with it, has started to dominate public discourses about the "pluralisation" of Europe. Consequently, the public discussions about Islam seem to be the means by which Western societies discuss their recent and not yet fully understood evolutions and tendencies. In this context, immigrants are increasingly seen as Muslims, rather than as workers, students, parents, children, etc. In other words, society tends to define them by their (pre-supposed) identities rather than by their social roles. Thereby, the category of diversity, but also those of otherness (if not extraneousness) and even incompatibility, are being introduced in situations where such categories had previously been excluded because they no longer made much sense. For instance, second generation Europeans, who can no longer be considered immigrants and in fact have become less and less "other," are now being "Islamized," which means that they may well become reconstrued as "other," different, and even extraneous (Allievi 27).

The deindividuation of Muslim subjects that Allievi alludes to has become one of the primary means of defining “Islamophobia,” a term that is not without controversy. Critics of the word claim that it is used to effectively silence legitimate criticism of specific practices within Islamic communities and countries, including the systematic oppression of women, persecution of religious minorities, and brutal attacks against those critical of Islam as a whole. For the purposes of my work, however, Islamophobia remains a useful term in describing overt antipathy towards Islam and Muslims in general, antipathy that is not limited to specific cultural practices or situations. According to *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, a study commissioned by the Runnymede Trust (1997), Islamophobia can be defined as the expression of “closed” attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, where “Muslims are similar and all behave the same way because they are Muslims; Islam has an agency of its own; Muslims belong to a race called ‘Homo islamicus.’” This definition works to allow for non-essentialist debates regarding specific cultural practices, while acknowledging that such criticisms often serve to make a general case against Islam and Muslims as a whole.

The “closed” attitudes expressed towards Muslims on the websites I am studying bear remarkable connections to hate speech directed at groups that are more “traditional” targets for organized bigotry in the United States, particularly African Americans and Jews. As Susan Zickmund (1997) notes, the anonymous, hypertextual nature of the Internet helped to codify narratives of Others in a manner that has not been previously possible. In particular, online bigoted discourses have helped to create a relatively consistent articulation of “Other as

Social Containment” (groups that threaten society through degeneration, ignorance, and violence, typically African Americans and illegal immigrants) and “Other as Conspirator” (groups that threaten society through power, wealth, and control, typically Jews) (Zickmund 195). These two types of Other are articulated into “one malevolent Thing-like category” (196) where secretive Jewish power brokers manipulate clueless African Americans in order to bring about the degradation and destruction of white America. While such conspiratorial connections have been present in bigoted rhetoric well before the birth of the Internet, Zickmund notes that the Internet allows bigots to draw upon an “extensive discursive history” (p. 197) of hate speech, allowing bigoted ideologies that have “traditionally operated in isolation” to be propagated “beyond the narrow confines of pre-established alliances” (185). Thus, narratives of Jews manipulating blacks spread beyond the confines of the isolated intellectuals of organized hate groups to become more accessible to a wide array of organizations and individuals, as well as potentially enter popular consumption and reproduction.

In this process of reproduction, however, unexpected mutations and articulations can occur. It is my contention that many of the narratives and discourses of more traditional organized hate groups have been co-opted by the newer Islamophobes, even as many actively work to disavow such connections entirely.

For example, many of the blog posts I have studied are particularly fixated on the existence of black Muslim movements within the US as evidence of an active conspiracy on the part of the Islamic world to conquer the United States from

within, while others rail against a “war of demographics” being carried out against white Europeans by Muslim immigrants. These fears parallel classic anti-Semitic rhetoric, which is heavily steeped in paranoid fantasies of Jews subverting US culture from within by secretly manipulating other minority groups as pawns, whether through encouraging black uprisings or “outbreeding” whites through the importation of various immigrant groups. With both discourses, narratives denigrating various minority groups become subordinate to a larger conspiracy perpetuated by a more “dangerous” minority (Jews or Muslims).

Far from being simply another expression of anti-immigrant hysteria or anti-Semitism, however, Islamophobia draws on its own unique logics as well. As Junaid Rana explains in “The Story of Islamophobia,” Islamophobia is a unique form of racism that is embedded in the historical context of Islam and the West:

[T]his racism is grounded in the fears of social and economic deprivation elicited in the complex relationship of Islam to the West, including the history of European sectarian wars, the Crusades, and the Inquisition – all integral to the formation of Western capitalism and modernity... Islamophobic racism is reflexive and relies on mutually constituted histories of imperial conquest, subjection, and systematic forms of oppression. Simply put, Islamophobia is a gloss for the apparent anti-Muslim racism that has collapsed numerous groups into a single category of Muslim (Rana 149).

Rana traces this racism to numerous threats posed by Islam to contemporary white hegemony, with Islam serving as “a liberatory racial identification for African Americans [that] translated into a threat to white supremacy” (Rana 155).

Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) notion of a “racial ideology” shows how this challenge to contemporary American whiteness provokes a vigorous counterattack from all levels of white American culture. Defined as “the racially-based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or

racism) the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva 65), racial ideology helps to explain the active attempts by both white power-elites and more disenfranchised whites to push Islamophobic logics into the public discourses:

[I]t is a mistake to interpret whites’ racial views as the *direct* effect of the ideological work of white elites. Poor and middle-class whites are not passive repositories of some ‘objective interests’ or supra-consciousness that tells them what to believe, say, feel, or do when in the presence of racial minorities. Instead, the white masses have some real agency, that is, they participate in the construction, development, and transformation of racial ideology since, after all, it is in their racial interest to maintain white supremacy. Although elites attempt to sell their particular *racial projects* to the masses, the masses themselves are agents in the production and refinement of these projects (Bonilla-Silva 66).

Thus, I argue that the discourses I am examining are spontaneous attempts to defend (and define) contemporary whiteness against the rearticulated threat of Islam, and that while it can be viewed as a defense of white power elites, it is also a defense of whiteness itself.

Persuadables: Academic and Lay Perspectives

My focus is not on whether anti-Muslim rhetoric succeeds or fails in being persuasive – it is in how those who use such rhetoric work to *make their arguments be seen as acceptable arguments to make in the first place*. This is a process that is openly recognized in various political web communities from numerous political perspectives, where it is typically referred to as the “Overton window.” Named after Joe Overton – the former vice president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a neo-liberal think-tank – the Overton window is a visual representation of “politically possible” policy options and opinions. “Tacitus,” a blogger on the bi-partisan *Swords*

Crossed website, traces the process where an idea becomes a part of the Overton window by following a rough progression:

- Unthinkable
- Radical
- Acceptable
- Sensible
- Popular
- Policy (Tacitus 2006)

As an anonymous writer on the site diveintomark.org explains it:

The Overton window is a visualization tool used by “think tanks” that want to sway public opinion on certain issues. You start by outlining the continuum of possible opinions on an issue, including opinions which seem ridiculous or unthinkable. Then you figure out the narrower range of opinions that people currently consider reasonable. This range is the Overton window. The job of the think tank is to move the Overton window in a certain direction, so that ideas that were once unthinkable become acceptable to discuss, and ideas that were once radical become popular and perhaps even become policy. Along the way, certain ideas that were once popular may “fall out of favor” and become taboo (diveintomark.org, 2006).

The scholarly sophistication of Overton’s argument may be questionable, and the extent to which it is actually employed by think-tanks beyond Overton’s is difficult to verify. For the purposes of my dissertation, however, neither of these issues is problematic, as the legend of the Overton window has been adopted enthusiastically by members of each of the web communities that I intend to examine. Rather than seeing themselves as engaging in a process of argumentation, many present their activities as an attempt to change the discursive landscape itself. Incorporating the theory of persuadables with James Carey’s (1989) models of communication as transmission vs. communication as ritual, I argue that these web communities have shifted away from an approach based purely upon “a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of

distance and people” (49) to include an understanding of communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (23). Rather than examining the discourses as argumentative processes meant to be persuasive on their own merits, I will view them within a larger context of practice and repetition: even if any given anti-Islamic argument can be easily refuted or dismissed on its own, the constant repetition of the arguments on these sites makes their logic and meaning more and more familiar to other readers with each iteration, which in turn advances the persuadability of the arguments within the larger community.

In this regard, I am in agreement with Calvert (1997) that a ritual model of communication offers a more useful understanding of hate speech than a purely transmission-based model. However, I diverge from Calvert’s emphasis on the “maintain and reinforce” aspects of communication-as-ritual, which he uses to support Altman’s (1995) argument that “the language of racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs and epithets provides wholly *conventional* ways of treating people as subordinates” (127). Such a description is based around an understanding of hate speech as a means of maintaining “old” ways of thinking, and does not take into account the idea that hate speech can often be “new” (or more appropriately, “adaptive”). While the repetition element remains vital, I will also focus on the ways in which a ritual approach to communication *repairs* and *transforms* hate speech to fit contemporary norms and values. The Overton window becomes a means of describing how the symbolic transformation of reality is a necessary precursor to controlling distance and people, and work to situate their arguments accordingly.

The Internet in particular is a medium that arguably has a broader societal impact when viewed through a ritual model of communication. Under a transmission model, it quickly becomes unwieldy and marginal, as specific utterances are lost in a vast sea of information. Within a ritual context, however, each utterance can be viewed in context with similar utterances that are reproduced throughout numerous forums. Examples of such ritual creation and reproduction can be found in Internet “memes” as innocent as LOLcats or as troubling as the sarcastic labeling of Islam as a “religion of peace” next to gruesome articles of atrocities in Islamic countries posted on Fark.com. In short, it is not the weight or effectiveness of the individual arguments that concern me as much as their repetition, consistency, and ability to subtly shift the acceptable boundaries of discourse. Nevertheless, some element of argumentation should be considered as well, which leads to my next theoretical base.

Argumentation

Argumentation theory has the tendency to dismiss discourses similar to the ones I will be exploring as being fundamentally non-argumentative – that is to say, they seek no resolution to the debate. Pearce, Littlejohn, and Alexander (1987) choose instead to label such exchanges “reciprocated diatribes,” where “the disputants lack a common moral frame with which to understand the issues on which they agree and from which might be drawn some means of mutually acceptable adjudication of their differences” (172). This criticism certainly is warranted, and fits in well with Lievthrouw’s (1998) assertion that online opinions

are “cultivated” – that is to say, nurtured and refined within a sympathetic audience – rather than debated. However, Pearce et al view this primarily as a situation to be remedied, asserting that such impoverished discourses merit the intervention of rhetorical scholars:

Such conflicts may have to be decided by non-rhetorical means: hopefully the ballot box; conceivably the terrorist’s bombs or military/police action. It is at this point that our value judgments as researchers are most clearly revealed. We are not content to let such issues be resolved ‘in the streets’ if it is at all possible that they be resolved by ‘good reasons.’ Interpretive and critical scholarship may be able to move the debate to a deeper ontological and epistemological level, establishing an agenda for further research on this and other cases of ideological conflict (Pearce et al: 191).

While their dedication to restoring “good reasons” to public debates is admirable, it is not a motive that drives this particular project. Nevertheless, traditional argumentation theory does have practical applications to the issues that I will be addressing. Pearce et al, despite rejecting such exchanges as argumentative, are correct in asserting that “the *interaction* resulting from incommensurate premises is of special interest to rhetorical and communication scholars” (172).

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s pragma-dialectical methodology is also particularly useful for its division of argumentative discourse into four stages: confrontation, opening, argumentation, and concluding. Viewed within the context of U.S. public discourses as a whole, the Islamophobic discourses that I am analyzing can be understood as working almost constantly within the confrontation stage, where the protagonist and antagonist put their difference of opinion into words. The opening stage, where agreements on procedural and material starting points that

can be used in the next stage are made, is never reached – Islamophobic discourses (as with most hate speech) rarely seek to negotiate with oppositional discourses.

Nor is there much attempt by the discourses opposed to Islamophobia to seek common ground. Indeed, critics frequently place those making Islamophobic arguments into what Pearce and Wood (1980) refer to as the “...ist” category (e.g. sexist, racist, classist, etc.). Such an argumentative move places the accused in a “self-reflexively paradoxical structure” (239) where the accusation “simultaneously asserts the claims (1) that [the accused] is a villain who construes the world on the basis of attributes which discriminate among persons on the basis of their membership in particular classes such as sex, race, creed, etc.; and (2) that [the accused] is a villain who believes and/or acts upon negatively prejudicial attitudes toward members of certain classes” (240). This places the accused in a position where they are forced “into positions in which their own denials of one aspect of the charge become the convicting evidence of guilt for another, equally heinous, offence” (241). Such appears to be the complaint by those who take issue with the very label “Islamophobic,” particularly when it is meant to show them as “intolerant.” Pearce and Wood also predict a countertactic that is frequently adopted by those attempting to advance Islamophobic positions:

[T]he accused may use the sophisticated and difficult argumentative technique of locating a transcending premise, the introduction of which subsumes the previous ‘...ist’ claim and its universe of discourse as special instance of the new argument and its broader universe of discourse. Such a transcendent premise may be a fundamental value judgment that underlies the positions as reasonable alternatives to some third, consensually abhorrent, position... The difference is not accurately regarded as merely semantic; it becomes substantive (244).

Such is the case when Islamophobic arguments center primarily on Muslims as inherently intolerant, sexist, racist, etc. Accusations of intolerance invoke the counter claim that if the accusers are so interested in attacking those who are intolerant, why are they not attacking the inherently intolerant culture of Islam?

Pearce and Wood note that such strategies, while tactically innovative, are more useful in “stopping argument or shifting it to a more manageable context than in resolving truly differing opinions, because [the strategies] play havoc with levels of abstraction” (245). Yet this may very well be the primary goal. Such an approach, which deftly manipulates normative values of diversity and tolerance, does not serve to advance Islamophobic arguments so much as render them acceptable to the standards of public discourse – that is, persuadable. “Stopping the argument” becomes a notable victory when the argument is that their arguments are outside the realm of appropriate discourse, and “playing havoc with levels of abstraction” is also useful in blurring the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable speech, an attractive goal when attempting to change the discursive landscape.

Theories of the Internet and Community

While I argue that the subjects I will be examining give important insights into broader national (and often international) discourses, these insights emerge within the context of discourses within specifically defined virtual communities. This limitation is due to both practical and theoretical concerns. Practically speaking, it is nearly impossible to speak of any unitary “discourse” encompassing the entire Internet, and attempting to encompass as many separate discourses as

possible would amount to little more than an exercise in cataloguing. From a theoretical perspective, research into Internet discourses returns repeatedly to the idea of “virtual communities,” a term that has been repeatedly contested since its first use by Howard Rheingold (1993). Defined as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace,” Rheingold’s notion of “virtual communities” has endured an enormous amount of criticism over the previous decades, whether it be for his uncritical embrace of the Internet as vehicle for social and cultural change, the questionable validity of using the maddeningly vague word “community” to describe a variety of online social interactions, or simply his naïve, progressive optimism (Ferreday 2005). While the second concern merits its own discussion below, the first and third critiques are central to my project: I am arguing that the Internet is indeed an incredibly useful tool for social and cultural change, but that there is nothing about it that inherently lends itself to *progressive* change.

What I am arguing is that celebratory arguments including the democratic potential of the Internet, the inherently political resistance of subcultures (Hebdige 1979, Hall & Jefferson 2005), and the empowering aspects of global hybridity (Tomlinson 1999, Pieterse 2003) are significantly more accurate than many of their detractors claim. What makes them problematic, however, is that such democratic, liberatory empowerment applies just as much (if not more-so) to groups and philosophies that would be considered “reactionary” rather than “resistant” by many contemporary scholars.

The possibility for *regressive* change is one that has certainly dominated the work of scholars concerned with the potential for the Internet to reproduce and expand hegemonic power structures, often within the context of broader concerns regarding globalization and hybridization (Hardt & Negri 2000, Hartnett & Stengrim 2006, McChesney 2004). While I find these concerns legitimate, I propose that the Internet remains a powerful tool for organizing against hegemonic power blocs at a discursive level – but that this is not always something to celebrate.

Critics of globalization and hybridization frequently argue that the promotion of ideas of tolerance and multiculturalism are facilitating the hegemony of global capitalism, where matters of “identity” simply become another commodity that can be bought and sold. Moreover, critics such as Giroux (2003) claim that talk of “tolerance” and “diversity” is mostly for show, masking an underlying racism. Such arguments are, with relatively minor variation, frequently central to the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant discourses that I am addressing. The most vocal, popular resistance against global capitalism in the US is often based within the populist right rather than the left. Consider, for example, the popular uproar from the Republican party base during 2006 in response to plans to grant illegal immigrants amnesty (supported by both President Bush and presidential nominee John McCain), or the sarcastic dismissal of President Bush’s insistence that Islam is a “religion of peace.” The fact that the issue of Muslims in Europe is intimately tied to discourses regarding immigration has not been lost of American Islamophobes, who have made a powerful rhetorical move by articulating anti-immigration politics with the “war on terror.”

From a historical perspective, the resistant nature of right wing ideologies is not so surprising. While communism proved to be the downfall of monarchies in Eastern Europe, Russia, and China, the primary opponent to liberal democracies in Western Europe and the United States has been fascism. Carl Schmitt, arguably one of the most influential philosophers within the Third Reich, previewed many of the arguments leveled against neo-liberalism and globalization by noting that democracies can only attack one another after a lengthy, savage process of criminalizing each other, and that identity is formed primarily by opposition to one's enemies (1932). Schmitt's theories form the base of an intellectual lineage that extends to the American political philosopher Leo Strauss, who is often viewed as the intellectual founder of the neoconservative movement. What separates the right wing critique of neoliberalism and globalization from the left is that where the left abhors the Othering necessary to maintain the universalist illusion, the right embraces it. Based on Strauss' view that the only means of maintaining liberal democracies in the face of existential nihilism is to create a "national myth" centered around a primary foe, British documentarian Adam Curtis argues in *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear* (2004) that this "necessary Othering" has served as the foundation behind both the early neoconservative "Red Scare" of the late 1970s and the contemporary "War on Terror."

Where the right wing intellectuals of today diverge from their fascist predecessors is their commitment to defending the very liberal democratic form of government that they inherently distrust. Similarly, intellectuals on the American left have come to accept a certain limit to the boundaries of tolerance when it comes

to Islam, specifically for its perceived *lack* of tolerance. It is in these contradictions that I believe we can gain some understanding of how Islamophobic discourses employ the logics of multiculturalism and diversity while simultaneously attacking it, as well as seeing how anti-Islamic discourses are able to cross traditional political boundaries. In particular, it is my argument that constructing Muslims as being “humorless” has become a critical means by which Islamophobic logics are able to penetrate American discourses across the traditional political spectrum.

Humor, Humorlessness, and the Islamic Other

Within the ongoing discourse of the “clash of civilizations,” a term popularized by Samuel P. Huntington’s 1996 book of the same name, any number of evils have been attributed to Muslims within the ongoing popular discourse. A proclivity towards violence, rampant misogyny, and an irrational hatred and envy of the West frequently top the list. Yet perhaps none are so damning as the accusation that Muslims worldwide are completely devoid of a sense of humor.

Such accusations, while often put in the form of a joke themselves, are a serious matter in discourses regarding the importance of democracy, freedom of speech, and basic human decency. Erma Bombeck’s quote, “When humor goes, there goes civilization,” invokes an almost Habermasian appeal for a public sphere, where a rational, universalistic discourse is maintained by the social lubricant of comedy and satire, which serve to offer a means of critique and self evaluation that avoids direct offense and challenges existing power structures.

Yet the hope for using the public sphere of humor as a bridge to the Muslim world took a major blow with the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad Cartoon Contest controversy, where the Danish newspaper's decision to publish satirical sketches of the Islamic Prophet led to global riots, with dozens killed and millions of dollars worth of property damage. The events led to a flurry of condemnations of the violence from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Yet criticisms from Western editorials frequently took on an exasperated tone with Islam and Muslims in general, with accusations that Muslims were "thin skinned" and "unable to take a joke" being some of the more tame criticisms insinuating a fundamental incompatibility between Muslims and Western values.

Apte (1987) suggests that a "sense of humor" is a core value within U.S. American culture, a value that potentially conflicts with another core American value - cultural pluralism - due to the preponderance of degrading ethnic humor. Apte deals with this conflict by separating "private" ethnic humor from "public" humor based around diversity, a theory that Miczo and Welter (2006) build upon by articulating an "affiliative-aggressive dimension" of humor. "Affiliative" humor is defined as "[h]umor that is intended to elicit laughter and/or other forms of amusement in the targets... the basic themes of this type of humor center on integration, equality, and inclusion" (63). "Aggressive" humor, in contrast, is "any humor that derogates or provides negative information about someone or something" (Janes & Olson 2000, p. 474) and "the basic themes of this type of aggressive humor center on division, hierarchy, and control" (Miczo & Welter 2006, p. 63).

This division is problematized, however, by more recent trends in comedy television programming that promote overt ethnic humor both as “shock value” and as a means of bringing racial issues back into public discourses. Witness, for example, the success of shows such as *South Park* in using degrading humor towards Jews, African Americans, Muslims, and virtually any other group imaginable. Among my students, accusations that this humor is oppressive are typically challenged on the grounds that “everybody is made fun of equally,” a defense that appeals to a particular misanthropic form of common sense. Other successful comedy shows that are based around offensive racial and ethnic humor include *The Dave Chappelle Show* and *Mind of Mencia*, both of which are defended on similar grounds of equal opportunity disparagement, but are also particularly shielded by the racial minority status of the shows’ hosts and their willingness to make fun of “their own kind.”

The license to make such private humor public, therefore, seems to be ultimately determined by three factors: insults and stereotypes must be leveled at all groups equally, members of traditionally oppressed groups are preferable comedians to deliver such humor than whites, and one’s own race or ethnicity must be the primary target of ridicule. The final category in particular can be traced back to the Jewish American comedic tradition for self-effacement, and gives some indication of what contemporary marginalized groups must accomplish if they wish to gain a similar level of acceptance and assimilation.

As a strategy, Smith and Voth (2002) view humor as becoming intimately tied to successful political campaigns, noting that “the relationship between comedians and entertainers is increasingly more reciprocal where politics now

strategically uses humor for maneuvering as much as humor uses politics for comic antics” (110). Where humor used to be viewed as a genre segregated from more “serious” matters, it is now being co-opted and deployed for various political agendas: “political humor has matured in American culture to the points that its contribution to the democratic process verges on a significance equal to politics itself” (110).

Lest this be considered a sign of deterioration in political discourse, Smith and Voth invoke Kenneth Burke’s (1959) observation that comedy allows people to become “observers of themselves, while acting.” Such dialectical engagement “serve[s] as a mechanism of social confrontation,” granting a “new form of understanding that is otherwise not possible through traditional or tragic modes of criticism (Smith & Voth 2002, p. 111). Burke is invoked further with his suggestion that the comedic frame is “the most refined and complete frame for understanding social imbalance” (112), as it creates a “rationale for locating the irrational and non irrational” (Burke 1959, p. 171). Humor, therefore, can assist in both self-reflection and promoting rational understanding within the political sphere. Most importantly, it allows for self-correction:

A comic frame does not conceive evil or wrong-doing as guilt, but as error. Rather than banishing the victim from society, comic action encourages the comic author to return to society once he or she has realized the errors committed and attempted to correct those errors (Smith & Voth 2002, p. 112).

For Duncan (1968), this self-correcting quality to humor makes it not only beneficial to public discourse, but an absolute necessity:

Comedy teaches us that only so long as reason can function openly in society can men confront and correct their evil as men, not as cowering slaves (60).

Given the cultural assumption that Muslims typically lack a sense of humor, the implications of these observations to Islamophobia are numerous. To begin with, humor is not only rapidly becoming a vital practical necessity in gaining attention and sympathy for one's point of view; it is also generally accepted as a beneficial agent of reason and rationality. This has both subversive and coercive possibilities: on the one hand, discourses of minority groups such as Jews and African Americans that have been marginalized to the realm of humor are now in a position to make their voices not only heard, but respected.

On the other hand, members of groups that are perceived as lacking either the ability or the desire to engage in humorous discourses are denied the ability to engage in reasonable public debate. Indeed, such groups become further marginalized, as their "lack of humor" easily becomes a "lack of reason," with all of the dehumanizing aspects that this might entail. Duncan's reference to humorless/unreasonable societies where people are "cowering as slaves" bears strong echoes in Western reactions to violent Muslim protests over the Danish cartoon controversy, particularly in regards to accusations against both the Muslim protestors themselves and the Western journalists who are perceived as failing to confront them, such as Doug Marlette's (2006) accusation that "the continuing timidity of the American media looked increasingly like cowardice, appeasement, or better-you-than-me cynicism" (84).

Burke and Duncan's elevation of humor as necessary for reason implies that a lack of humor is an indication of irrationality, even a "slave" mindset. If people are unwilling to joke about serious issues, then they are unable to be Burke's "observers of themselves." Being unable to get such jokes in turn indicates an inability to "realize errors committed" and "return to society," leaving them in the pitiful position of "cowering as slaves." Such an attitude towards the supposedly "humorless" allows for the justification of any number of oppressive discourses.

Consider, for example, groups that have commonly been accused of being humorless: women (particularly feminists), Christian fundamentalists, people outside of the political "mainstream" (communists, anarchists, libertarians, or anyone else possessing a strong ideological position), and (of course) Muslims are all popularly portrayed as being simultaneously without a sense of humor and completely irrational. Not incidentally, it is this very quality of humorlessness/irrationality that frequently makes these groups the butt of any number of jokes, with conservative pundit Ann Coulter's quip that "Muslims are the only people who make feminists seem laid-back" (Coulter 2006) being only one of the more blatant examples.

Such groups are tolerated to varying degrees, but as David Goldberg (1993) points out, "tolerance... presupposes that its object is morally repugnant, that it really needs to be reformed, that is, altered" (7). Goldberg claims that this "enlightened" value of tolerance emerges as one factor among many that help perpetuate an us/them division based around the perceived irrationality/inhumanness of the racial Other. Just as the "rational hierarchy" was

once determined by physical characteristics of race, characteristics that were aesthetically “obvious” indicators of rationality (50), so too is humor now naturalized and made an “obvious” grounds on which one’s rationality, and consequently one’s humanity, can be judged. And while tolerance of the humorless/irrational Other is permitted, it is only done with the understanding that the irrational Other work towards rationality – in this case, through humor.

Lack of humor, therefore, is a fundamental deficiency, making the humorless subject something less than human. The fact that academic research dealing with humor leans more heavily in the direction of cognitive factors rather than aesthetics lends credence to the idea that humorlessness is perceived as a personal flaw in character rather than something that stems from cultural variability and miscommunication. While this makes accusations of humorlessness generally a more individualized process, it creates a crisis in framing when entire groups of people are perceived as having no sense of humor. The “logical” conclusion at such a point would be that the entire group is either pathological or stupid at a cultural, or even a biological, level.

Redemption Through Comedy – The Liberal-Pluralist Factor

Humorousness, both as a form of discourse and a state of being, becomes a complex site where numerous, often contradictory Western cultural values can be articulated and reproduced. I have already discussed how discourses of humor are used to perpetuate reactionary attitudes towards “irrational” outsiders. However, it is arguable that Burke’s understanding of humor as “a rationale for locating the

irrational and non irrational” has been embraced as a rallying point for beleaguered American liberals, progressives, and pluralists frustrated by the reactionary turn United States politics have taken within the last several decades. In particular, the success of left-leaning political satire programs such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Real Time With Bill Maher* in helping create the current Democratic majority in Congress and elect Barack Obama to the White House has led to recent popular articulations of humor and satire with progressive, middle class liberalism and pluralism.

These shows appeal to humor as a form of expressing both “common sense” and iconoclasm, serving to “liberate” progressive values from corrupt, reactionary governmental and corporate bureaucracies. Any revolutionary element of the shows is heavily blunted, however, by the level of privilege necessary for audiences to “get the joke.” The educated, middle-to-upper class nature of the target audiences becomes apparent by the deep level of cultural knowledge required to follow the shows’ narratives, knowledge ranging everywhere from popular commentary on international politics to contemporary pop culture to Saturday morning cartoons from the 1980s. Being able to integrate this knowledge requires an ability to recognize what Bakhtin refers to as the multiple voices and “secondary speech genres” within a given utterance.

Such cultural fluency can be both helpful and problematic. On the one hand, it is pluralistic in the sense that it requires sensitivity to multiple discourses, a common prerequisite for intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, the immense intertextuality behind much of the humor creates a distinct in group/out group

mentality where only those who “get the joke” can avoid being mocked. This required knowledge is taken almost exclusively from American popular culture, a fact that frequently leaves “foreigners” of any kind unable to get the joke, thereby rendering them “humorless” and the butt of many of the jokes. Ironically, it is people from countries that are resistant to globalization and the cultural imperialism it helps to facilitate – including many predominantly Muslim nations – that are at the greatest disadvantage in being able to get the joke. Additionally, the reflexive postmodernism of the genre also places specific ideologies of any kind as incompatible with humor, or at least makes them easy targets for it. Religion of any kind is at a huge disadvantage in this regard, and the popular conception of Islam as one of the strictest, most ideologically driven religions in the world does little to provoke sympathy from these audiences. How can Muslims be postmodern when they’re barely perceived as being modern?

In this way, Islam becomes an enemy not only of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism, but also liberal-pluralism. The Danish cartoon controversy sparked something of a crisis within traditional American political divisions. As *New York Magazine* contributor Kurt Anderson notes in his article “They Can’t Take a Joke,” “the controversy has thrown together such strange bedfellows—aggrieved Muslims, the Vatican, the White House, and liberal American newspapers on one side, *Le Monde*, Christopher Hitchens, and Republican ideologues on the other—that the default lines of left and right have been rendered obsolete” (Anderson 2006). While the incident served little purpose beyond adding fuel to the fire for right wing commentators who have been openly critical of Islam since the September 11th

attacks, for their leftist-secularist counterparts, the bizarre eruption of violence over such a seemingly innocuous exercise of free speech left many questioning whether or not Muslims and their religion could be truly compatible with Western liberal democracy.

There is a paradox here that is not lost on some critics, and numerous complex reactions emerge as the struggle to make sense of it continues. Some liberal critics have “jumped ship” to conservative allies, cutting loose the “pluralist” part of “liberal-pluralism” under the belief that liberal democracy can only survive within the context of Western Judeo-Christian-secularist society, and that Islam and Muslims are fundamentally incompatible with it and must either be fought off or forcibly Westernized. One such critic is Bruce Bawer, an openly gay literary scholar whose violent encounters with gangs of homophobic Muslims youths in the Netherlands led him to place Muslims above fundamentalist Christians on his list of threats to Western democracy in his book *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within* (2006).

For Bawer, liberals must own up to “pluralism” being a means of denying threats to their way of life, with the Danish cartoon controversy serving as a necessary wake-up call to this threat. Bawer does not go so far as to say Muslim immigrants can never become accepted into Western society – instead, he suggests that full assimilation into Western culture is the only means of doing so, and that a live-and-let-live, “I’m okay, you’re okay” mentality is only a front to a racist mentality that does not *want* others to assimilate.

Chapter Outline

Using methods of discourse analysis and online ethnography, I will use the theoretical concerns discussed above to examine how Islamophobic logics are articulated, reproduced, and challenged in three specific online communities: *Little Green Footballs*, *Onegoodmove*, and *Fark*. By examining the discourses of these different communities both on their own and in relation to one another, I will demonstrate how the discursive work of online communities serves to shift Islamophobia into the realm of persuadables within popular discourses. While some of this work is argumentative in nature, much of it is focused instead on disciplining community members in how to properly express criticisms of Islam and Muslims without violating popular norms and values of pluralism, multiculturalism, and equality.

Since it is impossible to adequately address every post dealing with Islam on any of the three sites, those posts that will be analyzed will be chosen based on several criteria. Any post that is quoted will thus meet at least two of the following criteria:

- Relevant: The topic of the post is primarily addressing Islam and or Muslims.
- Sustained: The post is part of an ongoing dialogue between site members, rather than being a single post that is ignored by the rest of the community.
- Provocative: The post is capable of eliciting a strong reaction from either community insiders or outsiders.
- Influential: The post is one that has affected other discourses within the community or outside of it, or is made by a particularly well-known and/or authoritative member of the community.

Chapter Two is an in-depth discourse analysis of *Little Green Footballs*, until recently one of the most influential blogs in the “anti-jihadist movement.” Under the

often heavy-handed discursive control of its founder, Charles Johnson, Little Green Footballs long held a reputation as the conservative “warblog” responsible for ending Dan Rather’s career, all in the name of protecting the United States from “crazed jihadists.” More recently, the site’s founder has turned his back on the movement he helped found over what he perceives to be its increasing allegiance to American religionists and European racists.

Chapter Three looks at *One Good Move*, a blog primarily dedicated to giving a common forum for English-speaking atheists. Founded by Norm Jenson, One Good Move takes a decidedly leftist approach from its inception to the present day, and garnered much of its audience through judicious posts of left-leaning American and British comedians. Jenson and company do not treat Islam as their primary target, but instead treat it as the quintessential example of why religion is dangerous.

Chapter Four turns its attention to *Fark*, an extremely popular news aggregator dedicated to collecting and commenting upon amusing and uncanny news stories from around the world. The community’s “Farkers” in many ways represent the stereotypical image of the classic “Internet nerd”: white, male, well-educated, well-employed, and displaying massive contempt for many social norms of politeness. For many Farkers, Islam and Muslims are utterly baffling, whether they be rioting over cartoons or protesting against a repressive theocratic regime.

Chapter Five is the concluding chapter, in which I tie together reoccurring themes and problems within each of the three examples in order to address a few fundamental questions: what do these debates, discussions, and diatribes accomplish within the context of broader discourses surround Islam and Muslims in

the United States? How do the unique structural aspects of online media influence these exchanges? Finally, what about these discourses has proven to be most persuadable?

CHAPTER II
LITTLE GREEN FOOTBALLS

tommoon Fri, Mar 30, 2007 8:25:00pm: Glenn [Beck] has never said anything negative about Islam. He only informs us about radical Islam. Please keep that in mind.

jenv Fri, Mar 30, 2007 8:30:29pm: As if there were a difference. "Radical" Islam is not a misunderstanding, perversion, or highjacking of Islam. It is a term used to obscure truth.

Sharmuta Fri, Mar 30, 2007 8:51:35pm: And for your information- I don't hate muslims¹. I hate islam.

tommoon Fri, Mar 30, 2007 8:55:59pm: I would imagine for the next year your quote will be displayed on every left wing website, to show how evil the haters are at LGF.

Introduction

Considered one of the most active and influential blogs within the American Right through much of the last decade, Little Green Footballs (which I will often abbreviate as "LGF") began in early 2001 as a non-political forum dedicated to sports and computer programming. Its founder, Charles Johnson, is a web designer based in California who describes himself as being "pretty much center-left" until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Immediately after the attacks, however, Johnson underwent a radical transformation, one that he describes in an interview on the Israeli radio station A7:

[9/11] was a real mind-blower, for many people, myself included. At first, my center-liberal leanings caused me to ask, "Why do they hate us?" and similar questions; that questioning led me to begin serious

¹ Given the much looser rules of syntax and grammar commonly employed within online discourses, I will refrain from appending [sic] to such mistakes. In the case of the above quote, the lower case being applied to proper nouns are commonly interpreted as deliberate signs of disrespect, not an accidental oversight. In the case of posts that are loaded with less rhetorically motivated errors, to append [sic] to every mistake would not only be highly distracting (many posts would require at least one [sic] within every sentence), but would also give this study a tone of dismissal and mockery that I very strongly wish to avoid.

investigation of the Islamic fanaticism that was growing unchecked in the Middle East. Now I think the question is a pointless one, not because we shouldn't self-examine, but because the answer lies within the Islamists, not within us – and understanding them will not achieve anything, except to the extent it allows us to defeat them (Ronen 2004).

The content of LGF quickly changed to match Johnson's conclusions. The blog shifted its focus almost exclusively to the emerging "war on terror," a change that eventually brought the website up to 50,000 visitors per day. At its peak, the site was listed as the sixth most popular blog in the world in 2004 (Ronen 2004).

The above account given by Johnson represents a narrative of a post-9/11 paradigm shift that problematizes conventions of liberalism and multiculturalism. Johnson's previous identity as a someone with "center-liberal leanings" is not so much challenged from without as it is transformed by its own logic: by asking the fundamentally "liberal" question, "Why do they hate us?" Johnson first defines liberalism as an appreciation for self examination and criticism, but then claims to have discovered an answer that absolves the need to ask the question in the first place. This theme defeats liberalism and multiculturalism with their own logic, but does not seek to discredit such logics entirely – "we" (Westerners) should continue to "self-examine," but self-examination in this particular case is "pointless" because the answer is external to "us." Westerners must also avoid the "center-liberal" tendency to attempt to "understand" others, though Johnson acknowledges that such tendencies may be useful insofar as they "allow us to defeat them." Outside of that context, however, Johnson finds the tendency to examine either the self or the other to be self-defeating.

Given Johnson's dismissal of liberalism's usefulness in facing this new adversary, it should come as no surprise that Little Green Footballs offered its full (though not unconditional) support for the Bush administration's policies regarding the War on Terror. It is not, however, accurate to say that Johnson presents LGF as a Republican – or even conservative – web forum. Indeed, particularly since the disintegration of the Republican party in the aftermath of its losses during the 2008 elections, Johnson has worked steadily to distance the rhetoric of Little Green Footballs from reactionary conservative elements, particularly those that cross the line into overt racism or are heavily invested in evangelical Christian perspectives, as reflected in this post made to LGF on April 19, 2009:

I haven't changed my position against Islamic fascism one bit. I still believe it's a threat to Western civilization, profoundly anti-democratic, and needs to be fought. However, I have learned (to my dismay) that many of the people who portray themselves as "anti-jihad" are simply paranoid bigots, and/or religious fanatics with hidden motives, who have hitched a ride on the justifiable outrage most of us felt after the 9/11 attacks. My objections to radical Islam are based on my commitment to classical liberalism, and the values of the Enlightenment (Johnson 2009).

Johnson's shift in focus from attacking the American Left to the Right has even garnered praise from liberal elements within the blogosphere, creating a narrative of redemption that misses the point of the blog – Little Green Footballs is dedicated to convincing the American public of the necessity of a war against Islam as a cultural and ideological entity. Most importantly, we shall see that Johnson displays the most interest in using discursive techniques that are *genuinely persuasive* within popular discourses, a position that places the website in constant tension between

the “mainstream media” and the more radical elements of the anti-Jihadist movement.

Allies and Enemies

Throughout its history as a political blog, Little Green Footballs has heavily focused on identifying “allies” and “enemies” of the anti-jihadist cause. Despite Johnson’s frequent claims to be above traditional partisan affiliations, he remained a consistent advocate of the Bush administration, particularly its more hawkish, neo-conservative elements. American Christian and Jewish conservatives were also granted the status of allies throughout most of the Bush years, though Johnson himself strictly avoided Christianist rhetoric in favor of a strongly secular grounding. While he similarly avoided making direct appeals to religious Judaism, Johnson has consistently held Israel to be one of the most consistent allies of the anti-jihadist cause. This attitude in particular is almost universally displayed by the Lizards², in part because Johnson is extremely swift to delete any posts and ban any user that expresses opinions deemed hostile to Israel or anti-Semitic. Indeed, it was Johnson’s devout commitment to fighting anti-Semitism that ultimately led to his break with much of the rest of the online anti-jihadist movement, which he decided were too quick to ally with anti-Muslim political groups in Europe that were also known to harbor anti-Semites.

² A pejorative term used by critics against members of LGF that the group eventually came to enthusiastically embrace, complete with the image of a lizard holding a martini glass draped over the site’s header.

In terms of “enemies,” Little Green Footballs has accumulated an impressive roster over the past decade. During most of the Bush years, Johnson et al. vigorously attacked any individual or group that was perceived as being in opposition to any of the allies listed above. Particularly popular targets included the “mainstream news media” (typically abbreviated as MSM by users), academia, progressive liberals, and (of course) radical Islamists. These various groups are articulated as being part of a cohesive whole that works to undermine the anti-jihadist cause. These groups are typically placed under the umbrella of the “Loony Liberal Left” (often abbreviated as L³) or “idiotarian,” against which Little Green Footballs defines itself as “anti-idiotarian.” This Manichean division helps to explain how some of Little Green Footballs’ most visible achievements seem to be more about general partisan politics than advancing the anti-jihadist cause in specific. To Johnson and his followers, the former has always been viewed as crucial to the success of the latter.

Enemy #1: The MSM

Little Green Footballs garnered some of its heaviest initial media attention in the summer of 2004. Almost immediately after the CBS television news magazine *60 Minutes 2* released documents purported to prove President George W. Bush’s absenteeism during his years in the National Guard, Johnson called on his fellow bloggers’ resources to check the documents’ veracity. Johnson refers to this call to action as “open-source information gathering... a huge pool of highly motivated people who go out there and use the tools to find stuff,” claiming that LGF has “an army of citizen journalists out there.” The exercise proved to be an astonishing

success – the documents were quickly shown to be forgeries, and the ensuing scandal eventually led to CBS anchor Dan Rather’s resignation (Kurtz 2004)

A less famous incident, though more directly important to the anti-jihadist cause, involves a case of tampered photos that is referred to on LGF as the “Fauxtography scandal.” During the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006, the short but brutal war had garnered a great deal of international media attention, much of which was seen by the lizards as overtly hostile to Israel. This hostility was verified for Johnson on August 5th, 2006, when Wisconsin artist Mike Thorson passed a tip to him that a Reuters photograph of a bombed out Beirut district, taken by Lebanese stringer Adnan Hajj, showed signs of tampering. Specifically, smoke from the burning buildings appeared to be “cloned” using Photoshop, a popular image editing program. Throughout the day, Johnson blogged about the photograph, creating animated GIFs to highlight the cloned areas and inviting bloggers from LGF and other sites to offer their own analyses. Reuters quickly moved to alert their readers of the photo’s dubious authenticity, but bloggers had already discovered another Reuters photo by Hajj that showed signs of Photoshop tampering. Within 18 hours of Johnson’s initial post, Hajj was suspended and all of his 920 photos were pulled from the Reuters archive. Reuters went on to issue a public statement condemning the forgeries, which in turn set off a storm of traditional media coverage and editorials addressing the scandal. Johnson himself went on to appear on *Good Morning America* and was interviewed by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and numerous other popular news outlets.

Wall and Bicket (2008) claim that these “victories” of LGF and the conservative blogosphere over the media establishment fit an overall pattern of attack that seeks to discredit oppositional voices by “magnifying any errors [on the part of the news media] as indicators of massive systemic failure” (p. 131). Attempts by mainstream media to repair their own errors (Rather’s resignation, public apologies, etc.) served only to further agitate critics. Wall and Bicket further claim that this continued agitation is “at heart a form of ideological work, a means of trying to ensure that certain views are not perceived as credible while others are” (p. 135). In this case, the views that are declared non-credible are not simply those views that are predicated on the tampered evidence (e.g. Israel was guilty of using excessive force during the conflict), but ultimately *any* view that could be seen as critical of Israel and sympathetic to Hezbollah. For the perspective of regular posters at Little Green Footballs, such views are endemic to the MSM at large, one of many reasons why the MSM is viewed as being the single biggest obstacle to the anti-jihadist cause.

Despite this extremely hostile attitude, LGF’s most prominent members (and their supporters) display a relationship with American popular culture that is tense, but not marginal. Just as the LGF bloggers attack supporters of multiculturalism while still working within the cultural logic of the concept itself, so too do they attack the MSM while still heavily relying upon it. For while lizards regularly denounce the media and the “brainwashed masses” that it has duped, they still understand it to be a necessary platform for swaying public opinion to their cause. Consider the following post by user MSMasher (2007):

Yeah, our media sucks. It's infested with the L3 and beholden to pro-jihadist oil interests. But it's what we've got. Your average American watches 4-6 hours of TV a *day*. If we can promote those within the MSM that understand the danger that we're in, and do to the rest of the traitors what we did to Rather, we'll win this thing. It's not the media itself, it's the people within it that are the problem.

MSMasher's comments are persuasive appeals to his fellow Lizards, where he situates the mainstream US media as being a potential solution rather than simply a problem to be overcome. His screenname works to build his credibility in this argument: by devoting his very name to the concept of "smashing" the MSM, he alerts his fellow Lizards that he not only shares their frustration with media, but has made it one of his primary concerns. Put into context with his reference to "what [they] did to Rather," as well as his reference to "those within the MSM that understand the danger," he situates "media smashing" as an ongoing process that has already yielded results rather than an impotent desire. MSMasher goes on to reference other "resistant" messages within both the news and entertainment media that are other signs of the potential for their message to succeed:

Obviously, there's FoxNews, which still tries to play at being MSM for advertisers, but we know better. Also obviously, there's Coulter, Malkin³, Beck⁴, Limbaugh, and the like. But look beyond just the news and opinion makers. They're at the front lines, but the entertainment media is within the heart of the enemy. And we're winning there, too. Watch 24. It's a fantastic show, and there's a reason it's so popular. It *gets it*. So do the viewers. Look at how popular 300 was. Fighting for freedom against rampaging Persians? A bold leader defying a lackluster legislature to save them all from destruction? Yes please. We'll be seeing more, because while a small minority of L3

³ Conservative columnist and pundit Michelle Malkin

⁴ CNN pundit and conservative radio talk show host Glenn Beck

Dhimmicrats⁵ may change a midterm election here or there, the way people really vote in this country is with movie tickets and TV ratings.

Note that MSMasher argues for the persuadability of LGF discourses by emphasizing the popularity of similar messages with non-elites. He becomes particularly excited (“Yes please”) about the perceived presence of such messages in entertainment media, the “heart of the enemy.” Once again, the emphasis is upon successes gained and the probability of future successes to come.

Lizards view themselves and their media heroes as vanguards that will help to enable everyday Americans to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. In a post by Johnson regarding CNN’s broadcast of Glenn Beck’s anti-Islamist polemic “The Extremist Agenda,” he comments that “US mainstream media actually seems to be starting to report facts about the global jihad that you could have found at LGF any time in the last 5 years. I can’t help wondering why this didn’t happen immediately after 9/11” (Johnson 2006). The replies were numerous and rapid, but most followed a theme similar to the one expressed by poster “Eagle”:

Because someone had to lead the way. Someone had to "break trail" into the swamp that the PC MSM would not dare to tread. That someone was you Glenn (and MM⁶, etc.). For which I thank you.

Despite the enthusiasm of Lizards like Eagle and MSMasher, other bloggers work to remind each other that such cases are the exception rather than the rule, such as “Ward Cleaver’s” sarcastic admonition, “Shhhhh! Watch the show quietly, so the

⁵ A commonly used play on the word “Democrat” with the Arabic word *dhimmi*. The latter was a term used to refer to “protected people” of the old Muslim empires, a status conferred upon non-Muslims who did not convert but otherwise submitted to Muslim rule. *Dhimmis* were considered second class citizens and had to pay a protection tax, but were otherwise allowed to police themselves and continue practicing their religion.

⁶ Michelle Malkin

dhimmis at CNN don't wake up, and yank future shows like this.” Such reminders, while having a playful quality to them, serve to remind Lizards that they must approach their discourses as non-persuadables to the elite media gatekeepers that control public discourse and behave accordingly.

Not all Lizards are champions of the “common person’s” ability to identify resistant messages like MSMasher, as is seen in “Ojoe’s” comment that people did not recognize the Islamic threat “immediately after 9-11 because most people aren't scholars, except for things like sports statistics. But better late than never.” Such a comment bears a startling (and ironic) resemblance to anti-war activist Noam Chomsky’s assertion that the level of sports knowledge displayed by average Americans shows that what is missing in the general electorate is not intelligence, but priorities (Achbar 1994). These priorities are misdirected by the MSM, which makes turning the content of popular media more towards the discourses of the Lizards a mandatory priority.

Enemy #2: Academia

Ojoe’s comment brings us to another cultural force that the LGF community shows great ambivalence towards: scholars and academia. As his comment suggests, Ojoe and many other Lizards pride themselves on their academic training, which often appears to be remarkably extensive. With this knowledge, however, there is often a tone of disdain towards certain prominent academic ideas, scholars, and institutions. In the same comment thread, for example, “BabbaZee” notes that people’s discomfort with critiquing other cultures is a consequence of “the

embedded Gramscian language of deception.” “Right Side” is more specific in his critique, choosing to focus on how one prominent academic in particular has shaped current cultural discourses surrounding Islam:

For this, the main culprit may be the late Dr. Edward Said [link to wikipedia article on Said]... Edward Said was a Palestinian author and professor who almost single-handedly destroyed over a century of Western "Orientalist" scholarship on the Islamic and Arab cultures. He dismissed all of it with what amounts to an ad hominem attack: Western scholars can't really be objective about Islamic and Arab cultures because they come from a culture of "colonialism." And that anything written by a Western professor about Muslim culture just reflects a subconscious desire for Western hegemony. And that was that! As a result, Middle Eastern Studies departments at major liberal-arts universities today won't accept anything less than fawning admiration of Muslim culture. Following Edward Said, anything mildly critical is labeled "colonialism" (Right Side 2006).

Right Side’s critique of Said, particularly how Said’s notions of colonialism inhibits “anything mildly critical,” is noteworthy in that it invokes a basic norm and premise of academia. The premise in this case would be “criticism is necessary for productive academic discourse,” with the norm being “one should resist efforts to silence criticism.” By labeling Said’s critique as an “ad hominem attack,” Right Side further invokes accepted academic rules of proper argumentation to discredit him. Finally, by referring to Said’s “[destruction of] over a century of... scholarship,” Right Side positions Said as an academic who has inhibited the growth of knowledge rather than expanded it.

Far from the anti-intellectualism often expressed within many right-wing discourses, Lizards such as Right Side, BabbaZee, and Ojoe instead embrace certain fundamental institutional values of the academy and declare themselves to be, effectively, the “real” intellectuals. While they respect the basic assumptions of the

institution, they take issue with certain prominent theories for being not only detrimental to American culture, but also for undermining those very basic assumptions.

As with the media, part of the respect for academia comes from a belief that academic institutions have an enormous impact on American cultural values.

These people teach our children right when they are on the cusp of adulthood. It's not as if our kids have the choice of avoiding them anymore. You want a good job? You need to go to college to get it these days. Even if you take something useful like accounting or medicine, you've got to take left wing indoctrination courses in order to achieve a true "liberal arts" education. Somebody needs to tell these L3 profs that "liberal" in this case means "diverse," not "fanatic devotion to the Left" (RandWasRight 2006).

While some "profs" might take exception to the idea that they have any kind of significant impact on American culture, much less control its destiny, many Lizards see certain inherent logics of leftist academic theories present in many of our norms and premises, such as BabbaZee's assertion that "Gramscian language" is "embedded" in American discourses surrounding issues of race. RandWasRight attributes this to the "indoctrination" that students seeking good jobs have to deal with in order to get their degrees. This situates the blame not on education itself, which could be perceived as an attack on the basic American cultural premise that education is fundamentally beneficial. Instead, it places the blame on individuals and ideologies, both of which are acceptable objects of critique not only within American society as a whole, but within academic society in particular.

Enemy #3: Multiculturalists

One of the concepts that the LGF community shows perhaps the strongest ambivalence towards is the very notion of “racism.” Lizards are acutely aware that their discourses are considered by many to be racist, a fact towards which they display distinct resentfulness. In the same comment thread regarding Glenn Beck discussed above, “Ringo the Gringo” makes the following observation:

People are very uncomfortable with the whole idea of criticizing another culture. After all, anyone who has been to college knows that all cultures are equally beautiful...and if you do dare to make judgements about exotic brown-skinned people it is very likely that you are simply a shallow-minded, Euro-centric xenophobe. Or worse, a racist (Ringo the Gringo 2006).

This comment is not a rejection of the cultural premise “being a racist is bad.” Instead, it is a rejection of the idea that what the Lizards are saying is racism at all. While he treads on dangerous grounds by using the words “exotic brown-skinned people,” Ringo mostly works to situate himself as critiquing “culture” rather than race. “Prester John” makes such a case even more explicitly in the thread discussing profiling, this time emphasizing the idea of religion over race:

Time to state it again I guess. Islam is not a race, it's a religion... If they want to ban something please call it what it is i.e. religious profiling. But then religious profiling doesn't sound as nefarious as racial profiling (Prester John 2007).

By noting that racial profiling sounds more “nefarious” than religion profiling, Prester is identifying how much more deeply set American norms and premises regarding race are than those regarding religion. Accusations of racism are consequently portrayed as attempts by their accusers to make the Lizards’ beliefs less persuadable and more “nefarious.” Once again, however, many Lizards seek to challenge this dynamic by claiming it is not they that are in violation of these norms

and premises, but their multiculturalist opponents, as expressed in this post by “dead sea squirrel” in the comment thread regarding Glenn Beck:

The reason the left is so hypersensitive to "racism" is their own deep-seated racism. They believe with a fervency worthy of a jihadi suicide bomber that "people of color" cannot succeed without the patronage of white people (dead sea squirrel 2006).

These same accusations extend to their critiques of Muslims. One of the primary arguments used by Lizards is that Islam is an inherently racist and bigoted ideology itself, and that those critics who accuse LGF of bigotry are themselves in violation of accepted American norms and premises by turning a blind eye to such racism. In particular, the enormous problem of anti-Jewish sentiment within the Islamic world is constantly invoked. The theme of Muslim anti-Semitism is used in particular to invoke the spectre of World War II, relying on that war's reputation as the best example of a “just war” and narratives of how British and American inaction early on in that conflict resulted in the deaths of millions, as argued by “Chicken Kiev” in the Glenn Beck thread:

Compare the newspapers of these past five years to newspapers printed during World War II ... and see how today's papers REFUSE to mention the enemy as such, characterize the murderers for what they are ... we are living in times of great evil (Chicken Kiev 2006)

The problem, therefore, is not racism towards Muslims, but instead a failure to recognize the racism *of* Muslims. Through this strategic use of World War II and Holocaust narratives, Lizards are able to not only defend themselves against accusations of racism, but to also claim the moral authority of *anti*-racists.

Members recognize a growing tension within mainstream discourses regarding Muslims, a tension they identify as being between multicultural idealism

and pragmatic self-preservation, as seen in this comment by “Aegius” on an article regarding the profiling of Muslim airline passengers:

So we are just supposed to do nothing if someone or a group of people shouts "allahi ackbar" on a plane? What if they approach the cockpit? What if they mess with their shoes? What if they put seat belt extensions under their seats? Or if they speak in Arabic or Farsi(sorry, but that is a red flag.)? Oh, yeah, we are just supposed to ignore it. Yeah, right... I don't want to have go to the flight crew and complain, but I will if I see suspicious activity, because I want to live and not get killed. It's called self-preservation, not bigotry.

This positioning of profiling as “self-preservation, not bigotry” works within Ansell’s framework of how new racism attacks “special privileges” of minorities as a “threat.” In this case, what is different is the standard by which a privilege becomes “special.” For African Americans or women, “special” privileges typically refer to affirmative action-style initiatives that seek to bring greater equality between these groups and white men. In regards to Muslims, however, “special privilege” is a way of referring to basic guarantees of due process and the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty.

Aegius acknowledges that he is in violation of certain cultural norms. While he does not make any apologies for being suspicious of certain activities independent of the cultural, religious, or racial background of the individuals perpetrating them, he does make the repair “sorry, but that is a red flag” after stating his distrust of people speaking Arabic or Farsi. He is acknowledging that such accusations could be viewed as “bigotry,” but makes the appeal ultimately about “self-preservation,” a common theme in many LGF posts. Multicultural appeals against profiling thereby become a demand for a very “special privilege” indeed, as they displace basic rights of self defense for non-Muslims.

This appeal to practicality and common sense is invoked continuously in attacks on multiculturalism. Rather than attack it as ideologically flawed (which would then imply an attack on American cultural values as a whole), Lizards frequently work to portray multicultural values as good and noble in theory, but unpractical in application, particularly in regards to Muslims:

[F]or Multiculturalism to work requires that all parties be fair and willing to accept people from a different background. But then the L3 are not even tolerant of people born and raised in Western countries that do not believe the same as they do (FurryOldGuyJeans 2005).

By referring to the necessity for “parties to be fair and willing to accept people,” Furry positions himself as accepting the desirability of multicultural ideals. Within a cultural context, he is positioning his discourses as not deviating from the norm “people should be willing to accept others” or the premise “an accepting society is a good society.” Instead, he is working within them: by positioning Muslims and liberals as being *non*-accepting, he places the burden of violating the norm and premise on them rather than himself. Far from challenging American cultural conventions, Furry situates himself as their enforcer.

Indeed, as we shall continue to see throughout this analysis, Lizards frequently situate their arguments within the realm of persuadables by situating oppositional arguments as *non*-persuadables. The most common means of doing this is by pointing to the apparent hypocrisy of those who commonly promote values such as multiculturalism (i.e. the “L3”), such as Furry’s accusation that American and European leftists are consistently intolerant towards their fellow Westerners.

Strategic Persuasion: Front Stage and Back Stage

The tendency to portray themselves as cultural outsiders raises legitimate concerns of this group's relevance as a persuasive force outside of their immediate circle. Despite a handful of public victories like Rathergate and Fauxtography, it is possible for one to dismiss LGF as a haven for cultural outcasts who associate with each other more out of a desire for companionship than as part of a persuasive agenda. The constant reiteration of the same arguments about Islam to people who already believe in the key premise may seem a pointless activity, a large scale "preaching to the choir." Indeed, if we are to take LGF as a relatively isolated community, little more would need to be said about it.

Taken as part of a larger cultural context, however, these discursive practices can take on a more complex role. I argue that these oft-repeated claims serve as a sort of back stage drill, one that works to prepare community participants for their engagement with oppositional voices outside of the community – and possibly even prepare their arguments for use within the very institutions that they deplore. For all of their concerns that their views are marginal, Lizards *do* express an intense identification with American culture (or even more broadly, Western culture) as a whole, and maintain that their attempts at persuasion are vital to the survival of that culture. Indeed, incidents such as Rathergate and Fauxtography indicate that such work *can* pay off, that the lizards can shape these institutions through public censure and shaming. These most successful incidents were achieved within the boundaries of acceptable appeals and behavior – the fact that LGF's greatest victories had little to do with attacking Islam directly is not lost on Johnson or his fellow lizards.

Having seen how participants on LGF work within specific cultural norms and premises in order to make their discourses persuadable, it is necessary to understand how the lizards vigorously work to maintain this positioning. Because for all of the work done to keep their discourse within “acceptable” limits, the anonymity and relative freedom to say what one pleases on the Internet threatens to bring culturally deviant utterances into the blog. The presence of such statements gives those who are in opposition to LGF’s discourses the evidence necessary to label them as racists and bigots, which in turn prevents their discourses from becoming persuadable.

In order to combat this, Johnson and other LGF regulars constantly work to patrol the ongoing discussion and enforce culturally acceptable rules of discourse. One of the earliest examples of this kind of patrolling is Johnson’s decision to ban the use of certain words that are construed as racist or bigoted, such as “muzzie,” “sand nigger,” and even Coulter’s infamous “raghead.” In defending his choice to institute the ban to LGF participants, Johnson (2007) made the following comment:

Some — particularly those whose comments have been removed — have said that to erase such comments amounts to the very dhimmitude I am trying to keep America from adopting. I disagree. For one thing, I believe that curses, epithets, racial or other kinds of insults, and the like have no place in any public discourse. I also believe that their presence lowers the level of that discourse and leads many to believe, rightly or wrongly, that a site where such things are said by commenters must have nothing worthwhile to say in its articles. And also I think it’s simply stupid to hand ammunition to those who are doing all they can to discredit people who are trying to raise awareness about the threat of jihad and Islamic supremacism .

Johnson’s statement that such comments “have no place in any public discourse” shows his desire to have LGF be truly “public” rather than a private community, in

keeping with his stated goal of “rais[ing] awareness about the threat of jihad and Islamic supremacism.” The attention and opinions of those outside the community are extremely important, and the site must work to maintain that their arguments are “worthwhile.” Johnson continues the narrative that those in opposition to the site wield great cultural power, yet are so flawed in their assumptions that they must seek “ammunition” to “do all they can to discredit” the Lizards. Finally, Johnson’s comments display a commitment to the notion that his beliefs and values are completely consistent with American standards regarding racial discourses.

LGF’s dual focus on ideological purity and pragmatic action is reflected in the structure of the site. Johnson alone dictates what content appears on the main page, which typically consists of links to relevant news stories along with key quotations from the linked website and a brief commentary from Johnson. These stories are then open to discussion by registered users in the comment threads, where most of the “community” aspects of Little Green Footballs take place. Comment threads are one of the least visible parts of any given post – tucked away in the bottom right side of the post is a gray number that indicates the number of comments currently in the thread. This number must be clicked on before the user can even see any comments, and the user must be registered in order to post on the thread at all. While this design choice can be explained in terms of practical and aesthetic concerns (a given comment thread often has more than a hundred posts, and displaying them all would both increase load times and detract attention from the main post itself), minimizing the discussion threads also has the effect hiding the discussions from

casual users. Only users with a relatively high degree of interest in the post are likely to bother exploring the comments section.

While only allowing registered users to post in comment threads is a fairly common feature on political blogs, Johnson takes the somewhat unusual step of only permitting registration during a short period of time any given weekend – typically only an hour or two at a time. These registration “windows” are never announced in advance, which makes it extremely difficult for casual visitors to register. Thus, the registration process itself is a means for Johnson to control the discourses of the site. While requiring registration is a time-honored means of discouraging outsiders from posting knee-jerk and inflammatory comments, LGF’s registration process requires a heavy level of commitment to monitoring the site, a trait that is most likely to be found in readers who already identify with Johnson’s positions.

Once a user has succeeded in registering, she or he may make posts within the comment threads, but must pay careful attention to the posting guidelines prominently displayed at the start of every thread:

- Comments are open and unmoderated, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Little Green Footballs.
- Obscene, abusive, silly, or annoying remarks may be deleted, but the fact that particular comments remain on the site in no way constitutes an endorsement of their views by Little Green Footballs.
- Posts that contain phone numbers, street addresses, email addresses or other personal information will also be deleted, as will posts that consist only of a variation on the word, "First!"⁷

⁷ In many Internet forums, posters will often compete with each other to position themselves at the top of a comment thread by making the first post, something akin to a text-based game of “King of the Mountain.” The quickest way of doing so is to simply post the word “First!” and nothing else. As this often results in several nearly simultaneous posts of “First!” cluttering up the top of a given comment thread, this practice is a never-ending source of irritation for site moderators.

- Comments that advocate violence will be cause for immediate banning with no appeal.
- Disagreement and debate are welcome, but insults and abuse are not, and may cause your account to be blocked.
- REMEMBER: posting comments at LGF is a privilege, not a right. Abuse that privilege, and your account will be blocked.

These disclaimers serve to define the limits of discourse for both the LGF community and to outsiders who may stumble upon the site. By claiming that comment threads are “open and unmoderated, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Little Green Footballs,” Johnson implies a level of freedom in discourse contradicted by other practices, such as preventing easy registration and the banning of posts that Johnson vaguely deems “obscene, abusive, silly, or annoying.” These latter qualifiers are not present until after the first bullet point, which is likely to be the only part of the disclaimer that casual browsers will read at all. The rest of the disclaimers can be read more closely as warnings to those who post in the comment thread: each criterion includes a warning of comment deletion or banning from the site; posts that carry potential legal risk (disclosing personal information or advocating violence) will not be tolerated; and participating in comment threads is a “privilege” that is easily revoked due to any number of loosely-defined criteria.

Johnson’s control of the site’s discourse is just as dedicated to controlling what outsiders might see as it is to what insiders might say. Johnson regularly deletes comments that may be viewed as overly inflammatory, though he has clarified that such comments are not so much deleted as “hidden” from other users besides himself, with the option to “unhide” them at a later date, as he did with one user who used another web forum to accuse Johnson of unfairly deleting his comments:

Here's a guy who used to be a registered LGF commenter ("ElKafir") with a post accusing me of "deceptive malevolence," and claiming he never wrote a comment I attributed to him... Well, unfortunately for this person, when I delete a comment at LGF, it's simply removed from view, not gone for good. And I've restored the viewable status of his comment, to prove that he did indeed write exactly what he's claiming he didn't write.

Johnson also works to prevent known opponents and critics from easily accessing LGF. Attempts to link to LGF from sites that Johnson views as "unfriendly" – such as the Council of American Islamic Relations or leftist sites like the Daily Kos – are automatically redirected to <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/>, which is the English homepage of the Israeli Defense Force. This redirect works to both frustrate outsiders who are likely expecting to be linked to an example of "Lizards behaving badly" while also making the case that LGF's cause is just (defending a nation that a majority of Americans are sympathetic to) and is not, as many of the site's critics maintain, bigoted (defending Jews, a group that is often represented as the quintessential victims of bigotry). Another example occurred when the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) attempted to link readers on their website to bigoted comments made by LGF users: instead of taking the reader to the Little Green Footballs, the links were redirected to websites that claimed to document evidence of corruption within CAIR. CAIR subsequently removed all links to LGF.

Toeing the Line... and Crossing It

Despite Johnson's constant efforts to keep Little Green Footballs within typical American norms of acceptable discourse, countless examples exist where overtly bigoted and violent comments have been allowed to remain undeleted. Typically, such comments are carefully worded in a manner that keeps to the letter

of Johnson's restrictions, though not necessarily their spirit, such as in this comment thread regarding the Muhammad cartoon controversy:

My 2 Cents 4/14/06 4:43:39 pm: I can think of only ONE approach that would be truly effective in convincing the major media to stand up to the intimidation of the Islamofascists. For the record, I hereby express this concept purely academically and hypothetically, not as a specific call or recommendation to actual action. And here it is: If the major media were sufficiently terrified (read, "terrorized") that their failure to stand up to Islamofascism represented a threat to their physical safety, then they would presumably "cave in" to such "intimidation," and thus, ironically, actually support free speech. Again, I am not one of those who would threaten the media with violence. Yet I really do wonder -- among the millions and millions of Americans who are getting angrier and angrier every day about the media's willfull and execrable surrender of all our rights and freedoms to our enemies, are there really none at all who are willing to threaten the media with violence, specifically to counter that threat, and to balance the effect currently advanataged solely by the Islamists? Just wondering.

rickl 4/14/06 4:49:19 pm: Interesting. So if enough of us start threatening media people with violence for not showing Mohammed, then maybe they will back down and show him?

Leper 4/14/06 4:49:55 pm: My2cents, Well said! And besides, think how much fun it would be.

My 2 Cents 4/14/06 4:57:56 pm: Let me repeat, I am not advocating that anyone do anything like that. But again, to address the logic of what you are saying, then yes, I do indeed believe that the media's caving-in to even indirectly-implied Islamofascist threats demonstrates that they can indeed be persuaded to report and present information directly in accordance with the desires of those who choose to threaten them with physical violence, whether for evil ends, or even for good ends.

Here, My 2 Cents uses the disclaimer that he is merely expressing a "concept purely academically and hypothetically," even though he professes earlier that his scenario is the "ONE approach that would be truly effective." While rickl keeps a similarly "hypothetical" tone by calling My 2 Cents' proposal merely "interesting," Leper enters dangerous territory by expressing too much glee in his speculation on "how much fun it would be" to terrorize members of the news media. This prompts a

repair from My 2 Cents, who protests, “Let me repeat, I am not advocating that anyone do anything like that.”

While these repairs and disclaimers are extremely thin (the “purely academic and hypothetical” scenario is also presented as the only scenario “that would be truly effective”), M2C’s scenario succeeds in making two points simultaneously: first, that “Islamofascists” are so dangerous that they have succeeded in cowing the popular news media; second, that those members of the media are cowards who can only be moved through violence or threat of violence. The fact that his visions of violence are directed at non-Muslim Westerners helps to render the comments more acceptable.

Also note the use of the word “Islamofascists.” The use of this word, as well as words like “radical Islam,” and “Islamists” all work to support Johnson’s claim that LGF is dedicated to defeating a specific movement within Islam rather than Islam as a whole. Yet this disclaimer is also a thin one, and many lizards take the position that the only kind of “true” Islam *is* radical Islam, and that any attempt to truly destroy “Islamofascism” necessitates the end of Islam as a whole:

Stringart 3/02/06 1:35:25 pm: Can Islam be reformed? If all Muslims can agree on which parts to ignore, that’d be a yes. So the answer is no.

Gordon 3/02/06 1:40:14 pm: So Charles, if this is right, then Islam can't be reformed. What then? It's time for an answer from you, Charles.

Cato the Elder 3/02/06 1:45:12 pm: Gordon, I'll answer for myself: Islam cannot be reformed. It must be bottled up, hamstrung, mocked into insignificance, relegated to the ash-heap of history, minimized, overcome and destroyed.

Mentat 3/02/06 2:19:49 pm: Islam can't be reformed. Our only choice is disengagement with the Muslim world. Ban Muslim immigration. Put up security barriers to keep them out. Stop buying Muslim oil that funds the Jihad against the West. In fact, stop buying

anything from any Muslim country anywhere. That just about covers it for me. Oh, and one more thing, if they attack us again, respond with overwhelming force until they feel utterly defeated and don't bother us anymore. There. Now I'm done.

reaganite 3/02/06 2:37:39 pm: I'm only going to make one more comment on this thread. I don't know if Islam can be reformed. But we certainly need to try before we have to kill them on a mass scale.

Killgore Trout 3/02/06 2:41:59 pm: Please stick around. Things haven't gotten ugly yet but we might need you.

Iron Fist 3/02/06 2:47:03 pm: #99 reaganite, 100%. That is what we are trying to do now. I really wonder if the L³eftists who are so obviously salivating at the thought of us failing (not to mention the Islamofascists that are actively fighting us) really realize what the cost of that failure will be.

Here, almost all pretense of the violent scenarios being “hypothetical” has been dropped. Each of the commentators above (all of whom have been prolific and highly rated participants on LGF for several years) expresses pessimism that anything but the utter destruction of Islam is sufficient for the West to be safe. Note in particular that Gordon directly challenges Johnson’s policy of prohibiting eliminationist talk by addressing him by name and demanding to know his response to the idea that Islam cannot be reformed⁸.

Some qualifiers do remain, however. Every commentator except Mentat and Stringart avoids using the word “Muslim” in favor of “Islam,” keeping the violent rhetoric mostly restricted to a system of belief rather than actual people. Mentat and reaganite both state that one last attempt at a non-violent (though still extremely severe) response is warranted, while “respond[ing] with overwhelming force until they feel utterly defeated” or “kill[ing] them on a mass scale” remain safely hypothetical. The latter scenario in particular is qualified by the idea that “we

⁸ At no point did Johnson respond to Gordon’s comment. Nor did he make any other comment in this thread at any point.

certainly need to try” to peacefully reform Muslims before they “must” be killed on a mass scale. Iron Fist works to further repair reaganite’s statement by claiming that LGF exists specifically to *avoid* violent confrontation, as reforming Islam is “what we are trying to do now.”

While such comments may *technically* avoid advocating violence, they nevertheless are treated with alarm by outsiders. When attempts by oppositional websites to highlight these comments through direct links to LGF were thwarted by Johnson’s security precautions, critics began to resort to taking screen captures of the comments and posting them on their own websites. An entire site, lgfwatch.org, exists entirely for this purpose. These tactics succeeded in branding Little Green Footballs as a hate site in the eyes of many Internet communities. This infuriated Johnson, who claimed that LGF’s critics were attempting to make the site’s more extreme statements appear commonplace. In defending similar attacks against another anti-jihadist website, Johnson both discredits such attacks while warning lizards of their discursive power:

Notice a pattern here? They can’t attack the blog’s owner for his statements, so they use the time-honored tactic of cherry-picking “extreme” comments from readers, completely out of context (and often distorted or misquoted), despite the clearly-worded disclaimers at Spencer’s site. It’s the same dishonest tactic that the LGF haters (you know who you are—the ones who can’t stop reading) have been using for years, and the Islamist lobby (CAIR) has now picked up on it (Johnson 2006).

Johnson’s opening line, “Notice a pattern here?” gives his statement an overtly instructional/scolding tone, both to the Lizards and “the LFG haters (you know who you are – the ones who can’t stop reading)”. By carefully outlining the perceived tactics of the “LGF haters” and “the Islamist lobby,” Johnson is simultaneously

repairing social damage done by users who break popular standards of public discourse and reaffirming the importance of his tight control over the LGF discourse.

The repair work on the social damage is accomplished at multiple (though not mutually consistent) levels: denying that the comments should be seen as outside the social norm (by placing the word “extreme” in quotation marks); denying that the comments mean what they might appear to mean (by insisting that the comments are “cherry-pick[ed],” taken “completely out of context,” and are “often distorted or misquoted”); and by denying that the comments should be seen as representative of the site as a whole (which are made inadmissible by “clearly worded disclaimers”). By simultaneously defending, reinterpreting, and dismissing the remarks, Johnson implies multiple strategies that Lizards can take in defending the site and controlling their own discourses.

Johnson’s warnings help to encourage Lizards to unofficially patrol each others’ discourses as well, to work to maintain the boundaries of discourse by publicly censoring comments that may be deemed as overly inflammatory, such as this comment made by “Jan” in a thread regarding Palestinians:

Elimination [of the Palestinians] is the only solution; I know that sounds bad, but that's the way it is. Forced sterilization, and full occupation to keep them under control until the problem solves itself in about 50 years.

The only response Jan’s comment received was a succinct admonition from “Ariel”:

Thanks for your solution. Please feel free not to mention it again. Ever. Shit like that is unnecessary.

No further comments on the post were made, and no other posts from Jan are on record at the site, indicating that she was most likely either banned from the blog or

chose never to post again under that name. No explanation for why Jan's proposal was "unnecessary," because none is needed: the post is a blatant violation of cultural norms and premises involving genocide (a genocide that avoids actual slaughter through forced sterilization), a fact that Jan herself acknowledges by her caveat, "I know that sounds bad." While similar disclaimers can be found in the comments discussed above, this time the speaker is informed that her idea is indeed "bad." Ariel's message is clear: LGF is not to be treated as a forum for saying whatever one wishes regarding Muslims. Instead, it is a place where those with similarly negative attitudes towards Muslims can work to make their argument as persuasive as possible, which means working within the established, dominant rules of proper discourse. Jan's comments, which were posted in 2006, can thus be seen as a preview to the eventual feud between LGF and other anti-Islamic sites that are not nearly as careful with patrolling their own discourses.

Schism

The Democratic takeover of Congress following the 2006 elections resulted in an increasingly frustrated tone from online anti-jihadists, who saw the loss of so many political allies as a sign that liberals were on their way to taking over the American government entirely. The nomination of Barrack Obama as the Democratic presidential nominee a year later brought full scale panic to many conservative sites, who began to heavily focus on Obama's Muslim heritage and race. While Johnson shared many conservatives' dislike of Obama on grounds of policy, he became disturbed by a rise in the use of overtly racist language in attacks

against the nominee, both on LGF and other conservative websites. Johnson regularly denounced other blogs for overt displays of racism, displays that Johnson saw as both morally and pragmatically detrimental to the anti-Jihadist cause. His uneasy feelings about his fellow anti-Jihadists became most apparent during a public struggle between himself and Pamela Geller, a former LGF member who runs the prominent conservative blog Atlas Shrugs and who claims that Johnson was “the reason I started blogging” (Weigel 2009).

In October 2007, some of the leading terrorism-focused conservative bloggers flew to Belgium for a Counterjihad Summit sponsored in part by the Center for Vigilant Freedom (now the International Civil Liberties Alliance), an outgrowth of the LGF-inspired blog Gates of Vienna. “It was the best conference I ever went to,” remembered Geller. But the summit included members of Vlaams Belang, a controversial Belgian political party that criticizes Islam and Shariah law, and had been attacked within the Netherlands for its connections to extremism and racism. Johnson went to work exposing this, and the attendees reeled from the negative attention (Weigel 2009).

Much of Johnson’s distaste with Vlaams Belang stems from accusations that the party is as anti-Semitic as it is anti-Islamic, though he stated that he was also uncomfortable with much of the party’s anti-Muslim rhetoric. Johnson was worried about the fact that Gellar was one of the attendees, concerned that her close association with LGF would imply that his site endorsed the views of Vlaams Belang.

Johnson and Geller’s violent disagreement ultimately led to a mutual de-linking between Little Green Footballs and Atlas Shrugs. Other prominent anti-Jihadist bloggers came to Geller’s defense, particularly Robert Spencer, director of the website JihadWatch and author of the bestselling *Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam*. Like Geller, Spencer claims to owe much of his popularity to Johnson and LGF, stating that Johnson “built my Website. I learned how to blog from reading his stuff”

(Weigel 2009). Also like Geller, Spencer was roundly denounced by Johnson for attending the Counterjihad Summit. The majority of the anti-jihadist blogosphere came to the defense of the conference attendees, including many of LGF's most prominent lizards. Johnson responded by deleting comments made by his critics, banning them, and delinking his site from several other anti-jihadist blogs. Infuriated former lizards attacked Johnson and his "fascist tactics" on numerous conservative websites, which Johnson began to delink as well.

This protracted "blogwar" resulted in Johnson being "excommunicated" by most of the anti-jihadist movement, and then much of the conservative blogosphere in general. As his conservative supporters dwindled, Johnson began to shift LGF's focus from attacking conservative Islam in specific to religious conservatism in general. While he had long criticized American conservatives who advocated creationism, Johnson had previously avoided making such criticisms a central focus of the site. He also scornfully dismissed conservative conspiracy theories that Barack Obama's birth certificate had been forged – while Johnson maintained that he still disliked most of Obama's policies, he claimed that the "birther" movement accomplished nothing except to delegitimize other conservative causes. Lizards who raised questions about the birth certificate were banned.

By April of 2009, Johnson finally began to formally break from the American conservative movement. In a series post made in a LGF comment thread, he pushed back against claims that this break was in any way inconsistent with his previously stated political philosophies:

Charles 4/19/2009 6:08:46pm: I used to try to fight against the characterization that LGF was a "right wing" blog. Eventually, I gave

up because it was pointless; I realized they were going to put me in that pigeonhole no matter what I wrote.

Now a lot of people seem to feel betrayed and angry because they made assumptions about my views on issues such as creationism, gay rights, abortion, etc. etc.

I tried to tell them, but they just didn't want to listen.

I can only be honest about my opinions. If that means I need to be excommunicated from the "right wing," I'm fine with that.

Because I never joined.

Johnson also defended his break with the anti-jihadist movement by reaffirming his commitment to the cause, rather than his commitment to his fellow anti-jihadists:

Charles 4/19/2009 6:29:31 pm: Another point: I haven't changed my position against Islamic fascism one bit. I still believe it's a threat to Western civilization, profoundly anti-democratic, and needs to be fought.

However, I have learned (to my dismay) that many of the people who portray themselves as "anti-jihad" are simply paranoid bigots, and/or religious fanatics with hidden motives, who have hitched a ride on the justifiable outrage most of us felt after the 9/11 attacks.

My objections to radical Islam are based on my commitment to classical liberalism, and the values of the Enlightenment.

Johnson went on to define "classical liberalism" as a commitment to "personal freedom, limited government, rational debate, and a strong national defense." He also claimed that the rise of extreme rhetoric from his fellow bloggers only worked to delegitimize their goals:

Charles Sun, Apr 19, 2009 6:38:46pm: re: #255 Alouette

Anyone who relies entirely on the MSM for their information, thinks Pam Geller represents the "Conservative" blogs, and "J Street" is pro-Israel.

I'm going to vomit now, I can't hold it in my mouth any longer.

Sucks, doesn't it? But that's the inevitable consequence of legitimizing people like Geller and Corsi, instead of rejecting them.

Johnson made another announcement of his formal break from the American right later that year, in which he offered a ten point rationale for “Why I Parted Ways With the Right”:

1. Support for fascists, both in America and Europe
2. Support for bigotry, hatred, and white supremacy
3. Support for throwing women back into the Dark Ages, and general religious fanaticism
4. Support for anti-science bad craziness
5. Support for homophobic bigotry
6. Support for anti-government lunacy
7. Support for conspiracy theories and hate speech
8. A right-wing blogosphere that is almost universally dominated by raging hate speech
9. Anti-Islamic bigotry that goes far beyond simply criticizing radical Islam, into support for fascism, violence, and genocide
10. Hatred for President Obama that goes far beyond simply criticizing his policies, into racism, hate speech, and bizarre conspiracy theories

Within the anti-jihadist blogosphere, Johnson’s defection was greeted with derision as an inevitable move from someone who held any sympathy with liberalism. On the blog Jihad Watch, “Hesperado” offers what has become a common narrative of Johnson’s betrayal within the anti-jihadist movement:

Hesperado | September 9, 2009 4:21 PM: The most plausible explanation for CJ’s behavior this past year is sincere fanaticism. He sincerely believes his point of view. He sincerely believes in the PC MC⁹ fear of the danger of bigotry if it is not checked.

He began as a Leftist, and for a while he suppressed his Leftism when he had the marginal good sense to become worried about the revival of Islam. But just as certain Muslims who seem to be loosening the ties to their Islam suddenly lash out and try to kill people (or succeed), through a manifestation of "Sudden Jihad Syndrome", what we have seen this past year in CJ is "Sudden Leftist Syndrome" -- his old-time religion of Leftism has come back, with a vengeance; and it cannot brook excessive criticism of Islam, because according to Leftism, Islam is a preciously privileged "ethnic" group, and any criticism of Muslims too dangerously seems, in the minds of Leftist, to start tending toward the direction of bigotry, racism, and soon acquires additional velocity as it starts rolling down the slippery slope toward genocide. This fear (in the case of the anti-Islam movement, preposterously unfounded)

⁹ Politically Correct Multi-Culturalist

to Leftists like CJ is more important than the Islamoreality against which the demonized "Islamophobes" are working.

While right wing anti-jihadist sites scornfully rejected Johnson and the remaining members of LGF, many left wing blogs openly praised the break as a sign that Johnson had finally "returned to sanity." For example, on the popular leftist weblog Daily Kos, user John Campanelli lauds Johnson in a post entitled, "Charles Johnson Breaks with the Right:

You have to give Johnson credit for having escaped the Wingnut compound. I wonder if he had to undergo cult deprogramming.

Many users in the comment thread offer similar praise:

Doc2 on Tue Dec 01, 2009 at 12:13:01 PM: He broke with the right long ago, and has been castigated for it. His diary today is a classic IMO. His anti-teabagger, anti-birther, and anti-climate denier rants are consistently intelligent and makes most of the diaries on this site seem pretty inane. I'm liking lgf more and more each day.

Dc 20005 on Tue Dec 01, 2009 at 12:42:36 PM: I saw a link to this posting yesterday on another blog and went to LGF expecting what I saw the last time I was there (3 years ago or more). I was shocked.

Consistent themes in this praise are expressions of pleasant surprise, respect, and solidarity with Johnson. Yet amongst all the praise given Johnson and the remaining lizards, little mention is made of his stated commitment to anti-jihadist principles. For most left wing commentators, it was Johnson's previous political affiliation that is the main point of contention. Even for those commentators who believe Johnson is still fundamentally more Republican than Democrat, he has become an example of a "sane" Republican with whom one can have a "civil discourse":

Now on any given day the average progressive isn't likely to find a lot of common ground with Johnson's site. While he's always been on the non-crazy side of the creationist/Darwinist debate he's taken more

than his fair share of stands that would get you (or at least in my opinion, should get you) drummed out of a meeting of Center for American Progress fellows. Imagine my surprise when I saw that nearly everything on his front page could have been taken right off of Daily Kos... I'm not saying that Johnson is right on most issues, or really, any issues, but I am gracious enough to say thanks for showing that there are some people on the right who do not approve of the freak-show that has come to dominate the GOP over the last couple of years. While I'm positive that LGF and Dkos will continue to cross swords on an almost daily basis, I'm more than willing to admit that I'd trade GOP'ers like Johnson for the current side show that's been driving the Republican party straight into Jesusland any day of the week (moderate of extremes 2009).

While moderate of extremes takes great care to qualify that he's not in agreement with Johnson on a number of issues ("I'm not saying that Johnson is right on most issues, or really, any issues" and "I'm positive that LGF and Dkos will continue to cross swords on an almost daily basis"), he does so after claiming that "nearly everything on his front page could have been taken right off of Daily Kos," indicating that the perspectives on the two web sites are compatible. Most importantly, he grants Johnson et al respectful language, saying that he is "gracious enough to say thanks" and that he accepts them as political rivals over the "current side show that's been driving the Republican party straight into Jesus land any day of the week." This is the very definition of persuadable – moderate of extremes is not indicating that he agrees with Johnson's perspectives, but rather his belief that those are acceptable perspectives to have within the context of mainstream political debate. Indeed, when Daily Kos user Plutonium Page notes later on in the thread that "LGF is still horrible when it comes to Islamophobia," moderate of extremes responds that they are "definitely still horrible about it... But even they were calling out some of the crazy anti-islam wingers about their ties with European anti-Islam

political parties. Not saying their on the right side of the issue, but not totally off the deep end.” In this particular case, Johnson’s anti-Islamic discourses are granted persuadable status by being contrasted against their more extreme counterparts. While his views are “definitely still horrible,” his willingness to “call out” more extreme elements situates his views closer to the realm of acceptable discourse rather than being “totally off the deep end.”

In Through the Back Door: Leftist Islamophobic Persuadables?

Ironically, Johnson’s break from the anti-jihadist movement may do more to make anti-jihadist beliefs persuadable to a much wider audience than would have been possible had the schism never taken place. In particular, by attacking the American far right while reaffirming his commitment to fighting “radical Islam,” Johnson helps to situate anti-Islamic discourses into a liberal (both classical and progressive) framework.

It is important to remember the timeline of Johnson’s break with the American right – much of his distancing began shortly after the Democratic Congressional victories of 2006, accelerated with the election of Barack Obama, and became complete during the height of President Obama’s popularity. Johnson has consistently shown concern when the discourses of LGF appear to extend past the persuadable boundaries of popular political discourse. Despite the image Johnson promotes of being an iconoclast who presses against popular sentiment, he consistently modifies his public discourses to align himself and his website to be persuadable within the dominant political ideology. Rather than having a “change of heart” similar to former conservative figures such as Andrew Sullivan or Richard

Brooks, Johnson maintains that his change in political allegiance is a mark of *consistency* with his political ideology and goals. What changes is emphasis – rather than focusing the majority of LGF’s attention on conservative Islam, he instead shifts the attention to conservative Christianity.

Rather than positioning anti-jihadism as an important element of the conservative political movement as a whole, Johnson and (to a lesser extent) the remaining lizards of LGF speak of movement conservatism as an occasionally convenient tool for advancing anti-Jihadist logics and policies. Once that tool began to move too far outside of mainstream discourses to be politically useful, Johnson et al. were prompt to discard it, even if it meant discarding most of the established anti-Jihadist movement along with it:

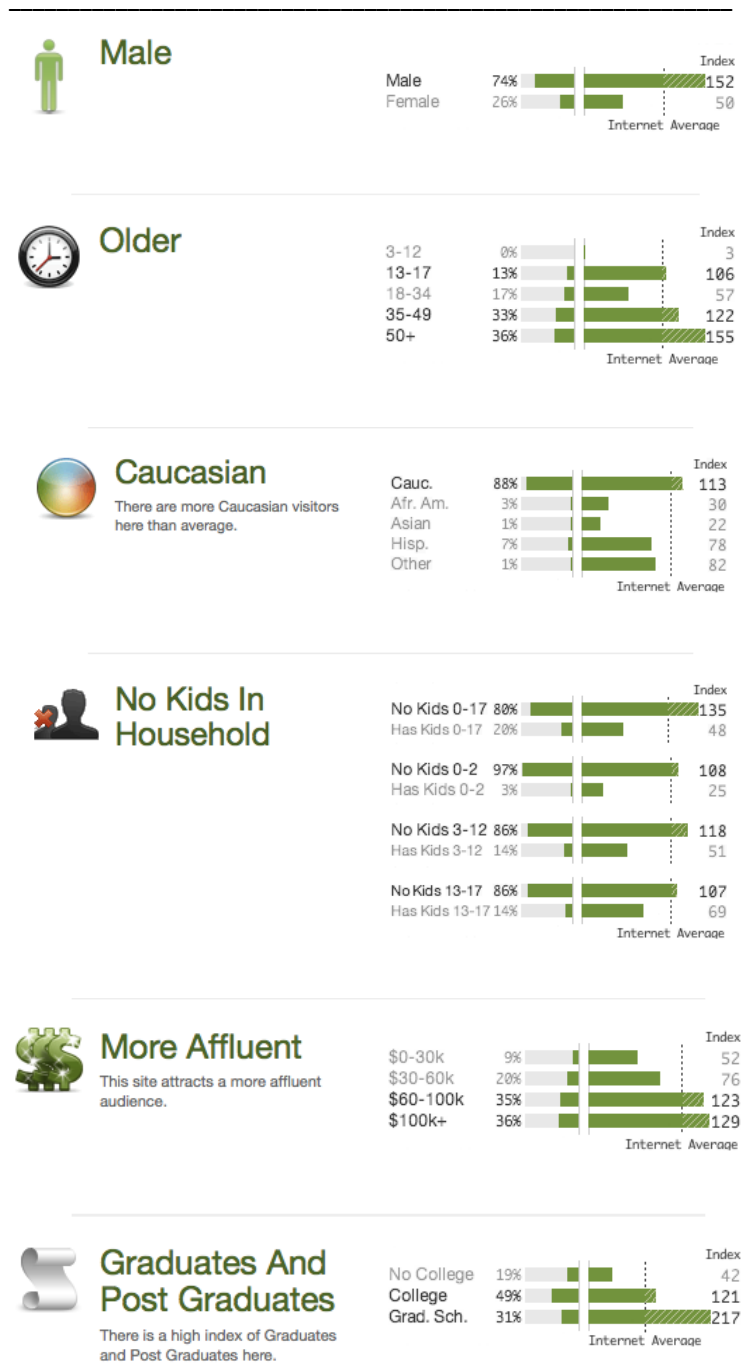
I don’t think there is an anti-jihadist movement anymore. It’s all a bunch of kooks. I’ve watched some people who I thought were reputable, and who I trusted, hook up with racists and Nazis. I see a lot of them promoting stories and causes that I think are completely nuts (Johnson 2009).

It is important to note that Johnson is not disavowing himself or LGF from the belief that “Islamic fascism... [is] a threat to Western civilization, profoundly undemocratic, and needs to be fought.” At no point has Johnson offered any sort of apology or retraction for anti-Islamic statements made by himself or other members of LGF, past or present. Instead, he claims that he “[doesn’t] think there is an anti-jihadist movement anymore” as those who “portray themselves as ‘anti-jihad’ are simply paranoid bigots” rather than “classical [liberals].” His repeated use of words such as “kooks” and “nuts” for people whom he “thought were reputable” and once “trusted” shows a disgust with anti-Jihadists who behave in a manner that is far

outside the realm of accepted public discourse – that is to say, outside of the realm of persuadables.

Even as his fellow anti-Jihadists similarly denounce him as “crazy,” Johnson has managed to position himself and the LGF community within the bounds of mainstream discourses while still maintaining a commitment to presenting much of the Muslim world as inherently incompatible with “the West.” As we shall see in the next chapter, however, much discursive work had already been done to position these anti-Islamic discourses within the range of progressive liberal persuadables long before Johnson’s break with the American right.

Table 1: Littlegreenfootballs.com Demographics



Source: Quantcast.com, accessed 4/30/10,
<http://www.quantcast.com/littlegreenfootballs.com#demographics>

CHAPTER III ONE GOOD MOVE

J.D. | August 18, 2007 1:36 AM: "[Islam is a religion that is]...full of itself, thinks it knows all the answers..." That describes most forms of theism as far as I can tell; not just Islam.

Mick | August 18, 2007 2:19 AM: I find muslim fundamentalists more frightening than any other kind. The jehovas witnesses may be annoying but they wont advocate your murder (far as I know).

Introduction

Despite the tendency to view Islamophobic discourses as originating primarily from the political right, such activity can also be detected in areas more traditionally associated with the left, as we have seen with Little Green Footballs. These discourses are typically presented in a much more subtle fashion, and usually in conjunction with a broader discursive strategy. In particular, the online discourses of atheism frequently employ Islamophobic arguments as a means of making atheism in general more socially acceptable. Examining these particular discourses in relation to Little Green Footballs and Fark serves a number of purposes. First, they serve as proof that overt Islamophobia is being situated as a legitimate persuadable from multiple political perspectives, which supports my claim that Islamophobic logics are becoming increasingly accepted in "popular" discourses overall. Second, they show that Islamophobic logics are rich and complex, and that they interact with other discourses in a myriad of ways. Finally, while the atheist discourses I will be examining in this section are often situated as strictly oppositional to the right wing discourses of a blog like the earlier version of Little Green Footballs, consistent patterns emerge between the two that suggest a

more general understanding of how Islam is perceived in relation to issues of globalization, neoliberalism, and pluralism that transcends traditional political categories.

While numerous blogs, forums, and other websites are dedicated to atheism, I will focus in particular on the blog Onegoodmove.org (abbreviated here as 1GM). The site began in 2002 as a collection of random musings by the site's founder, Norman Jenson, on issues of science, literature, politics, and day-to-day life. Just as 9/11 radically narrowed and politicized the focus of Little Green Footballs, 1GM was transformed into a much more focused advocate of left-wing politics and atheism by a specific political event: the 2004 presidential race.

While not as widely trafficked as blogs like Little Green Footballs or Daily Kos, 1GM gained a respectably large readership during the election that has to this day waned only gradually. Based on user-submitted reviews on the webpage review site *StumbleUpon*,¹⁰ it appears that this popularity is due in part to Jenson's frequent postings of high quality, downloadable video clips of popular news and entertainment programs, particularly *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, leading readers to describe the site as "great entertainment" (LemonBlueberry 2008) and "advisable when you need a good laugh" (lunadesal 2008). This humorous quality is portrayed as being intimately connected to its other major appeal as being a critical site focused on speaking "truth to power." "Saintaaron" describes the blog posts as "wonderful examples showing ignorant america[sic]" (2008), while "phaedawg" claims that it is a "great filter for some of the crazy stuff

¹⁰ <http://www.stumbleupon.com/url/onegoodmove.org/1gm/>

going on out there” (2007). Most importantly for the purposes of this study, it is understood to be a “great source of political and atheist info” (Halloumi 2007).

Unlike Little Green Footballs, 1GM is maintained primarily as Jenson’s personal blog. As such, while comments are frequently posted by a wide variety of users, it is not as much of a web “community” as LGF. Nevertheless, Jenson presents himself as an advocate and organizer for the atheist community at large. Part of how Jenson creates a sense of an atheist “community” while dictating most of 1GM’s content is by making many of the posts little more than links and brief summaries of articles, television appearances, and books by prominent atheist intellectuals and advocates, with only cursory commentary of his own. In 2008, Jenson took the step of incorporating a full web-forum interface on the site, allowing for a much more cohesive series of ongoing discourses between users that can more easily deviate from the agenda set by Jenson’s postings.

Also unlike LGF, many 1GM postings appear to be engaged in genuine persuasive attempts made towards potential “outsider” readers. Despite the community-building aspects of the site, the specifics of its format (limited posting options for those other than the site owner, heavy use of popular video clips, ease of posting comments anonymously, etc.) suggest the site would attract a wider variety of viewpoints than the more insular Little Green Footballs. As such, the implicit norms and premises of the site (particularly the premise that “religion is bad”) cannot be taken for granted and must be continuously reproduced. Much of this reproduction involves taking specific examples of religious groups of all varieties committing offensive acts and using them to make a larger case against religion as a

whole. Not surprisingly, incidents involving Muslims are frequently used, with the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy (“It is not Denmark that has something to learn, other than the realization that many that practice Islam are violent”¹¹) being only of the most famous. Talk of “respect” for Islam is derided as ludicrous and dangerous, as seen in the quote offered by Jenson from a Slate.com article, “the plain fact is that the believable threat of violence undergirds the Muslim demand for ‘respect.’”¹²

These arguments almost inevitably lead to a broader case being made against religion – by getting the reader to accept that Islam as a whole is harmful to society, 1GM gets a “foot in the door” to make arguments about the harms of religion in general. This leap is dependent to some degree on the value of equality – if one is to argue that one major religion is bad, one must argue the same for all religions in order to avoid being viewed as a bigot. As Dwzonka elaborates in a discussion thread about a YouTube video critical of Islam, “this guy [Jenson] isn't focusing on Islam. He is an atheist. He disses Christianity all the time.”¹³

In this regard, I argue that such discourses are more of a product of Islamophobia becoming a persuadable than a cause: Islam is recognized as the easiest target of the major world religions, and is therefore one of the safest means to advance atheism as an acceptable worldview. However, they ultimately contribute to moving Islamophobia in specific further into the realm of social

¹¹ http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2006/10/links_with_your_398.html

¹² http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2007/08/links_with_your_440.html

¹³ <http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2007/08/islam.html#comment-102294>

acceptability through the ritual repetition of these arguments, as well as by making Islamophobic values understandable within a left wing context.

Avoiding the Bigot Label

Jenson's choice to make 1GM a host site for video clips of popular liberal commentators such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Bill Maher is much of the reason for the site's popularity. While live video streaming technology makes it relatively easy for any website to post such clips today, such technology has only become readily available and convenient since the creation of YouTube in 2006. Before then, video clips were primarily available in Quicktime, avi, and mpg formats, which suffer from numerous limitations. In particular, non-streaming file formats place the responsibility of housing and maintaining video clips directly on the blogger's website, rather than relaying a stream from YouTube or another host site. This often requires the site owner to purchase large amounts of virtual storage space, as well as pay heavy fees should the site experience heavy download traffic. This made sites that hosted such videos relatively rare, which in turn helped to make One Good Move a uniquely consistent source of popular video media. Even though the site's major focus is on advancing atheism, much of its traffic from 2004 to 2006 can be attributed to users seeking video files that advanced a general liberal agenda, one that did not always relate directly to atheism.

Such users were therefore confronted with Jenson's particular take on atheism, which frequently involves attacks on major world religions and their adherents as irrational, hypocritical, and dangerous. Rather than limit himself to exclusively attacking Christianity – the dominant religion in most of his readers'

societies – Jenson does not hesitate to attack non-Western religions just as vigorously and unapologetically. By bracketing religion outside of specific cultural contexts, Jenson makes arguments that are frequently accused of being culturally insensitive, even bigoted. Jenson’s position as a self-identified liberal makes advancing such arguments with his readers problematic, as he runs the risk of being labeled a bigot and rejected out-of-hand by liberal readers who visit his site.

This very same liberal status, however, can potentially inspire left-leaning readers to do some of the repair-work for him, rather than risk challenging their own identities as leftists. As Roberts-Miller (2009) describes it:

The logic is: I am a good person; I am a member of X ingroup; my membership in X ingroup makes me a good person; therefore, members of my ingroup are also good people. My goodness and the goodness of others in my ingroup are logically connected. To acknowledge that members of the ingroup might not share that good quality means changing the narrative about the relation of good-ness and ingroup identity. This is not only threatening to our sense of self, but to our sense of reality: if our imagined taxonomy is wrong, then the world may not be quite as easy to interpret as we would like (p. 181).

In order to maintain a coherent sense of group identity, leftist readers who identify with Jenson on any other number of issues must make a choice between either labeling Jenson as part of the “out” group of bigots or modifying their own understanding of what being a member of the liberal “in” group means. In order to encourage readers to choose the latter approach rather than the former, Jenson works hard to situate his arguments to be more in line with liberal persuadables, and his readers in turn work to repair Jenson’s occasional slippage into cultural chauvinism. As we shall see below, this is accomplished primarily through

presenting anti-Islamic logics as consistent with a broader “anti-fundamentalist” system of meaning.

The Fundamentalist Question

On January 16, 2007, Jenson linked to a live online debate between bloggers Sam Harris and Andrew Sullivan over the question, “Is religion built upon lies?” Harris, who takes the affirmative position, makes the case that Islam is uniquely guilty of suffering from the “fundamentalist problem”:

I think you and I agree that there is a problem with religious fundamentalism. We might not agree about how to solve this problem, or about how fundamentalism relates to religion as a whole, but we both think that far too many people currently imagine that one of their books contains the perfect word of the Creator of the universe... We are both especially concerned about Islam at this moment--because so many Muslims appear to be "fundamentalists" and because some of the fundamentals of Islam pose special liabilities in a world overflowing with destructive technology. I think, for instance, that we would both rank the Islamic doctrines of martyrdom and jihad pretty high on our list of humanity's worst ideas (Harris 2007).

Sullivan’s counterpoint:

We agree that Islamic fundamentalism is by far the gravest threat in this respect (because of its comfort with violence); and that the core feature of what occurred on 9/11 was not cultural, political, or economic - but religious... The reason I find fundamentalism so troubling - whether it is Christian, Jewish or Muslim - is not just its willingness to use violence (in the Islamist manifestation). It is its inability to integrate doubt into faith, its resistance to human reason, its tendency to pride and exclusion, and its inability to accept mystery as the core reality of any religious life.

Both Sullivan and Harris accept the premise that Islam is unique in its capacity for two traits: “fundamentalism” and violence. For Harris, the issue is that “some of the fundamentals of Islam pose special liabilities in a world overflowing with

destructive technology,” which positions Islam as uniquely (“special”) unable to safely coexist with advanced technology. This infantilizes Muslims (“so many” of whom “appear to be ‘fundamentalists’”) in comparison to the unmentioned non-Muslim populations of the world who are assumed do *not* “pose special liabilities in a world overflowing with destructive technology.”

While the above exchange does not take place on 1GM itself, it is consistent with the discourses of the site, both in terms of content and style. As we shall see below, users respond to a provocative video clip within the same range of attitudes.

Is Islam Uniquely Evil?

On August 18, 2007, Jenson posted a video monologue of English author/comedian Pat Condell entitled “The Trouble With Islam.” In it, Condell offers a restrained yet scathing commentary on Islam and Muslims, claiming (among other things) that Islam is “a religion of war,” that “Muslim women in Britain who cover their faces are mentally ill”, although in some parts of the world women had no choice but to cover their face, as they were “governed...by primitive pigs whose only achievement in life is to be born with a penis in one hand and a Qur’an in the other.”

Jenson also offers his own brief written commentary:

Well, that pretty much sums up how I feel about unwarranted demand for respect that characterizes all religion especially one that demands respect through intimidation and violence.¹⁴

Jenson’s opening assessment of the linked article works as an example of extremes: while “all religion” issues an “unwarranted demand of respect,” Islam is

¹⁴ <http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2007/08/islam.html>

“especially” problematic because it is “one that demands respect through intimidation and violence.” “All religion” serves as an inoculation against critiques that Islam is being uniquely singled out, yet “especially one” does indeed single Islam out for unique (or at least notable) status. While Jenson may be arguing that he is using an extreme example to prove a general point, several commentators take issue with this particular approach, particularly in light of Condell’s very Muslim-specific critiques and insults:

Fox | August 18, 2007 1:20 AM

Have to admit I both agree and disagree. While I certainly detest religious fundamentalism and the frequent attempts by religious people to indoctrinate others to their beliefs, as well as excuse themselves from criticism, I also don't see the point in generalising in the manner, which seems to be done here. You could pretty much transfer a lot of what was said to pertain to various ethnic races instead. I.e. "Black People are ghetto-banging murderers and I wish they'd grow a brain and think for themselves instead of constantly relenting to peer pressure and gang violence". People would likely have been offended by that as well, so in terms of offense due to generalisation I don't think religion has a free pass.

It's not that I'm offended. Believe me, that'd take quite a lot more. I just don't find it very constructive when there are so many better -- and in my opinion reasonable, arguments to be made against religion.

Here Fox notes the problematic nature of how Jenson and the linked video articulate their arguments. In particular, he invokes anti-racism with the analogy of “Black People [as] ghetto-banging murderers,” which he notes would “likely” have offended a generalized “people.” Notably, Fox is here differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate offense with blatantly anti-Black statements as a litmus test – offense at one’s group being negatively generalized is legitimate in matters of race, therefore they are equally legitimate in matters of religion, and is not a case where “religion has a free pass” that other groups do not.

Ultimately, however, Fox acknowledges that the position is not enough to offend *him*, which would “take quite a bit more,” implying that he still sees offense as unwarranted. Instead, he switches tactics and argues that the argument should be dismissed because it is not “very constructive when there are so many better –and in my opinion reasonable, arguments to be made against religion.” Fox clearly suggests that there is an appeal to the link for the majority of the forum participants, but effectively argues that this appeal may not be as “reasonable” – or persuadable – as other possible avenues of argument. Put into the context of his preceding argument, Fox is arguing that the non-persuadability of the link is based around its unique generalization of a disenfranchised group (one that he never mentions by name) rather than religion as a whole.

J.D. | August 18, 2007 1:36 AM

"[Islam is a religion that is]...full of itself, thinks it knows all the answers..."

That describes most forms of theism as far as I can tell; not just Islam. How else could you describe someone who claims to *know* that the universe was created by a Great Alpha Male In The Sky for the primary purpose of serving as the backdrop for human activities, that the Alpha Male In the Sky is obsessively preoccupied with the minutiae of human behaviors, and moreover that 'He' commands us to behave in ways that are suspiciously reminiscent of the prevailing cultural norms of the theist's society?

J. D. takes similar issue with singling out Islam, claiming that the quoted accusation “describes most forms of theism... not just Islam,” though he qualifies that this is “as far as I can tell.” He emphasizes this commonality by generalizing monotheism as centered around a “Great Alpha Male In The Sky” who is “obsessively preoccupied with the minutiae of human behaviors.” While he deviates from Fox’s approach by actually mentioning Islam by name, he only does so once within the first two

sentences, after which he restricts himself to significantly more abstract descriptions of “theism.” Other commentators are more specific:

Mick | August 18, 2007 2:19 AM

I agree with this rather well spoken chap. I find muslim fundamentalists more frightening than any other kind. The jehovas witnesses may be annoying but they wont advocate your murder (far as I know).

Though if I may pick a nit, when he says that religon was always pretty dormant in the UK he must have forgotten about the many hundreds of people savagely murdered in Northern Ireland on religous grounds, to this day. Check out parts of Scotland too for sectarian strife between christians. No muslims involved in either case.

Mick offers a significantly more enthusiastic endorsement of the link than Fox or J.D. (“I agree with this rather well spoken chap”) and reaffirms the idea that Muslim fundamentalists are “more frightening than any other kind.” Yet there are still qualifications – Mick is specific to point out that *he* specifically finds them more frightening, notes that his belief that Jehovah’s Witnesses do not advocate murder only goes “as far as I know,” and most significantly notes specific contemporary examples of religious strife and violence within Christianity, and that there were “[n]o muslims involved in either case.”

Peter G. | August 18, 2007 2:28 AM

I have to agree with the commentator that Islam is the least tolerant of the major religions, indeed, any religion. This is not a recent development. There is no country in the world where Islam dominates that life for the adherents of other religions is not made a misery. Ask the Ba'hai or the worlds' few remaining Zoarastrians how life in Iran has been going. The specific injunctions contained in the Koran regarding allowable abuse of People of the Book, ie Christians and Jews, are bad enough but for those of other beliefs, which includes pretty much everyone else on the planet who hasn't declared themselves an Atheist, the penalty is death. Oh yeah. Don't tell anyone in Islamic countries if you are an Atheist. You probably won't enjoy being stoned. I have always found it ironic that my country, Canada, has prosecuted people and deported them for indulging in holocaust

denial. Now those people may be complete nutjobs but none of them has been accused in open court of urging the death of their fellow citizens. The Koran does. A more perfect example of hate literature could hardly be found. Well, except for, possibly, the bible.

Here we have by far the most firm, direct condemnation of Islam as uniquely evil, more specifically “the least tolerant of the major religions, indeed, an religion.” Peter G. states in no uncertain terms that Islamic societies are places where minority faiths and atheists live lives “made of misery” when they aren’t being stoned to death. He even goes so far as to claim that Muslims are worse than “nutjob” holocaust deniers, as “none of them has been accused in open court of urging the death of their fellow citizens,” and claims that “a more perfect example of hate literature could hardly be found” than the Qu’ran. Yet even this direct, fierce condemnation ends with a qualifier that the Bible “possibly” is on level with the Qu’ran as hate literature.

The posts quoted above roughly sum up the range of opinions typically offered by 1GM commentators regarding Islam. While they span a wide range of agreement and disagreement with the positions presented in Jenson’s link, all of them have a few common themes: no matter which position is taken, all begin by expressing some level of sympathy with the scholar, and all end by implying that the same critiques can be applied to Christianity and/or religion in general. When speaking of Islam in general terms, regular users on 1GM tend to fall within these persuadable boundaries, where Islam is somewhere between a unique or classic case study in the evils of religion. Each post acknowledges both of these perspectives as legitimate in some fashion, and all accept two basic premises: that

Islam is something the world would be better off without, and that religions as a whole are irrational and dangerous.

Such persuadable limits remain a constant throughout the archives I have examined, though they become contested in the face of specific, dramatic incidents involving Muslims. As we shall see in the case of the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy, the persuadability of the perspective that Islam is *not* uniquely evil is particularly vulnerable to challenge during such moments of crisis.

Epic Encounter: the Danish Cartoon Controversy

On February 20, 2006, Jenson posted a link to a *60 Minutes* special on the Danish cartoon controversy¹⁵. Even though Jenson himself did not offer any immediate commentary on the link, the ensuing discussion in the comment thread became lively:

noah | February 20, 2006 5:51 PM: What an amazing example of how people refuse to take responsibility for their actions. That goes for everyone involved.

Fletch | February 20, 2006 10:00 PM: It seems to me that there is enough blame in this situation to go all the way around. Both sides have acted childishly with the goal of provoking a response. Both sides are wrong in what they have done, and both should back down and start acting with just a hint of respect for each other and the restraint required for us to get through the difficult times everyone is currently going through.

Noah and Fletch immediately open the discussion by asserting a common human element to “both sides” and “everybody involved.” Both use language that infantilizes the parties involved as “refus[ing] to take responsibility for their

¹⁵ http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2006/02/60_minutes_on_d_1.html

actions” and “act[ing] childishly with the goal of provoking a response.” No credit is given to the existence of any legitimate grievance beyond mutual hypocrisy. Both posts thus work to remove the commentators from the actors within the controversy, and attempt to assert “respect” and “restraint” within the subjects by calling them to acknowledge “the difficult times everyone is currently going through,” thus putting all contemporary human suffering on a level playing field.

Fletch’s response in particular constructs international disputes within a therapeutic-individualist context – each side “should back down and start acting with just a hint of respect for each other” suggests a personal conflict between two neighbors, while situating the need for a resolution to the conflict within a broader multinational context where every person, nation-state, and organization recognize their concerns as fundamentally equal (“required for us”). These equal concerns all stem from a common source (“the difficult times everyone is currently going through”) and share a common solution (“respect for each other and... restraint”), simplifying a complex multinational series of incidents under a single therapeutic rubric.

In contrast to Fletch and Noah’s attempts to render equal judgment upon all parties involved under a “one world, one people” system of meaning, “Jo Ann” works to create an unambiguous hierarchy of blame:

Jo Ann | February 21, 2006 1:03 AM: hmmm.. The newspaper exercised their rights of freedom of expression. That is still a right in Denmark, and the Danes should not have to submit to the rules of Islam. The other side has a right to be offended. But they are killing people, and that is a lot more than being "childish" ...

Jo Ann takes direct issue with attempts to equalize the parties involved – while she accepts the dualistic division offered by Noah and Fletch (“the other side”), she insists on a hierarchy of blame, where Muslims have “a right to be offended,” but are “killing people” and are attempting to force Danes to “submit to the rules of Islam,” while “the newspaper exercised their rights of freedom of expression.” Danish law is rendered natural and innate by being described as “rights,” while Islamic law is both denaturalized and trivialized by being described as “rules.” The use of the word “submit” also reminds readers who are educated about Islam that the word itself means “submission,” in contrast to the “freedom” of the Danes. “Still a right in Denmark” lends a sense of urgency by implying that such rights may not continue to exist in Denmark (or elsewhere) in the future. Finally, while it appears at first glance that Jo Ann is rejecting Fletch’s characterization of protesting Muslims as “childish” by stating that “killing people... is a lot more than being ‘childish,’” her use of “a lot more than” instead implies that the “childish” label is correct, but insufficient. She goes on to explain:

What is really wrong with this picture is that the Muslims riot in huge numbers over some cartoons (two of the most vile ones misrepresented as being published by Jyllands-Posten). But a greater threat to the sanctity of their religion are the violent acts committed in the name of Allah/Muhammed. Where were all of these rioters after 9/11? Shouldn't they have been protesting the use of Muhammed for purposes of killing people? As I recall, a great number of them seemed to applaud what happened, or just shrugged their shoulders and intimated that the U.S. had it coming. So the cartoons accurately depicted some Muslims as being terrorists in the name of Muhammed, and now the Muslim terrorists are proving them right. The "moderate" Muslims should be directing their anger at their fellow Muslims who defile their prophet with these barbaric acts...

The comment that “a greater threat to the sanctity of their religion are the violent acts committed in the name of Allah/Muhammad” constructs Muslims as acting against their own self interests, the epitome of an irrational act, particularly over something as trivial as “some cartoons.” She distances herself somewhat from a full condemnation of Islam in general by specifying the targets of the cartoons as being “some Muslims” and “Muslims terrorists, yet Jo Ann dissolves the bracketing of “Muslim terrorists” from Muslims in general by her description of “‘moderate’ Muslims.” The sarcastic use of quotes around “moderate” in describing “moderate Muslims” implies the impossibility that such a Muslim can even exist. Their existence is further disproved by the apparent lack of any Muslims “directing their anger at their fellow Muslims who defile their prophet with these barbaric acts.” If such Muslims exist, they “should be directing their anger at their fellow Muslims.” Since no such protests are apparent in Western media (and since no such protests occurred after 9/11, a far more significant event than “some cartoons”), it is clear that they fail to live up to the proper definition of “moderate,” and therefore do not exist in any meaningful sense.

“Moderate” thus becomes a substitute for the word “rational” – rational actors would behave in a manner that focusing condemnation on “these barbaric acts.” Any act of violence committed by Muslims is now committed by “Muslim terrorists,” even violence committed in chaotic street protests. Finally, note also that there is no mention made of “liberal” Muslims – “moderate” becomes the most liberal perspective that a practicing Muslim can hold. This denial of liberal status

becomes particularly apparent in her concluding remarks, in which she separates Muslims in general from “liberal” Denmark:

I really sympathize with Denmark - such a nice little, liberal country with Muslims there trying to change the nature of their open society, which up until now has allowed for a system where all of the natives were quite content.

Here Jo Ann offers her most overt contrast between Danes and Muslims (with no use of the phrase “Danish Muslims”). Denmark is portrayed as the epitome of Western liberal ideals (“nice,” “liberal,” “open society”) and in naturalistic, utopian terms (“little,” “nature,” “allowed,” “quite content”). Non-Muslim Danes are granted the status of “natives” who are “*all* quite content” [emphasis added] with “their” society. Danes are also granted the privilege of sovereignty by Jo Ann’s referral to them as “Denmark” and describing them in society-scale terms (“country,” “society,” “system”), all of which are disrupted by “Muslims there.” Muslims, in contrast, are none of these things: native (“Muslims there”), little (“huge numbers”), liberal (“moderate”), nice (“violent), or open (“submit”).

Urgency suggested by the use of the phrase “up until now,” suggesting that Denmark’s utopian status is threatened and possibly already ruined. Jo Ann thus creates a vivid image of an isolated, liberal utopia under siege from within due to shifting demographics promoting an intolerant ideology. This language evokes any number of “culture war” conceits – fear of immigrants, nostalgia for a culturally “untainted” past, anxiety over non-white fertility, etc. Her language also implies a sense of inevitable decline and ground ceded that cannot be taken back.

Jo Ann's post focuses primarily on the content of the news rather than its form. "PotShot," on the other hand, finds significance in the choice of wording used in the linked clip:

PotShot | February 21, 2006 9:08 AM: One thing that has been on my mind that I was thankful to hear at the beginning of the clip... "THEIR prophet Muhammed"

All of the coverage concerning the cartoon stuff has been along the lines "THE prophet Muhammed", and I may or may not be splitting hairs here, but says THE prophet Muhammed is kinda confirming that he was a prophet, which non-muslims should not agree with... Anyhow, just somethings small that warmed my heart. You gotta pay attention to the little things right?

PotShot is celebrating a perceived shift in/resistance against dominant cultural logics, where the multicultural logic of respecting others' beliefs (by accepting Muhammad's status as a prophet) gives way to a liberal logic of "objective" accuracy (by emphasizing the subjective criteria by which prophets are given their title). PotShot presents this as a small ("I may or may not be splitting hairs here," "somethings [sic] small," "You gotta pay attention to the little things") but gratifying ("I was thankful to hear," "warmed my heart") deviation from the dominant narrative ("All of the coverage").

PotShot's celebration also places himself in opposition to the inclusive "we" advocated by Noah and Fletch by approving of the use of the word "their." While he does this in order to remove legitimacy from a particular belief, he also promotes the exteriorization of Muslims and Islam from Western cultures. Use of the word "their" is presented as an acknowledgment of the premise that the title "prophet" is a status granted by believers of that prophet, leading to the plainly stated norm "non-muslims should not agree [that Muhammad is a prophet]." Thus, PotShot

implicitly claims that referring to Muhammad as “THE prophet” not only respects Muslim beliefs, but also effectively endorses them.

At this point, “Craig” attempts to reposition the discussion within a multiculturalist frame, an attempt that elicits a rare comment from Jenson (“Norm”) himself:

Craig | April 9, 2006 3:41 PM I miss the good Old Fashioned Days when no movie studio would show an actor playing Jesus (Joshua) for fear of reprisals. I don't divide our country between religious and non-religious, but between tolerant and intolerant. Reasonable and unreasonable. That said, I do believe it is important to respect the wishes of others as long as they do not hinder your own freedom. The Danish Cartoon was an intentional stab at a minority to "get them to accept" the western ways. Of course, I have also found highly intolerant scientists.

Norm | April 9, 2006 3:50 PM I don't think it was to get them to accept our western ways, but to affirm that we continue to stand by our western ways, freedom of speech, and are not willing to accept their ways just because they find it offensive.

After taking the common tactic of setting up an equivalent Christian scenario (“no movie studio would show an actor playing Jesus... for fear of reprisals”), Craig proceeds to dismiss the other common tactic of condemning religion in general by stating that he doesn’t “divide our country between religion and non-religious, but between tolerant and intolerant. Reasonable and unreasonable.” He judges the Danish cartoons to be an intolerant (“an intentional stab at a minority”) and coercive (“‘Get them to accept’ the western ways”), and notes that intolerant behavior is possible within a secular paradigm (“I have also found highly intolerant scientists”) as well as a religious one.

Jenson's rebuttal repositions the cartoons from acts of coercion to acts of communication and self-affirmation. The cartoons are a way to "affirm... western ways," suggesting that rather than being a message to Westerners about Muslims that was unfortunately intercepted, the cartoons were more of a message to Muslims about Westerners. The message is not a warning for them to stop being violent as much as it is a warning that violence will not change "our" ways. Jenson's use of the word "our" in describing "western ways" and "their ways" in describing Muslims implies his acceptance of the "us/them" dichotomy presented by PotShot, and also suggests that such a division will never be dissolved ("I don't think it will get them to accept our western ways").

Finally, Jenson also articulates a hierarchy of values where freedom of speech is a strong value that one should "stand by." Indeed, the fact that "freedom of speech" is the only specific example Jenson gives of "western ways" implies that it is the embodiment of "western ways." His dismissive statement that Muslims "find it offensive" suggests that "their ways" reject freedom of speech as a value entirely, thus implying that Muslims reject the very foundation of Western cultures. By using the phrase "just because they find it offensive," Jenson presents "avoiding offense" as a weak value under "western ways," but is a strong value for Muslims. Indeed, "avoiding offense" (in particular, "avoid offending *us*") is the *only* Muslim value presented, while "Western ways" are presented as valuing both "freedom of speech" and "avoiding offense," with the caveat that the former always trumps the latter.

Jenson's link to the *60 Minutes* clip serves to articulate the Muhammad Cartoon Controversy as a clash between secular Western and religious Islamic

factions. Consequently, the debate within the comment thread focuses primarily around the question of equivalency – is the West “guilty” of “misbehaving” in some fashion? If so, can “it” be held as having equal responsibility in the crisis? The first question helps to soften the second one – by acknowledging Western culpability in the incident, the 1GM commentators are able to act their roles as “reasonable,” educated Westerners who are willing to compromise. The nuanced, rational discourse of the ostensibly “Western” forum participants becomes a stand-in for the editors and cartoonists of the *Jurgens-Postens*, who are either criticized or defended by forum participants in a tone that suggests the Danish journalists are representative of “their” side (the West) and are therefore “their” responsibility.

Playing this role offers a performative answer to the second question, as the shortcomings of both the Danish journalists and their 1GM ciphers cannot be held as equivalent to the “irrational,” violent actions of Muslim protesters. Even posts that express some degree of sympathy with the Muslim protestors only go so far as to judge the cartoonists and protestors as equally culpable. Those who emphasize Muslim culpability condemn it in strong terms, while those who strive for a more balanced judgment favor language that belittles more than it condemns. Persuadable discourses about the controversy are therefore positioned between “the actions of the Muslim protestors are uniquely evil” and “both the Muslim protestors and the *Jurgens-Postens* staff are behaving irresponsibly.” Despite the more careful language of the latter attitude, it is significantly more likely to provoke a hostile response than the former. This suggests that the persuadability to the latter attitude is significantly weaker within this community than the former,

particularly during discussions of Muslims acting out against foundational “Western” norms and values.

Foot in the Door

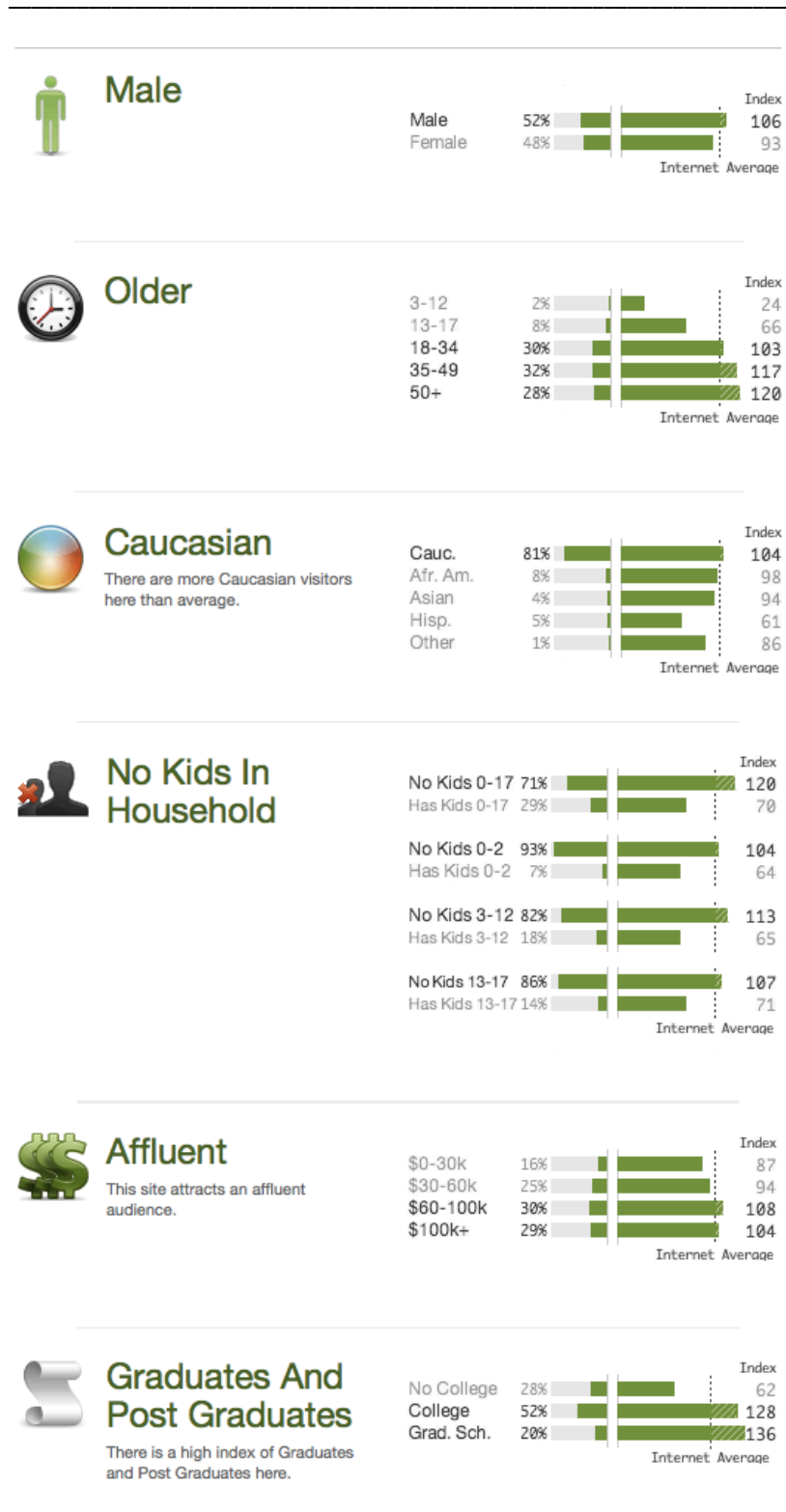
Unlike Little Green Footballs, anti-Islamic discourses on One Good Move have remained relatively consistent over the past decade. The site’s purpose as a refuge of sorts for left-leaning American atheists ensures that Islam will always be treated with a certain level of distrust and distaste. Nevertheless, a range of persuadable discourses about Islam exists in a constant state of flux, as arguments that advance liberal secular atheism conflict with the values of multiculturalism. Specifically, a strong distaste for bigoted language and reasoning – both for its irrationality and its association with the right wing in American politics – keeps the exchanges on 1GM under tight self-regulation by users.

What is ultimately most remarkable about 1GM’s discourses about Islam is the caveat given at the start of this conclusion – that the discourses displayed have remained relatively consistent in comparison to LGF and (as we shall see in the next chapter) Fark. This may be because 1GM does not hold the degree of popularity that Fark and LGF share, allowing for the community to remain smaller and more consistent than the constant traffic of the higher volume sites. It probably also has to do with the site’s unabashedly pro-atheist and anti-theist discourses, perspectives that remain well outside the norm of contemporary American values. Since the site’s main premise is outside the realm of current persuadables in popular culture, Jenson et al do not seem as concerned with appealing to the public as much as with

self-affirmation. Jenson's statement about Muslims, "I don't think it was to get them to accept our western ways, but to affirm that we continue to stand by our western ways, freedom of speech, and are not willing to accept their ways just because they find it offensive," could easily be read as an affirmation of atheists in the face of theists.

It is this interchangeability of "Islam" with "religion-in-general" that best explains the lack of change in the site's rhetoric. Unlike Johnson, Jenson does not treat Islam as an underlying disease so much as a particularly virulent symptom – the worst of what religion has to offer, perhaps, but still no more than an extremely effective example. Indeed, while Jenson does not display as much concern for making his discourses persuadable for the larger population as Johnson, he nevertheless shows a knack for understanding what the current boundaries of US persuadables are, and where they are most open to being pushed. Islam is a useful foil for those occasions when Jenson cares to push atheism closer to acceptable status: it is relatively easy to gain compliance with statements about Islam's irrationality with most Americans, even if those statements are easily modified to include religion-in-general. Islam thus becomes atheism's "foot in the door" of American popular discourses. Unless portrayals of Muslims within those discourses take a dramatic turn for the better in the next few years, Islam will continue to serve as an extremely useful catspaw for Jenson's style of atheism.

Table 2. Onegoodmove.org Demographics



Source: Quantcast.com, accessed 4/30/10,
<http://www.quantcast.com/onegoodmove.org#demographics>

CHAPTER IV
FARK

dstaggs 2006-02-08 01:20:24 PM: Do these muslim nutjobs understand that we could make Islam a farking *memory* if we wanted to? I think it's about high time we did just that.

Confabulat 2009-06-20 07:22:17 PM: What the hell does Allahu Akbar mean?

greentea1985 2009-06-20 07:23:18 PM: I believe it means "God is Great."

Mentat 2009-06-20 07:34:18 PM: I never thought I would see the day when that phrase was a rallying cry for democracy.

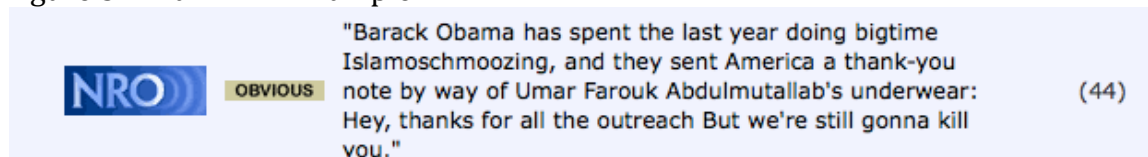
Introduction

Onegoodmove and Little Green Footballs are both political blogs with clearly articulated agendas. Fark.com, in contrast, is first and foremost an entertainment website. Founded in 1999 by Drew Curtis, the site began as a repository of interesting news items that Curtis wished to share with his friends without resorting to mass emails. By 2003, the site had expanded well outside of Curtis' immediate circle of friends, with more than one million visits per day (Why 2003). As of June 2009, Curtis claims that the site receives over 52 million views per month, with an estimated 4 million unique visitors, making it one of the top 100 English language websites (McBride 2009).

Links to the news stories use a classification system of topic "tags" that are still in effect in 2010, including such categories as "News," "Hero," "Dumbass," "Obvious," etc. Each tag is preceded by the link to the news story, then followed by a (typically humorous) headline made by the user who submitted the link, with a final

link to the Fark discussion thread for that particular link. The following (Table 3.1) is an example of a link posted January 11, 2010:

Figure 3.1: Fark Link Example



Source: Fark.com, accessed 1/11/10,
<http://www.fark.com/cgi/comments.pl?IDLink=4926071>

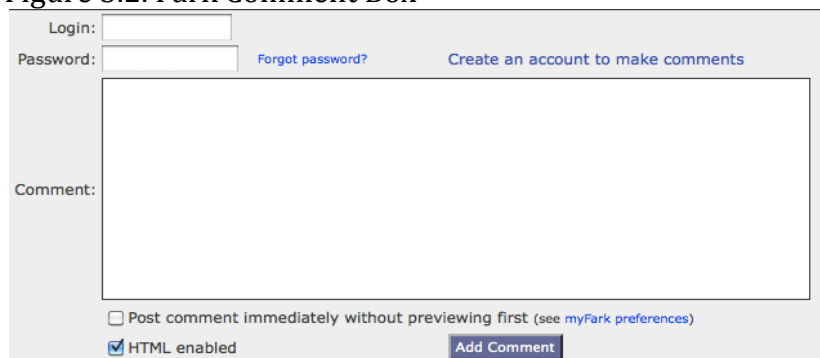
The “NRO” image is the link to the story in question, which takes the user to an article at the *National Review Online* entitled, “But We’re Still Gonna Kill You.”¹⁶ The Fark headline in this particular case is a direct quote from the article rather than a headline created by the submitter, as indicated by the quotation marks. Finally, the (44) is the link to the discussion thread, with 44 indicating the number of comments in that particular thread.

The structure of Fark comment threads has changed little since the site’s founding in 1999. Posts are arranged in chronological order and are marked by date and time, with the earliest posts appearing at the top of the page. Like LGF and 1GM, replies to earlier comments are not “nested” with the object of the reply. Consequently, carrying on an ongoing discussion with other users typically requires posting a reply as soon as possible after the initial post so that the reply remains in

¹⁶<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NTE3NTI1MWVIMzRjYWl5ODY1OTI0YWwNiNWNkOTMxZTg=>

relatively close visual proximity. Posting in a discussion thread requires the creation of a Fark account name and password.

Figure 3.2. Fark Comment Box

The image shows a web form for posting a comment on Fark.com. At the top left, there are two input fields: "Login:" and "Password:". To the right of the "Password:" field are two links: "Forgot password?" and "Create an account to make comments". Below these fields is a large, empty text area labeled "Comment:". At the bottom of the form, there are two checkboxes: "Post comment immediately without previewing first (see myFark preferences)" which is unchecked, and "HTML enabled" which is checked. To the right of these checkboxes is a blue button labeled "Add Comment".

Source: Fark.com, accessed 1/11/10,
<http://www.fark.com/cgi/comments.pl?IDLink=4926071>

While it may seem problematic to consider a site with so many regular visitors a “community” in even the loosest sense of the word, almost the entirety of *Fark’s* content can be considered community generated: every story and headline submitted comes from users, and the comment threads associated with each story are considered one of *Fark’s* major appeals. While the site receives several thousand submissions every day, the majority of casual web surfers never see them. Instead, a significantly smaller subscription-only group of “Total Farkers” (often abbreviated as “TFers”) can see and comment on each submission, and eventually help to narrow the estimated 2600 submissions per day down to a few dozen links that are submitted for the general public to view and comment. Instituted in 2002, the TotalFark subscription service charges \$5 per month, with an estimated 2000

subscribers. TFers are represented by having a “Total Fark” tag after their screennames in comment threads:

Figure 3.3. Farker Screenname



Source: Fark.com, accessed 1/11/10,
<http://www.fark.com/cgi/comments.pl?IDLink=4926071>

Since TFers are able to see and comment upon links before non-subscribers, comments made by TFers in discussion threads completely dominate the earliest posts. Depending on how fast a thread is “greenlit” for the general public, several dozen comments may be made before a non-paying user is able to make a comment. This often gives TFers a heavy level of control over the ensuing discussion, as they are able to set discursive boundaries for likely interpretations of the linked story. This discursive dominance is not lost on many TFers, and is often the major appeal of a Total Fark subscription, as the following user comment indicates:

Aarontology 2009-11-21 10:52:49 AM: We don't pay \$5 to post. We pay \$5 to let the peasantry know who to obey.

Given Fark’s popularity and format, the site serves as an excellent resource for examining how the carefully cultivated discourses I have examined in Little Green Footballs and Onegoodmove penetrate and interact with more popular, less disciplined discourses. While Farker demographics – largely male, white, middle class, educated Americans – are more typical of the Internet than the world as a whole, it still offers a valuable insight into how various discourses develop within this disproportionately influential demographic. Norms and premises are more

heatedly contested between users than they are on LGF and 1GM, as Farkers are not expected to conform to a particular ideology or perspective. Fark also lacks the strict and overt moderation seen on the other two sites, described euphemistically in the site's posting rules FAQ:

Fark is like a large house party. House parties need to have a few rules to make sure that nobody gets badly hurt or has to call the cops. Being cool about it and following the house rules makes it more fun for everyone involved. We don't mind when you show up drunk at 3AM - chances are we're just as drunk if not more so - but we do mind if you start breaking the furniture and picking fights.

The "house party" metaphor above is an apt description of both the site's moderation policy and overall tone. Fark's purpose is presented as being primarily one of entertainment, and any actions that may result in the disruption of that entertainment are targeted for sanction. The FAQ offers the following list of what specifically counts as off-limited in discussion threads:

- Don't repost deleted content/links.
- Don't post NSFW (Not Safe For Work) images or unlabeled NSFW links.
- Don't post graphic images or links to graphic content.
- Don't post repetitively.
- Don't threadjack.
- Don't encourage others to perform illegal acts.
- Don't post hate speech.
- Don't post broken images/links.
- Don't post private/contact information no matter how easily obtained.
- Don't troll/harass other Farkers.
- Don't troll/harass Fark or its maintainers.
- Don't discuss bans in the threads.
- Don't try to make the thread discussions all about you -aka Attention Whoring.
- Don't post TotalFark content/links on regular Fark.
- Don't attempt to hack, flood, DoS, DDoS, or otherwise compromise Fark.
- Don't abuse the submission queue.
- Don't post illegal content of any kind.

The FAQ refers to these rules as “basic, common sense stuff,” implying that the reader is expected to be relatively savvy with Internet norms and lingo (threadjacking, broken images, trolling, Dos/DDoS) and with broader (American) social norms (NSFW/graphic content, illegal acts, “attention whoring,” and hate speech). The offenses listed can be divided into three categories of acts:

- Disruptive (acts that impede the regular function of the site, technically or socially)
 - Examples: Repetitive posting, threadjacking, hate speech, posting private information, harassing Farkers or moderators, “attention whoring,” hacking, abusing the submission queue
- Illegal (acts that violate either actual laws or common workplace rules and regulations)
 - Examples: NSFW images, graphic images/content, encouraging others to commit illegal acts, posting private information, trolling/harassing, hacking, posting illegal content
- Meta (acts that interfere with the “front stage” aspects of maintaining Fark and disciplining violators of the previous two categories)
 - Reposting deleted content/links, posting broken images/links, discussing bans, posting TotalFark content/links on regular Fark, abusing the submission queue

Although none of the excerpts from Fark discussion threads presented below were ever deleted or subject to moderator sanction, the above guidelines are useful for understanding that all of the selections were considered “acceptable” by those standards. They are also useful for their inherently contradictory expectations: while the above guidelines emphasize the need for users to respect other Farkers’ enjoyment of the site, such enjoyment is openly predicated on deliberately inciting fellow users for amusement, as we shall see below.

Fark and Political Controversy

Much of *Fark's* overall attitude towards political ideology can be found in its attempts to “balance” political discourses. Site moderators actively work to head off potential accusations that *Fark* is biased in favor of any particular political philosophy by keeping the number of greenlit “left-wing” and “right-wing” links relatively equal in number. This desire to maintain a “balanced” public image is particularly apparent in the recent introduction of a “Political Inclination Thermometric Analyzer” (PITA¹⁷) graphic at the top of all political discussion threads.

Figure 3.4. Fark.com's Political Inclination Thermometric Analyzer



Source: Fark.com, accessed 1/11/10,
<http://www.fark.com/cgi/comments.pl?IDLink=4926071>

The graphic appears as a horizontal thermometer, blue on the left side and red on the right. The far left end of the thermometer is labeled “commie,” while the far right end is labeled “fascist” – a deliberate jab at the tendency of online ideologues of one political persuasion to grossly exaggerate the stances of another, while also effectively classifying anything other than “centrist” politics as beyond the acceptable boundaries of reasonable political discourse. While it is possible for a

¹⁷ The choice of acronym is itself a display of contempt for overt political ideology, as “PITA” is more commonly used by Farkers as an abbreviation for “Pain In The Ass.”

given link to be classified anywhere along the spectrum, the majority of links end up being voted as being either one extreme or another.

The only PITA indicator that consistently stays close to the center is the primary PITA thermometer at the very top of the political links page. This PITA is meant to serve as a rough aggregate of all political links on *Fark* within the past 30 days, and serves as a warning system for moderators – should the thermometer drift too far in one direction, the moderators quickly work to greenlight more links from the opposite end of the spectrum. The goal of PITA, therefore, is not to encourage links to “balanced” articles, nor is it to encourage “balanced” discussions within the comment threads. Instead, PITA works to distance the image of *Fark* as a whole from any particular political philosophy in favor of political spectacle, which encourages users to express disgust with contemporary political discourses in general (while at the very same time promoting partisan clashes for the entertainment of the more apolitical users).

Fark and Islam

What makes *Fark* particularly relevant to this discussion is the consistent appearance of links to stories relating to Muslims, particularly those stories centered on themes of violence, oppression of women, terrorism, and other stereotypical Muslim behavior. Such stories frequently include headlines that make sarcastic references to Islam as a “religion of peace” and decry Muslims as being backwards, childish, etc. These quips almost inevitably generate heated debate within the associated comment threads. For example, in a “Sad” story posted on

January 9, 2007, the headline reads, “Shiites threatened and their stores vandalized after Saddams[sic] execution increases sectarian strife. Baghdad? No, Detroit¹⁸.” The first comment is offered by “pilto,” who states, “if they ever decide to nuke the middle east, i REALLY hope they save a nice little bomb for deerborne. that place is a friggin cesspool and terrorist training camp.” A few posts later, “Ahhh_Ennui” retorts by “fixing”¹⁹ pilto’s comment in a quote to read “I’m a huge dumbass troll.” The thread then quickly erupts into a complex debate between several dozen Farkers, much of it focusing on what opinions are appropriate and inappropriate to express on the forum.

Halfway through the comment thread, however, the discussion takes a marked shift with a comment from “canyoneer”:

the invention of monotheism is nothing to brag about, IMO. In fact, the introduction of monotheism to the world has been, on balance, a great disaster. You should be ashamed of yourselves for having vomited forth such a corrosive, destructive concept. Monotheism is *in effect* a great evil.

The focus quickly shifts to this comment, with users gradually broadening the debate to whether or not religion as a whole is the source of evil in the world. Thus, while a story link and headline posted to *Fark* that deal with Muslims is inflammatory, the Islamophobic logics of the submitter are not accepted as persuadables to a large number of respondents, who rapidly work to redefine the debate within more acceptable parameters.

¹⁸ Detroit, MI is home to one of the largest Muslim communities in the United States.

¹⁹ A practice where a user will quote another user in a post, but will change key words or phrases to either attack that user or make a particular point. The changed text is usually highlighted and followed by the acronym FTFY (“Fixed That For You”).

These attempts to reposition the debate around religion-in-general rather than Islam-in-particular have a markedly different character than the strategies employed at One Good Move. Whereas 1GM generally introduces negative stories about Islam with the purpose of attacking religion-in-general, Fark stories are frequently introduced as attacks on Islam-in-particular, as can be seen by the frequent use of the sarcastic “religion of peace” label in the article headlines. It is the commentators within the discussion threads who typically work to reposition the linked story as a case of religion-in-general. This implies a perceived divergence in the range of persuadables for the general public (the four million monthly visitors to the site, the vast majority of which only view the main headline page and do not participate in the discussion threads) versus the range for the Farker community (consisting of a few thousand registered users). For the headline page, attacks on religion-in-general are avoided in favor of attacks on Islam-in-particular, indicating a perception that the general public is more open to persuasion about the latter than the former²⁰. Indeed, while the headlines greenlit by Fark moderators tend to actively violate cultural norms and premises based within the logics of multiculturalism, many Farkers within the discussion threads actively work to repair the insensitive displays of the headline submitters (and the moderators who greenlight them) to conform to multicultural expectations.

This incongruity between the main page and the discussion threads is consistent with Fark’s purpose as an entertainment site rather than a platform for advancing particular political positions and ideologies. Political debate is purposed

²⁰ An assumption that is well-supported by opinion polls that place atheists as the “least trustworthy” group for the majority of Americans... right below Muslims.

for entertainment rather than the other way around, thus topics are often chosen that are more likely to garner significant disagreement between users rather than those that will either be accepted as a given or will be outright dismissed by the majority of users.

They Don't Get It: Fark and the Muhammad Cartoon Controversy

Despite this tendency towards generating controversy between Farkers, however, debates within discussion threads occasionally reach a relative consensus. In the case of stories relating to Islam, such consensus is often reached with remarkable speed, particularly when the story is framed as an example of Muslims lacking a sense of humor. As a site dedicated to the humorous deconstruction of popular news stories, lacking a sense of humor becomes an even graver transgression than it is on Little Green Footballs and One Good Move. Users who display a consistent inability to “get” the humor of their fellow Farkers are subject to heavy mockery. In the case of news stories about individuals or groups who “take themselves too seriously,” the subjects of the stories are typically mocked by the majority of Farkers, even across traditional political boundaries. For those who are in political opposition to the subjects of the stories, such incidents are held as typical examples of the illegitimacy of opposing positions. For those who might otherwise be sympathetic to the subjects of the story, there is a strong tendency towards quickly distancing themselves. This serves to both repair the Farker’s political perspective and gain recognition from other Farkers as being above traditional partisan affiliations.

In the case of the Muhammad cartoon controversy of 2006, Farkers of multiple political persuasions displayed an almost uniform disgust over the controversy, laying most of the blame on Muslim protestors. For example, on February 8, 2006, a link with the “Ironic” tag was posted with the title, “Bush urges end to cartoon violence while Cheney remains CEO of Acme.” While the story received only a modest 168 comments, the vast majority of those comments interpreted the story as an indisputable case of people failing to maintain a proper sense of humor:

Gosling 2006-02-08 12:53:10 PM: I don't agree with Bush on very many things- I believe that's pretty well documented around here- but seriously. IT'S A FREAKING ONE-PANEL CARTOON! Okay, the cartoon qualifies as Muslim blasphemy, understood. There are ways to address that without burning down embassies. There are people INSIDE those embassies that can help you out.

Gosling begins by affirming his liberal (or at least non-conservative) credentials, both through direct statement (“I don’t agree with Bush on very many things”) and an appeal to his established ethos within the Farker community (“I believe that’s pretty well documented here”). This affirmation, combined with an appeal to an indisputable reality (“but seriously”), mitigates the potential to interpret his eventual “shouting” (“IT’S A FREAKING ONE-PANEL CARTOON!”) as an irrationally partisan utterance. Instead, it becomes a statement of disgust that frames the Muslim protestors as severely overreacting (“There are ways to address that without burning down embassies”) and acting against their own self-interests (“There are people INSIDE those embassies that can help you out”). Both his stated disapproval of President Bush and his acknowledgment that the protestors may have legitimate political grievances (“Okay, the cartoon qualifies as Muslim

blasphemy, understood”; “there are people... that can help you out”) situates his admonishment as being beyond traditional political divisions, and therefore more objective than condemnation from an established conservative or Islamophobe.

GurneyHalleck 2006-02-08 12:56:28 PM: Exxxcellent headline, submitter. Very clever. People taking things too seriously is one of the main problems facing our great world.

GurneyHalleck makes no attempt to repair his dismissal of the protestors. He instead makes an appeal to the objective power of humor, first through praising the humorousness and intelligence of the submitter (“Exxxcellent headline, submitter. Very clever”), then by articulating the protestors as part of “one of the main problems facing our great world” by being a case study of “People who take things too seriously.” The brevity of the post in comparison to Gosling’s further illustrates the “obviousness” of GurneyHalleck’s statement.

Another Farker, “Senile Violence,” uses brevity in a similar fashion:

Senile Violence 2006-02-08 01:16:53 PM: I have nothing against islam, but burning down buildings because of a cartoon... I mean, come on, it's a farking cartoon!
/got nothing

Unlike GurneyHalleck, Senile Violence makes a half-hearted inoculation against accusations of Islamophobia (“I have nothing against islam”), but accepts the obviousness of Gurney’s position by emphasizing his incomprehensibility of the protestors’ position (“/got nothing”) and amazement at the seeming lack of proportion in their response (“but burning down buildings because of a cartoon... I mean, come on, it’s a farking cartoon!”). By repeating the word “cartoon” twice, Senile invokes common perceptions of cartoons as being vehicles of humor and entertainment, and unworthy of serious response.

Farker dstaggs, in contrast, proposes an even more serious escalation:

dstaggs 2006-02-08 01:20:24 PM: Do these muslim nutjobs understand that we could make Islam a farking *memory* if we wanted to? I think it's about high time we did just that.

In this case, dstaggs expresses incredulity at the irrationality of the protestors (“Do [they] understand...?” “nutjobs”) similar to Gosling and Senile, except this time from an unapologetically anti-Muslim (“muslim nutjobs”), eliminationist position (“we could make Islam a farking *memory* if we wanted to[;] I think it’s about high time we did just that”). The irrationality of the protestors is here grounded in a failure to recognize both the benevolence and power of the Western world (“we could... if we wanted to”). Dstagggs also implies that Westerners have a degree of patience and tolerance (“if we wanted to”) that Muslims lack, patience and tolerance that have been pushed past a reasonable limit (“it’s about high time we [make Islam a memory]”).

Another factor worth noting is that while overtly eliminationist speech like dstaggs’ typically receives direct condemnation from at least a few other Farkers, little sanction occurs within the rest of the thread. Even comments that show contempt for Islamophobic positions also display frustration (at best) with the protestors:

Aphostile 2006-02-08 01:27:55 PM: The haters will just use this as more evidence that Islam is a barbaric, backward culture... that they can't even keep protests over old Danish cartoons peaceful. I can see how they found them particularly offensive though. In the good old days they'd just give the Flemming Rose guy the Salman Rushdie treatment and consider the issue resolved.

While the use of the word “haters” to describe Islamophobes implies Aphostile’s opposition to such speech, and “I can see how they found them particularly

offensive” suggests sympathy with the protestors, the first part of the post mostly bemoans the protestors for effectively proving the “haters” point “that Islam is a barbaric, backward culture.” Furthermore, his reference to the Salman Rushdie *fatwa* at the end of the post calls into question the sincerity of any defense Aphostile previously made for the protestors, as it offers an “alternative” way to “consider the issue resolved” that is treated as equally reprehensible (and inconceivable) within popular media.

Rather than a call to empathy, Aphostile’s post may instead be read as a wry dismissal of all parties as hopelessly ignorant. This becomes a common theme in many of the followup posts: “Diogenes” laments, “I really have little to no hope left for this world. It's become so surreal that you need LSD to understand it.” “Goddamhippie” declares that there is “nobody to cheer for here.” This bears some similarities to comments on One Good Move that offer the half-hearted defense that Islam is at least no worse than any other religion. While this is a common theme on Fark as well, the above quotes make an appeal that is even broader than an attack on religion in general – instead, it is an attack on *humanity* in general.

On Fark, misanthropy is often invoked as the great equalizer, regardless of the subject matter – it allows for an acceptance of certain basic multicultural logics (“people are all equal”) while still allowing for a casual dismissal of people that one does not like (“people are equally stupid”). This tactic is a common one within the realm of contemporary American satire – comedy shows such as *South Park* and *Family Guy* frequently engage in blatantly racist, sexist, and other forms of bigoted humor under the defense that they “attack all groups equally.” As many Farkers take

their comedic cues from these shows and others like them, it is not surprising that misanthropy becomes the favored means of “making sense” of world events without taking a recognized partisan position. Like on *One Good Move*, this tactic allows Farkers to offer a half-hearted “defense” of underprivileged groups and simultaneously attack them without having to make sense of their actions. This in turn helps them to accept the status quo and maintain a sense of consistency between conflicting cultural norms and premises.

Since most popular news media tend to deal with human tragedy and crisis, the stories that Fark links to are rarely treated as anything but further affirmation of the misanthropic principle. On one very significant occasion, however, this misanthropic tendency was severely disrupted. Seeing a revolution in the works that most established news media in the United States were ignoring, a number of Farkers began to drive the media narrative themselves, and in the process began to express a level of optimism and sympathy that even surprised themselves.

Epic Encounter: Fark and the Iranian Green Revolution

Early Saturday morning on June 13, 2009, a Fark submitter posted a link to an article on *The Atlantic* website with the tag “Interesting,” and the headline “Ahmadinejad's own election monitoring commission has declared the Iranian election results invalid and call for do-over.” While most of the links posted that day had earned no more than a couple hundred comments at most, the *Atlantic* link went on to generate 1204 separate comments. The following day, a link with the tag “Followup” and the headline, “Grand Ayatollah Sanei in Iran has declared

Ahmadinejad's presidency illegitimate and cooperating with his government against Islam.' It just keeps getting better and better" generated enough comments to earn the label "lots" rather than the specific number of comments, a sign that the discussion thread had reached an unusual volume.

Within both threads, Farkers interspersed their usual snarky commentary ("You mean we could have arrested McCain and Palin for losing? Well, isn't this a better game.") with debates over whether or not something significant was happening in Iran:

DamnYankees 2009-06-13 07:57 PM: I can't help but feel that there isn't really anything major happening there - we're just seeing what we want to see.

Spunkemeyer 2009-06-13 08:04 PM: Imbecile. Go to YouTube and look at few of the protest videos. Get your head out of the sand.

DamnYankees 2009-06-13 08:05 PM: There were plenty of protests in American and Europe about the Iraq War. Protests happen all the time. Protests != revolution.

Pechorin 2009-06-13 08:07 PM: True. But you should take a look at the videos. It appears to be transcending protest. Next they need to march on the mosques and start driving the clerics around town with a rope around their necks.

Good Behavior Day 2009-06-13 08:07 PM: I know what you mean. It's hard to sort out what's real news and what's not. Is there a popular uprising after a rigged election or is there a couple of street protests after Ahmadinajad won by a landslide?

Weaver95 2009-06-13 08:09 PM: The government shut down internal and external communication channels. That tells me that this is a little more intense than an out of control block party.

As users continued to debate the significance of the events, others began to post information and perspectives that helped to inform curious Farkers about the political history of Iran, the significance of the current events, and links to Twitter feeds from Iranian protestors. Various users began to collate this information into single posts, which in turn generated interest from both regular Farkers and

community outsiders who were dissatisfied with the lack of coverage the election and protests were receiving from traditional news sources.

After two more “Followup” links were posted in the same day, each earning more than a thousand comments, what was to become known as the “Fark Epic Iran Thread” began in earnest. In the fifth thread, labeled “♪ Don't you know ♪ They're talkin bout a Revolution ♪ (Iran election/Revolt Thread Part V),” a Fark moderator made an unusual appearance by posting the thread’s first comment:

Moderator 2009-06-15 10:05:59 AM: Thanks everyone for keeping things so well behaved. One note, however, please do not use the threads here to encourage illegal activity. Thanks.

Even more unusually, the thread was officially closed three hours later at 1490 comments, as a moderator made another post directed Farkers to move on to the “Part VI” thread. At the very top of the thread was an exhaustive summary of events, historical and political backgrounds, and dozens of links to Twitter feeds, YouTube clips, and other media leaked from the Iran.

Figure 3.5. Tatsuma Epic Iranian Thread Opener

Tatsuma	2009-06-16 01:01:23 AM
<p><u>important: The Iranian government is looking for dissident twitterers, so if you have an account, change your location and timezone to tehran!</u></p>	
<p>This seems to be helping quite a few people, so I'll go ahead and repost it in every threads with some adjustments. Sorry, this has reached the level of TL;DR but I really am trying to cram the most relevant information and speculation only. Everything is updated as events unfold, especially the timeline and what will happen in the future.</p>	
<p>Suppression of Dissent - The Players</p>	
<p>Currently, there are either two or three groups who are suppressing the students on the ground that you'll read about throughout this thread:</p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Basij 2. Ansar Hizbullah (which I will refer to as Ansar) 3. Lebanese Hizbullah (Unconfirmed but highly probable. Der Spiegel, based on a Voice of America report, says that 5,000 Hizbullah fighters are currently in Iran masquerading as riot police, confirming the independent reports. Many different independent reports and video point that way. Even in the last hours other independent twitter feeds have declared witnessing thugs beating on people while shouting in Arabic; I will refer to them as Hizbullah) 	
<p>- The Basij are your regular paramilitary organization. They are the armed hand of the clerics. The Basij are a legal group, officially a student union, and are legally under direct orders of the Revolutionary Guard. Their main raison d'être is to quell dissent. They are the ones who go and crack skulls, force people to participate in pro-regime demonstrations, and generally try to stop any demonstrations from even starting. They are located throughout the country, in every mosque, every university, every social club you can think of. They function in a way very similar to the brownshirts.</p>	
<p>They were the ones who first started the crackdown after the election, but it wasn't enough. While they are violent and repressive, they are still Persian and attacking fellow citizens. A beating is one thing, mass killings another.</p>	
<p>- Another group was working with them, whose members are even more extreme, is Ansar. There is a lot of cross-membership between the Basij and Ansar, though not all are members of the other group and vice-versa. The vast majority of Ansar are Persians (either Basij or ex-military), though a lot of Arab recruits come from Lebanon and train with them under supervision of the Revolutionary Guard. They are not functioning under a legal umbrella, they are considered a vigilante group, but they pledge loyalty directly to the Supreme Leader and most people believe that they are under his control. They are currently helping the Basij to control the riots, but due to the fact that they are Persians and in lower numbers than the Basij, they are not that active.</p>	
<p>- The Lebanese Hizbullah is a direct offshoot (and under direct control) of the Iranian Hizbullah (itself under direct control of the Supreme Leader) and cooperates closely with Ansar though Ansar occupies itself only with Iran's domestic policies, while Hizbullah occupies itself only with Iran's foreign policy unless there is a crisis like right now. However, Hizbullah has been called to stop violent riots in Iran in the past.</p>	
<p><small>(the following paragraph includes some speculation based on reports from ground zero) Hizbullah flew in a lot of their members in Iran, most likely a good deal even before the elections in case there were trouble. They are the ones who speak Arabs and are unleashing the biggest level of violence on</small></p>	

Source: Fark.com, accessed 1/20/10,

<http://www.fark.com/cgi/comments.pl?IDLink=4450419&hl=-Dont-you-know-Theyre-talkin-bout-a-Revolution-%28Iran-electionRevolt-Thread-Part-V%29-%28thread-closed%29>

This summary was put together by TotalFarker "Tatsuma," a user who was viewed as notoriously anti-Muslim due to years of posting virulently anti-Palestinian comments. Yet over the course of the Epic Thread, he instead became known as a passionate, well-informed proponent for the protestors. His summaries were consistently posted within the first two comments of each continuation of the Epic Thread from that point on.

Throughout the following week, continuations of the thread were posted every few hours. As the Iranian government continued to clamp down on protestors and shut off media access from outside of the country, members of Fark and other

popular Internet communities began to set up proxy servers for protestors to use. Other users began to take an even more active role in the protests by initiating “denial of service” attacks on Iranian governmental web servers, overloading them with information requests to the point that the servers crashed²¹. These attacks often employed the kinds of vulgar and ironic humor popular amongst Farkers, including one attack that involved flooding governmental servers with Israeli-made pornography.

Farker activities during the Epic Thread garnered a remarkable amount of attention elsewhere in the blogosphere. One user on Slashdot, a respected web forum popular amongst “old guard” Internet users and designers, argued that Fark was playing a decisive role in forming the media narrative:

dAzED1 Wednesday June 17 2009, @03:46PM: Anyone that writes a story about this that doesn't mention Fark specifically needs to do a bit more research on the subject. Tats(uma) obviously gets quite a bit of credit, but he wasn't the only person there keeping up with the tweets. Fark (and oddly, 4chan) became major filters for finding the real data for the first several days. I'm amazed at the people who still don't know there's effectively a civil war going on in Iran, since CNN and other mainstream media didn't really start reporting on it until yesterday.

Two days later, Drew Curtis appeared in an online video interview on Vator TV, where he claimed that Fark was being heavily utilized by mainstream journalists covering the events:

I was sent this letter by a journalist friend and it was basically sent to other journalists to tell them where they should be finding

²¹<http://www.cnn.com/security/218000271;jsessionid=GJPO2ET3OX0TVQE1GHRSKH4ATMY32JVN>

<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2009/06/web-attacks-expand-in-irans-cyber-battle/>

information on the story, since everybody's understaffed and nobody has a formal bureau anymore. And they said that you should be looking through Twitter and Fark, and they always had to say, "Yes, really... Fark." Because everybody in the media knows us, and we're not exactly known for high end journalism.²²

For many Farkers, the entire Epic Thread was an uncanny disruption of how they viewed Muslims, Islam, and democracy:

Confabulat 2009-06-20 07:22:17 PM: What the hell does Allahu Akbar mean?

greentea1985 2009-06-20 07:23:18 PM: I believe it means "God is Great."

Mentat 2009-06-20 07:34:18 PM: I never thought I would see the day when that phrase was a rallying cry for democracy.

Many Farkers' sense of their community's nature and purpose was also disrupted, particularly the site's notorious ennui when confronted with politics and world events:

Bomb Mecca 2009-06-18 01:58:14 AM: I know you guys mean well with your wearing of green and protesting in local cities but don't you realize how pointless it is? It's kinda like marching for aids or walking for cancer, it makes you feel good and like you're doing something but it accomplishes nothing.

Markoff_Cheney 2009-06-18 02:03:24 AM: obvious troll²³ is obvious.

VwlssWndr 2009-06-18 02:10:01 AM: I don't know, with a name like "Bomb Mecca," he could be a concerned poster.

Abstruse 2009-06-18 02:22:12 AM: Does my green shirt do anything? No. Does my seeding of torrents, rehosting of pictures, and

²² <http://vator.tv/news/show/2009-06-20-with-iran-on-razors-edge-fark-takes-sides>

²³ "Troll" is a common pejorative term within many online communities used to describe users who post deliberately inflammatory comments. Originally, the verb "trolling" was meant as a reference to angling, a method of fishing in murky water that involves slowly dragging a baited hook or lure behind a moving boat. In this context, "trolling" is meant to evoke the idea of fishing for whatever gullible users choose to take the "bait" in the form of a deliberately offensive post. Over time, "troll" came to be interpreted both as the aforementioned verb and as a noun referencing hideous mythological monsters that live under bridges and attack unwary travelers. Despite these negative connotations, humor-oriented communities such as Fark often subtly encourage trolls and trolling as a source of amusement, as I shall discuss in more detail later.

reposting twitters help? Probably. Does the proxy I'm going to open when I get on my home computer help? Yeah, it does. Obvious troll is obvious.²⁴

WhyteRaven742009-06-18 02:02:45 AM: Considering how much time has gone into setting up proxies, helping others set up proxies, spreading info about the proxies and other stuff as well, people have done a lot. Indeed this is the first time in history a person could directly provide for people on the other side of the planet in a crisis without traveling, let alone without risking their own safety.

Mellorax 2009-06-18 02:05:15 AM: Sitting at my crapo computer in a crapo town with my crapo internet that's no good for proxies, there's not a lot I can do. It's a show of solidarity with the Iranian people. Right now, it's all I have to contribute. I'd rather give my thoughts and prayers to these people than nothing at all.

Mentat 2009-06-18 02:05:53 AM: The individual efforts don't mean much, but collectively, I hope it does. Those kids probably feel like they're all alone, but maybe they can take some solace knowing that a bunch of geeks 6000 miles away are rooting for them. Who knows, I guess we'll find out when it's all over.

Bomb Mecca 2009-06-18 02:10:14 AM: Oh well I'm the bad guy for harshing the vibes of the bleeding heart libs. It's like Rocky said in Burma, if you're not bringing guns you're not changin nothing.

Despite being labeled an “obvious troll” by two separate posters, Bomb Mecca expresses what is typically a common sentiment amongst Farkers – that political action “makes you feel good and like you’re doing something but it accomplishes nothing.” In a thread where Farkers are showing an unusual level of enthusiasm for their capability to assist the protestors, Bomb Mecca effectively attempts to reset the status quo on Fark. Particularly when put in contrast to his last post, BM’s first post reads like a genuine attempt at persuasion: he acknowledges the sincerity of his fellow Farkers, then attempts to use a commonly accepted premise (“you can’t meaningfully change anything”) and norm (“so why bother?”). Some other Farkers acknowledge a certain legitimacy to his apathetic assumptions

²⁴ This is a common turn of phrase on Fark and several other web-based communities. The repetition of the word “obvious” is meant to indicate that the poster is so obviously a troll that no other adjective is adequate.

(“there’s not a lot I can do,” “the individual efforts don’t mean much, but collectively, I hope it does”) while ultimately rejecting them (“I’d rather give my thoughts and prayers to these people than nothing at all”, “collectively, I hope it does,” “maybe they can take some solace knowing that a bunch of geeks 6000 miles away are rooting for them.”) Ultimately, his very name cannot help but frame Bomb Mecca’s post as mockery to his fellow Farkers (“I don’t know, with a name like ‘Bomb Mecca,’ he could be a concerned poster,” “obvious troll is obvious”), a mockery that he fully embraces with his second post, where he dismisses the others as “bleeding heart libs” and asserts the inflammatory notion implied by his name – that only violence can bring about change (“if you’re not bringing guns you’re not changing nothing”).

It is also worth noting that Bomb Mecca ceased to contribute to the Epic Iran Thread from that point on. While he had frequently engaged in similar exchanges with Farkers in other threads, BM rarely gives up so quickly. The unusually optimistic (and even occasionally pro-Islamic) tone of the thread that he claims motivated him to post his comment in the first place becomes the same stated reason why he leaves.

On June 23, slightly over a week after the first part of the Epic Thread appeared, the final “official” installment of the Epic Thread was posted under the title, “More News on Iran. Clerics decide it’s a good day to wear green (Iran Thread XLV, yes XLV).” Despite Curtis’ somewhat reluctant agreement to place a band of green color around the “F” of the word “Fark” in solidarity with the protestors, rumors had begun to circulate that Curtis was calling an official end to the thread

out of concern that it was threatening Fark's status as an entertainment site. These rumors that were finally confirmed by Farker 100proof:

100proof 2009-06-24 04:04:29 PM: I've recieved confirmation from Drew that this rolling thread thing is over. Important news stories will now be greenlit according to the standards applied to all the other stories here.
/it's been real, guys...

All in all, 45 official threads (and numerous offshoot threads available only to TotalFarkers) made up the Epic Iran thread over the period of a week. Various factions of Farkers attempted to steer each incarnation of the thread to varying degrees of success, whether to praise and encourage their efforts, mock them, stir up trouble, or simply participate in what was seen as a historic event for the website. Farkers continue to reference the thread to this day, both as a time of extreme naivety, vicious infighting, and a remarkable case where "we used our powers for good." Whenever a link related to Iran is posted, some Farker will inevitably ask early on, "Is this the new Iran thread?"

Putting It Together: What the Fark?

Of all the three sites that we have examined, Fark appears to be the community where anti-Islamic rhetoric holds the least sway and is most likely to be challenged by other users. At the same time, Fark is also a community where anti-Islamophobic utterances frequently cross boundaries of acceptable speech without significant sanction from moderators. Arguments may break out over the use of such language, but users are unlikely to be banned for making statements such as "we [should] make Islam a farking *memory*."

The design of the site helps to explain both tendencies. Little Green Footballs and (to a lesser extent) One Good Move are websites with fairly specific foci: LGF champions the struggle between the West and the Islamic World, while 1GM argues politics from an atheist perspective. LGF and 1GM also have a tight editorial policy regarding links that are posted, with Johnson and Jenson serving as the sole arbiters of what issues are up for discussion and debate. While both frequently post links that have been deliberately forwarded to them by users, there is no formal process by which links are forwarded – users must take it upon themselves to attempt to contact the site owner, and the links are framed by editorial comments from Johnson and Jenson.

In comparison, Fark offers a specific web forum encouraging users – even unregistered ones – to post links and their own one-to-three sentence editorial. These links are immediately visible to Total Farkers, whose comments frequently guide the final decision by one of any number of moderators regarding whether or not to greenlight the thread for non-registered users. Finally, Fark seeks to appeal to a broader audience than LGF or 1GM in terms of ideology (if not demographics), and even actively seeks out a rough “balance” between dominant political perspectives (with the PITA thermometer being only the most visible example).

All of these factors not only lead to a greater variety of perspectives on Fark, but also promote a greater amount of visible antagonism between users and moderators, as well as between fellow Farkers. Such antagonism should not be seen as an unwanted by-product of Fark’s design – it is instead one of the major features of the site. Total Farkers regularly comment on this feature by handing out informal,

tongue-in-the-cheek “troll ratings” for the user who posted the link, the moderator who greenlit it, and the other Farkers who comment on it. Troll ratings are typically graded on a 1-10 scale, with higher ratings being given to trolls that are both subtle in their intent and effective in generating outraged responses²⁵.

The phenomenon of trolling both reflects and helps contribute to the general feeling of hostility towards holding strong political beliefs of any kind – any link or post that provokes active response is immediately held suspect, while the ensuing impassioned debates between a handful of users are treated as little more than kabuki by the other participants. This becomes the main draw for the site – which is, after all, dedicated primarily to entertainment and humor. Partisan tirades are viewed as the Internet equivalent of political television programs such as *The O’Reilly Factor* or Keith Olbermann’s *Countdown...* that in turn are mocked and ridiculed by other users in the style of the *Daily Show* and *South Park*.

In such an environment, it is difficult for any single position to gain adherence from a majority of audience members. Neither Johnson’s anti-jihadist sentiments nor Jenson’s passionate atheism can expect to gain enthusiastic support from even a plurality of comments on a given thread. In this regard, Islamophobic logics are by no means dominant on Fark. But they don’t *need* to be – they simply must be accepted as reasonable positions (i.e. persuadables). By engaging Islamophobic posts and acknowledging their pervasiveness, even those Farkers who try to argue against them effectively legitimize them. Others who strive towards consensus recognize that such sentiments have become a familiar part of the

²⁵ These very standards make high troll ratings almost impossible to come by, as being able to spot the troll means that it probably isn’t very subtle.

political landscape and ultimately accept anti-Islamic rhetoric – provided it is subsumed under the more “equal” umbrellas of anti-theism and misanthropy.

Farker Misanthropy

In their constant striving for “balance,” Farkers regularly grapple with Islamophobic logics. Like the users of Onegoodmove (and more recently, Little Green Footballs), many Farkers display reluctance to attack Islam and Muslims without the heavy use of qualifiers, particularly attacks on religion in general. Also like 1GM, Islamophobic persuadables are used by left-leaning Farkers to attack the American right wing as a whole (“I put Ann Coulter squarely in the same category as those clerics et al who incite violence”). While this serves to shift the attention from attacking Muslims to shaming one’s political opponents, it does so by accepting fears of Muslims and Islam as valid.

Unlike 1GM, Farkers will often justify Islamophobic reasoning by appealing to misanthropy – i.e. “I hate everybody equally.” This strategy is one that many Farkers openly adopt from popular cultural satire, particularly the television programs *South Park* and *Family Guy*. These programs regularly push (and even flagrantly violate) anti-discriminatory norms and premises in order to make fun of any number of minority groups.

What is particularly noteworthy about the misanthropic strategy is that it accepts certain basic multicultural logics (all people are equal) while still allowing for the casual dismissal of groups of people that one doesn’t like (“[I] really have little to no hope left for this world. It’s become so surreal that you need LSD to

understand it”). Recognizing that misanthropy itself can still be problematic within a classical liberal mindset, Farkers often work to maintain their stakes as rational humanists. One frequent qualifier to Farker misanthropic utterances is to state the premise that “people as individuals are good, people as groups are bad,” thereby reconciling the norm “one should make fun of all groups” with “one should not behave in an overtly hateful manner.”

Misanthropy is frequently used both to execute and to justify the practice of trolling as a means of establishing persuadable boundaries. Successful trolls require the user to find the delicate space where something passes the realm of acceptable attitudes to hold while still being recognized as a position that somebody in the community *could* hold – if they don’t push it past that boundary, it won’t provoke an outraged response; if they push it too far, then the “obvious troll is obvious.” Labeling something as a troll is also a means of establishing persuadable boundaries; if Farkers are called “obvious” trolls, even if they are being sincere, they (and anybody else reading the exchange) are effectively being told that their attitudes are so outside the community norm that it is laughable; by tentatively asking if something is or is not a troll, a user identifies what they believe to be the boundaries of reasonable discourse.

Finally, one of the defining characteristics of Farker misanthropy is a tone of *familiarity* – familiarity with the subject matter of the links, the political positions of their authors, the responses those links generate from their fellow Farkers, the responses that those comments in turn provoke from other Farkers, and so on. The misanthropy Farkers display carries a note of world-weariness, pessimism that

anything is different or that anything will change. Events such as the Epic Iran Thread challenge this cynicism for some, but becomes the exception that proves the rule (or even the perfect case-in-point) for others. For those who claimed it to be unique, however, it was a disruption of the familiarity typically used to reinforce a general sense of contempt, forcing them to confront and makes sense of the uncanny.

The Ritual Role of Fark – Making Sense of the Uncanny

In reading Fark, one cannot help but view many of the posts as part of a ritual exchange. Thus it becomes useful to look at Fark through James Carey's ritual model of communication, where communication is not so much about the transmission of ideas as it is about the creation of meaning through repetition and reproduction.

Fark discussion threads often note the ritualized process of communication openly in what is referred to as "meta-commentary" or simply "meta." The Internet as a medium tends to favor meta-commentary, since there is usually a data trail of previous exchanges that can be referred to in order to spot trends and report them to others. The moment something is recognized at the level of meta, it becomes situated within the discursive web by being labeled a "meme," or "infectious idea." Examples of common memes on Fark include LOLcats (a general Internet trend that Fark helped to facilitate in its early inception); /slashies (a means of putting what one has written into a nonverbal context, e.g. ending a post with /sarcasm as an indication that what the user just said should not be taken literally); referring to Islam as the "religion of peace;" etc.

As the last example listed above suggests, talk about Islam on Fark is often heavily ritualized, and that talk recognizes as a consistent part of the discourse the notions that Islam is a danger to Western civilization, Muslims should not be trusted, etc. If there is one consistent theme that emerges among Farkers in stories about Islam, however, it is a tone of utter bafflement. Put simply, Muslims just don't make sense to many Farkers, whether they are seen rioting over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad or invoking Allah in a struggle against a brutal theocratic regime.

For all the bafflement Farkers display towards Muslims, however, there remains a sense of familiarity, though this familiarity is closer to Freud's concept of the *uncanny*, where something that is foreign becomes strangely familiar through the process of repetition (1919). Even though users express constant bafflement with *why* Muslims behave the way that they appear to, they do so in a manner that also expresses a tired and exasperated familiarity. This sense of uncanniness pervades Farker commentary on any number of subjects besides Islam. Fark's nature as a news aggregator that specifically links readers to realities that are bizarre to the reader has the side effect of normalizing strangeness – the Fark tags immediately alert the users that this insanity can be, at the very least, classified as part of certain semi-consistent patterns. It is in turn incorporated with a cynical, often misanthropic attitude; the sheer number of bizarre links that occur on the site every day can be overwhelming, and lead to a view of humanity that is made up almost entirely of people being strange, stupid, self-destructive, combative... and very, very occasionally, spectacularly praiseworthy.

This is to some degree markedly different from the more narrative-driven discourses of mainstream media, but in other ways not so different at all. Anyone who follows news media in American culture is exposed to information that follows more or less the same logic – the more strange something is, the more it is worth discussing. By focusing on things that even regular news media tends to classify as *extremely* bizarre, Fark can be a useful place for spotting how discourses about the uncanny are formed before they spread to more mainstream outlets.

As mentioned above, Islam and Muslims are subjects that are treated as inherently uncanny to Farkers, but in this manner they are also not so dissimilar to established news media. The ways in which the uncanniness of Islam is rendered comprehensible in media is through ritualized patterns, many of which had already been formed well before the September 11th attacks (Islamic terrorists; angry protestors; chants of “death to America;” women in veils, wealthy oil sheiks, etc.). The one consistent pattern that was challenged by 9/11 was the fact that Islam and Muslims were no longer *distant*. Newly formed ritual talk of “sleeper cells,” “bioterrorism,” and the like quite literally brought the uncanny home.

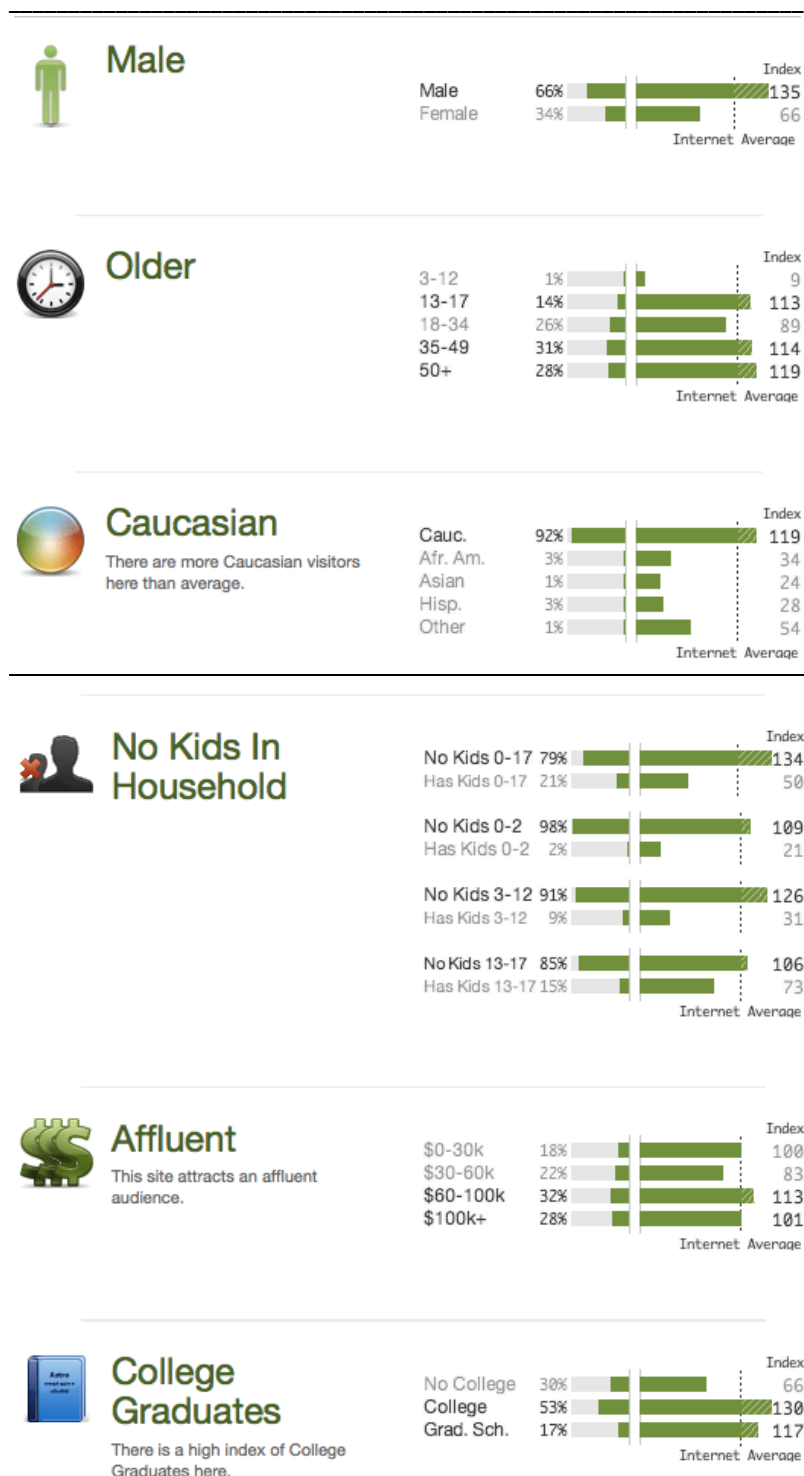
So how do Farkers and mainstream journalists alike classify “the Islamic world” when it begins to so heavily penetrate the discursive idea-scape? Three general strategies emerge:

- Separate it, repelling the penetration as an invasion (the “clash of civilizations” thesis)
- Classify it within the context of more familiar patterns (“Religious extremism,” “people being stupid,” etc.)
- Understand it as its own uniquely complex subject that people should avoid reaching any sweeping conclusions about (the assumption of individualism typically granted to whiteness)

In wrestling with these various strategies, however, a more remarkable pattern emerges: Islam becomes “glocalized” within the Fark community, where the eclectic and [Hampton and Wellman have frequently used the term to refer to people who are actively involved in both local and wider-ranging activities of friendship, kinship and commerce] This is not a term that I am using as either celebration or critique of Farker culture, but is instead simply the best descriptive term to fit the process I have described above: Islam is a (previously) external cultural force that has begun to consistently penetrate the day to day lives of the Farkers, so the community has learned how to integrate it in a fashion (somewhat) more consistent with their internal cultural logics, even as some of those internal logics are in turn modified and hybridized by their regular contact with Islam and Muslims.

As we shall see in the concluding chapter, this is not a process limited to Fark; it can be seen to some degree in each of the Internet communities examined in the course of this study. In order to see how, it becomes necessary to retrace our steps, starting with the theme of rationality.

Table 3. Fark.com Demographics



Source: Quantcast.com, accessed 4/30/10
<http://www.quantcast.com/fark.com#demographics>

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

fiodax Fri, Mar 30, 2007 9:07:49pm: It doesn't make any sense to me that we would call the "good Muslim" the one that holds to his faith the loosest...we wouldn't apply this label to anyone else, the "good Christian", the "good Buddhist", all of these labels indicate that the person lives and is defined by their faith, however the "good Muslim" is the only one that we let off the hook of these requirements for being good.

GurneyHalleck 2006-02-08 12:56:28 PM: People taking things too seriously is one of the main problems facing our great world.

Rationality

One consistent theme present within all three sites is a heavy focus on the importance of *rationality* to users. Rationality is the primary means of constituting and separating which individuals and groups are deemed worthwhile to engage as relative equals. "Rational" individuals are articulated as being part of the select in-group of the site's community, yet the classification is often invisible without having "irrational" Others to define the boundaries of what constitutes rationality. This helps us to understand the persistent focus each community has with "unmasking" the irrational Other, as the highly permeable nature of Internet identities and communities makes establishing who does *not* belong to the community a constant struggle.

We can better understand this process of individual and group articulation by examining how the different aspects of the subjects' identities are differentiated along a rational/irrational axis. In general, rationality appears to be a central to subjects' identities as bloggers and "elite" Internet users; as "Western," white, and

masculine subjects; and as individuals who possess a “sense of humor.” Each of these identities is articulated by contrasting against “Others” that are excluded from its definition, Others that are present in either the exterior (outside the cultural boundaries of the community) and interior (within the cultural boundaries of the community, though marginalized). Whether interior or exterior, each of these Others are defined primarily by a perceived lack of rationality.

Categories of Irrational Others

When discussing the concept of “elite” Internet users, the word comes to take on two different yet heavily overlapping meanings. On the one hand, they are quite typically the traditional “elites” discussed in feminist, race, and queer theory: affluent, white, educated, American males (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). On the other hand, they are the “elite” of Internet culture (referred to semi-sarcastically as “leet” by cultural insiders): highly computer literate; frequently in possession of expensive equipment and high-speed connections; and well versed in Net culture, with many of them having been active participants in Internet forums and communities since the early days of the Web – some for even longer.

For Internet elites observed in this study, the exterior “others” that they are defined against are typically non-users or casual users (here defined as users who occasionally browse the sites but rarely, if ever, participate in the discussion forums). On Little Green Footballs, for example, non-users are typically spoken of as being part of the “unwashed masses” or “idiotarians,” and are vigorously defended against by Charles Johnson in particular, whose technical and rhetorical methods of separating non-registered users from the main LGF community are legendary.

Casual users are treated with the suspicion of being infiltrators, sock puppets, or the like, with users assisting Johnson's regular purges of new members by contemptuously dismissing and flagging those who post contrary opinions. Fark's divide between Total Farkers and their non-paid counterparts are visually marked with the Total Fark tag, immediately rendering casual users as outsiders. Recent format advances on Fark, LGF, and 1GM allow registered users to see another user's post history, favorability rating, etc., a feature that is now commonly used by established community members to delegitimize comments made by newer users.

Whether exterior or interior, non-elite Others are branded irrational primarily through their lack of familiarity with the discursive rules of the particular web forum. LGF and Fark both feature extensive rules for posting that presume some degree of pre-existing knowledge of Internet-based discourses – both in general and within the specific communities. This is consistent with many web forums that openly encourage new users to lurk for an extended period of time before posting for the first time, ensuring that those who post will not only be familiar with the practices and standards of the community, but are also sufficiently in line with community interests and values to put in the time and effort necessary to join them. This works to minimize exposure to oppositional viewpoints – such voices must either be sufficiently familiar with the forum and its logics to be at least somewhat sympathetic to them, or they appear to be unintelligent trespassers who can't read simple forum guidelines. It also helps to ensure that only people from fairly specific demographics make up the majority of posts, as much of the cultural logic that underlies the forum guidelines are based around white, American, male,

middle class, educated rules of discourse. As Miller (1995) notes, the often-used metaphor of the “Internet as frontier” assumes a certain “manly hostility” inherent within Internet discourses that creates cultural meaning through active antagonism. This antagonism is in turn kept in relative check by rules of “netiquette” that implicitly accept the desirability of hostile discourse, provided that such discourses amuse or interest regular users. Bailey (1996) further argues that these rules constitute a kind of “newbie snobbery” that drives away potential users from marginalized cultures, noting:

The Net nation deploys shared knowledge and language to unite against outsiders: Net jargon extends beyond technical language to acronyms both benign (BTW, 'By the way') and snippy (RTFM, 'Read the fucking manual'). It includes neologisms, text-graphical hybrids called emoticons, and a thoroughgoing anti-'newbie' snobbery. Like any other community, it uses language to erect barriers to membership (38).

Each site’s code of ethics also works to separate the insiders from the outsiders and to define the extreme boundaries of persuadability. Fark’s code, for example, places a heavy emphasis on preventing activities that interfere with the enjoyment of Fark by its regular users by discouraging annoying or harassing behavior (neither of which are defined for newcomers). Little Green Footballs’ code instead emphasizes the need to maintain the site’s overall image to non-users by disavowing responsibility for material posted while simultaneously warning that any comments can be deleted at any time for the good of the site. Finally, One Good Move’s code of conduct remains unstated – Jenson simply deletes any material he deems offensive or inappropriate to the site. Each of these approaches works to separate outsiders through vagueness – users need to be deeply familiar with Fark

and LGF's discourses to understand what may be considered "rude" or "offensive" (particularly since both communities claim to *value* a certain kind of rudeness or offensiveness), while users on 1GM need to have intimate familiarity with Jenson's beliefs and standards if they hope to never accidentally violate any of them.

Despite the ostensible accessibility of these websites to people from a wide variety of nationalities, a combination of site content, cultural assumptions, and language all work to ensure that each community is made up almost exclusively of people from "Western" industrialized nations, particularly the United States and other English speaking countries. Implied with this identity is a default assumption of whiteness; even multicultural-minded users frequently speak of racial minorities in us/them terms and speak to other users as "white by default." Within the context, the "irrational Other" is identified externally as people living in non-Western countries and internally as immigrants of non-Western origin and Western-born racial and ethnic minorities.

While women users make regular commentary in all three forums, the sites also reflect the general Internet tendency towards a disproportionately large male audience. While the online gender gap has been steadily decreasing over the past few years, Fark, 1GM, and LGF were all founded by men during a time of even greater gender disparity. Their formats all in turn tend to favor male interests, particularly Fark, which openly caters to a "grown adolescent" male demographic with frequent links to sports, bawdy humor, and soft-core pornography. While women users are accepted (even celebrated) on these forums, they must usually do so by being "one of the boys" (again, especially on Fark). Similarly, men who display

too many stereotypically feminine behaviors in their posts are openly ridiculed. Thus, within the net-as-frontier image that is “bound up with the idea that women's minds are weak, fragile, and unsuited to the rough and tumble of public discourse” (Miller 57), women are the exterior irrational Other (who can be made acceptable members of the community by adopting masculine behavior) and effeminate men are the interior irrational other.

Within this framework, potential Muslim participants – particularly those who are not native to a Western nation – are at an extreme disadvantage on these forums. Such users are less likely to be familiar with the underlying cultural norms and premises that drive posting guidelines, are implicitly assumed to be non-Western and non-white, and as Edward Said has noted, come from a culture that has been rendered highly effeminate within popular Western depictions.

Sense of Humor

All of the above means of articulating identity through Othering become problematic when employed within a context of multicultural norms and premises. Even as we have seen the subjects of this study use various strategies to repair this dissonance, these strategies are nevertheless often vulnerable to exposure and critique from other users. Of all the potential means of Othering, however, the one most likely to gain adherence within these web forums is to identify one's self as possessing a sense of humor, primarily through decrying the lack of humor in Others. While this is particularly the case in Fark, a community whose express purpose is to collect and comment on humorous topics, humor has also been a central component in both Little Green Footballs and One Good Move: the former

tends to reflect the frequently sarcastic style of its founder, while the latter gained much of its popularity through posting clips of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Real Time With Bill Maher*, all television shows hosted by comedians.

Lacking a sense of humor is grounds for identifying a given subject – individual or group – as an irrational Other in both the exterior and interior sense. At the exterior level are people who fail to “get the joke” out of cultural ignorance: ignorance of the cultural contexts of American society at large or ignorance of the cultural contexts of the specific web forum. As we have seen, both American humor in general and “web culture” humor in specific place a heavy emphasis on sarcasm, irony, and the use of cultural memes, all of which are particularly difficult for cultural outsiders to parse. “Getting the joke” in this way helps to establish firm cultural and subcultural boundaries, as displaying a proper sense of humor to an obscure joke becomes an immediate means of identifying one’s self as a cultural insider.

Failure to get the joke, on the other hand, does not necessarily identify one automatically as an exterior Other. One may be an interior Other by failing to get a joke through cultural incompetence rather than cultural ignorance. This incompetence may be expressed through any number of gaffes, including expressing unqualified bafflement with material other users claim to be funny, responding to sarcastic comments as if they were serious, or taking visible offense to jokes that the majority of users claim are funny. Users who are extremely well versed in the cultural logics of these communities will frequently attempt to provoke other users into betraying their humorlessness (trolling). Successful trolling strategies often

involve performatively violating some of the most common boundaries of acceptable behavior within American popular culture, particularly by engaging in blatant displays of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Such behavior is rendered acceptable because it is understood by cultural insiders to indicate a mockery and rejection of such discourses. The deliberately bigoted content of such humor, however, makes it particularly likely that users who are not male, white American, and heterosexual are significantly less likely to find the jokes to be funny, which in turn permits cultural insiders to mark such users as irrational Others without being accused of being “really” bigoted by other insiders.

Talk about humor in these cases serves to strategically silence public discussions of how media are used and interpreted by audiences. While it may be acknowledged that some deviant consumers might – through their lack of humor – fail to understand the actual “harmless” meaning of culturally insensitive satire, to adjust one’s behavior and speech accordingly is only further enabling the deviants. Such enabling suggests that critics are themselves equally humorless, and therefore equally deserving of mockery and dismissal.

The emphasis here is on having a sense of humor rather than being funny – it is more important that one can get a joke rather than make one. While the latter is a valuable cultural commodity in all three forums, the former is treated as a necessary prerequisite to even participate in forum discussions and be treated with respect. Indeed, it is entirely possible to be seen as funny and also be seen as lacking a sense of humor when faced with the jokes of others, a status that is treated with just as much contempt as any other individual who fails to get the joke (perhaps even more

contempt, as the individual in question is now treated as not being able to take what he or she gives). Possessing a sense of humor is both necessary for maintaining social status within the community and for gaining persuadable status for one's arguments.

Given the importance of humor in maintaining boundaries, the perceived humorlessness of Muslims makes that group a popular target for Othering. Incidents such as the Muhammad cartoon controversy in particular are held as quintessential examples of this stereotype – what rational person or group, after all, would riot over a cartoon? Criticizing Muslim rage is thus rendered acceptable within the persuadable boundaries of the community, even desirable. Deliberately *provoking* such rage is even presented as almost a civic duty, as it “sends a message” to the Islamic world about the necessity of having a sense of humor in the modern world.

Religion and Rationality

Finally, one of the most compelling means of articulating “Others” in both the exterior and the interior is on the basis of religion. At first glance, the Othering process within these specific communities seems to be as much about separating themselves from the majority of American culture along with the Muslim world, as all three web forums display an affinity for atheism that is disproportionate to the American population as a whole. Indeed, when we consider that a 2006 University of Minnesota poll indicates that Americans tend to trust atheists even *less* than Muslims (a finding consistent with similar polls conducted by Pew Research in 2003 and Gallup in 1999), it would seem that this particular Othering strategy would

actually *reduce* the persuadability of Islamophobic discourses outside of the specific communities being examined.

Upon closer examination, however, this form of Othering is perhaps one of the most effective in gaining persuadability within groups that should supposedly be the most suspicious of Islamophobic rhetoric: academics and liberals. In *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*(2006), Tracy Fessenden argues that there is an “embedded moral schema” in the academic study of religion in the United states, one which separates “good” religion from “bad” religion on the basis of rationality. Fessenden defines “good” religion in this context as being “rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, compatible with democracy and the liberal state . . . [good religion] was what was taught and endorsed in academic environments; for everything else the discipline developed a nomenclature of marginalization (cults, sects, primitives, and so on).” Using this schema, we can infer that “bad” religion is irrational, pneumacentric²⁶, ritualistic, non-middle-class (both poor or wealthy), emotional, and incompatible with the liberal state. Not surprisingly, common portrayals of Muslims place Islam firmly as a “bad” religion by all of the above criteria.

- *Irrational*: Suicide bombers, terrorists, female genital mutilation, etc.
- *Pneumacentric*: Martyrdom, ecstatic practices (particularly within Sufism), “oriental mystics,” etc.
- *Ritualistic*: the Hajj, daily prayers, Sharia law, etc.
- *Non-middle-class*: rioting mobs of poor Muslims, rich oil sheiks
- *Emotional*: frequent media images of Muslims screaming, sobbing, fighting, etc.

²⁶ “Spirit-filled,” a term commonly used to refer to pentacostal Christian religious practices.

- *Incompatible with democracy and the democratic state:* frustration in attempts to build democratic societies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Iranian election crisis, human rights violations, etc.

Much of these criteria are consistent with Edward Said's critiques of how both the academy and media within the West portray Muslims and Islamic cultures. To their credit, many Western academics within fields ranging from religious studies to literary studies have taken Said's criticisms to heart and have worked diligently over the previous decades to promote a more nuanced, contextual view of Muslim societies and cultures. Nevertheless, these classifications of "good" and "bad" religion describe key norms and premises within much of the academic community to this day, where the norm of "good religions should be rational and critical" stems from the basic premise that "bad religions are irrational and primitive."

For the majority of users in all three web communities – users who are, on average, very well educated and familiar with academic discourses – these norms and premises are accepted as common sense and applied to Islam in a highly unfavorable fashion. On Little Green Footballs, for example, one user makes the case that Islam is not only a "bad" religion now, but will forever remain "bad" due to its core foundations:

fiodax Fri, Mar 30, 2007 9:07:49pm: All those like Beck who keep saying that "it's only radical Islam that is bad" and that Islam is due to have it's Reformation just like the Christians did. As if once that happens they will all mellow out. The problem is that when the Christians had their reformation the point was to get back to the fundamentals of their beliefs. So it is true that Islam will have a reformation, however what we all need to realize is that the radicals of today's Islam are it's reformers.

Christian's have skewed everyone's perceptions as to how seriously religious people take their faith because generally we are really bad living out what we say we believe. Because of this misperception, people just assume that the Islamist behave in the same way and that

a "good Muslim" would be the one that goes to Mosque on Friday, unless there kid has a soccer game, there is a good football game on TV, or if the local Imam ticked them off last week, that's what a "good Christian" does on Sunday right?

It doesn't make any sense to me that we would call the "good Muslim" the one that holds to his faith the loosest...we wouldn't apply this label to anyone else, the "good Christian", the "good Buddhist", all of these labels indicate that the person lives and is defined by their faith, however the "good Muslim" is the only one that we let off the hook of these requirements for being good.

Note that fiodax shows a very telling slippage in what counts as "good" behavior for Christians: on the one hand, his first and last paragraphs suggest that a "good" Christian "lives and is defined by their faith," made possible by the Reformation which got Christians "back to the fundamentals of their faith." On the other hand, the second paragraph states that Christians "are really bad about living out what [they] say [they] believe," but that this is exactly what makes them *good* Christians. Fiodox is using two separate meanings of "good": one meaning is, "living out what [one] says [one] believes," while the other meaning is being "mellow" and effectively *ignoring* the core tenants of one's beliefs when inconvenient. On the other hand, fiodox insists that a "good Muslim" (as the term is commonly used) can *only* be the latter. Thus, the writer invokes a common sense assumption that the fundamental tenants of Christianity (and Buddhism) promote the sort of "mellow," rational behavior that one expects from "good" people, while the fundamental tenants of Islam promote the exact opposite.

This dichotomy points to an underlying logic within a great deal of anti-Islamic rhetoric – that Muslims are believed to be significantly less capable of saying one thing and doing another than members of other faiths. This perceived lack of contradiction between belief and practice invokes a combination of admiration and

distrust from the subjects of this study. On the one hand, consistency is considered within much of American culture to be a positive trait for both individual people and systems of belief – such consistency is interpreted as a sign of intellectual coherence, integrity, and a guard against hypocrisy. On the other hand, American cultural norms and premises also acknowledge limits on the degree to which consistency between belief and practice is pragmatically possible. A certain level of dissonance between belief and practice are treated as signs of intellectual sophistication and maturity, a humble acknowledgment that the world is too complex for any single set of beliefs to encompass. Accepting a certain degree of dissonance between belief and practice is presented as particularly necessary when dealing with the complexities of modernity, where rapidly accelerating technological and cultural innovations force an “adapt or die” mentality. Those who remain heavily consistent between practice and belief are thus rendered dysfunctional, even pathological, as psychologists and laypersons alike treat extreme consistency as one of the key indicators of insanity.

Conflicting values of consistency and pragmatic dissonance are particularly apparent when examining the discourses of American politics. On the one hand, politicians who are caught in glaring inconsistencies between their stated beliefs and their actions become top news items. Consider South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford’s infamous affair with an Argentinian commodity broker. Primary media attention was focused on Sanford’s infidelity as a violation of his stated commitment to “family values” and his wife, while the fact that the governor’s affair was discovered due to his six day unexplained absence from office to meet with his

mistress quickly receded from popular media discussion shortly after the governor was found. The astounding derilection of duty entailed in Sanford's unprecedented disappearance – with even his staff unable to locate him, and no replacement temporarily taking authority – was ultimately of less interest than the details of the affair. The erotic spectacle of inconsistency tapped into one of the key values shared by Americans across political boundaries – a vivid distaste for hypocrisy.

On the other hand, there is also a strong tendency towards ultimately accepting this sort of behavior in public figures on the grounds that true consistency between belief and practice is believed to be unrealistic. Sanford managed to remain in office largely through *focusing* on his infidelity rather than ignoring it, confessing his sins in an anguished manner that appealed to the difficulty of living up to high moral expectations. His infidelity is thus rendered not so much a case of hypocrisy (saying one thing and doing another) as inadequacy (failing to live up to one's moral guidelines). Sanford even received admirable praise from politicians and pundits for embracing his own inadequacies, taking his fall from grace as a humanizing event.

Muslims, on the other hand, are not treated on the forums as guilty of hypocrisy or inadequacy, with the notable exception of sarcastically dismissing apologists who insist that Islam is a "religion of peace." Rather than treating highly visible incidents of Muslims committing violent acts as violating Islam's peaceful tenants, the sarcasm is directed at the notion that Islam even *has* peaceful values. Instead, countless quotes are offered from the Qur'an, the Hadiths, Islamic history, etc. that create an image of a religion founded on principles of violence, intolerance, and hatred. The actions of violent Muslims cannot therefore be described as the

deviation of individuals from a moral foundation, but are instead interchangeable subjects simply conforming to an ideology based on immorality. Brainwashed cultists, stripped of their individuality, prepared to embody their beliefs so deeply that they will willingly sacrifice their lives for them.

As noted above, there is a certain amount of admiration and respect granted to Muslims for their perceived consistency of praxis. This is a respect that is laden with some of the worst aspects of privileged chauvinism, however: it is the respect one might give a young child for espousing naïve platitudes that no grownup will actually practice, or for an aboriginal culture of “noble savages” untainted by the complexities of modernity. At the other end of the scale are Western religionists who look with fearful awe and envy upon images of Iranian clerics imposing brutal order on rebellious secular youths, or of Palestinian suicide bombers ready – eager! – to use their bodies as ammunition in the culture wars. Such open displays of lustful envy for violent action in turn become a source of moral panic for secularists who may have otherwise continued to toy with the noble savage motif. Ever suspicious that the United States is two steps from theocracy, the glee displayed by their native opposition convinces these pragmatic secularists that the line in the sand must be drawn, even if it is drawn in blood in the sands of the Middle East.

The valuing of pragmatic inconsistency is particularly prevalent in American liberal and multicultural values systems. Popular interpretations of multiculturalism emphasize the need for peaceful coexistence through tolerance of beliefs and practices that are not consistent – or even necessarily intelligible – with one’s own cultural logics. For both many supporters and opponents of multiculturalism, this

tolerance is proposed to have one major exception: one should not tolerate what one perceives as *intolerant* values. The degree to which one must actively oppose such intolerance is highly contentious, but is typically dependent on the perceived likelihood that a given group will actually act upon their intolerant beliefs.

This is consistent with the tendency we have seen to equate “rationality” with “having a sense of humor.” As TotalFarker GurneyHalleck says, “People taking things too seriously is one of the main problems facing our world.” While we have already seen how having a sense of humor serves as a marker for cultural insider status, it is useful to remember that humor is often based around the sudden realization of contradiction and dissonance. Thus, the idea of needing to not “take things too seriously” implies the ability to cope with dissonance between one’s beliefs and one’s practices. An individual has a right to be offended, but a well-developed sense of humor will prevent that individual from acting out against that offense... or even voicing it for others to hear. The silencing aspect of this line of thought is particularly ironic, and fits with Peters’ (2005) criticism of contemporary liberalism’s conception of freedom of speech:

Disdain for the experience of people who do not obey its rules of rationality is one of liberalism’s worst sins. In the free speech story, toleration of diverse opinions helped bring about a world-historical graduation from bad tempers. Those who cannot tell sticks and stones from names are stuck, in this view, in a previous era. People who think that correct words and ideas matter mortally need to get a grip (94).

Those that are able to “get a grip” are thus privileged due to their perceived modernity and sophistication, while those who cannot are perceived “stuck... in a previous era,” and are denied the possibility of complexity or nuance. This is consistent with many other forms of privileging, such as the tendency to grant white

writers and musicians who write violent prose and lyrics the pass of what Rodman (200) calls the “fictional I”:

When it comes to the aesthetics and politics of popular music, one of the trickiest words that a song- writer/vocalist can utter is "I". In some cases, the use of first-person address is a straightforward form of autobiographical witnessing, whereas in other cases, it's clearly a temporary adoption and performance of a fictional persona... [M]ainstream rock, folk, and country musicians have much more liberty to use the first person to utter violently aggressive, sexually provocative, and/or politically strident words than do artists working in genres like dance or rap. Which means—not coincidentally—that the artists most frequently denied the right to use the fictional "I" tend to be women and/or people of color (102).

Just as with rap and other minority artistic expressions, however, there is also a certain consumption of Islam as temporary release from the rigid expectations of rational, complicated behavior. Islam becomes the religion of a new kind of “noble savage,” a faith that practices what it preaches, no matter how unpragmatic (or immoral) that may be. Such consistency becomes a source of nostalgia for an uncomplicated pre-modern world.

What is particularly noteworthy is that both those who attack, defend, and romanticize Islam (at least the ones who are not raised Muslim themselves) tend to make the assumption that Islam itself is irrational. Detractors say the actions of its followers are consistent with their beliefs, while supporters argue that Muslims are no worse than members of other religions in this regard, and that there are plenty of “good” Muslims who fit fiodox’s second definition of a good believer: rational, unemotional people who do not take their faith very seriously. This shows how anti-Islamic discourses are discursively differentiated in the context of a given blogger’s position on the traditional political spectrum – “right wing” critics characterize

Islam as uniquely evil and Muslims as uniquely barbaric, while “left wing” critics dismiss claims of uniqueness and emphasize the universal “badness” of religion in general (and politely ignore the romantics who suggest that any of this might be a good thing).

Many of the arguments – from each angle of the debate – stem from this base assumption that Islam is an irrational belief system. The left wing approach and its emphasis on the universal incompatibility of *all* religious beliefs (or for the most cynical Farkers, any commonly recognized ideological system) with rational behavior fit with popular multicultural logics of equality and equivalence. Right wing positioning, however, can work within multicultural logics as well, primarily by emphasizing that the values of “peaceful coexistence” and “tolerance” are not only at odds with Muslim *beliefs*, but are also not being *practiced* by the Muslims seen on television rioting over cartoons or flying planes into buildings.

This emphasis on the perceived irrational practices of Muslims worldwide form the basis of arguments against the very use of the word “Islamophobia.” Critics point out that a phobia is defined as an “irrational fear,” and go on to assert that fear of Islam is a perfectly *rational* reaction when faced with the stark realities of both the religion’s beliefs and the adherents’ practices²⁷. Not surprisingly, what is particularly offensive to such critics is the implication that *they* are irrational, when accusations of irrationality are the very basis of their polemics.

²⁷ I actually agree with this critique to a point: fear of Muslims and Islam does indeed become a rational response when confronted with the mediated *image* of Islam and Muslims within popular entertainment and news.

Problems for Persuadables: Defining the Boundaries of Race and Religion

Perhaps the single greatest obstacle to granting anti-Islamic logics persuadable status is the accusation that such logics are inherently racist. While users frequently display a great deal of scorn for such criticisms, the obvious frustration embedded in their dismissals implies that these accusations are recognized as one of the most damaging accusations that can be leveled against them. Refuting such accusations thus becomes an extremely important task.

One of the most frequent rebuttals to accusations of racism is to note that Islam is not a race, but a religion. As noted above, religion (specifically “irrational” religion) is frequently presented in these forums as being a much safer target than race, particularly with a highly educated audience. As Fessenden notes, attacks on religion generally produce significantly fewer sanctions than attacks on race:

Thus when a hero of American literary studies’ own formative narrative of democracy—a Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example—is discovered to align himself with a social-evolutionary paradigm of race (as when Emerson confesses his conviction that African and Indian races are destined not to “progress” but to disappear), alarms are sounded and the work of exposure or exculpation begins, but when the same figure is seen to align himself with a social-evolutionary paradigm of religion (as when Emerson notes easily that Roman Catholicism, too, is destined to disappear), no such expiatory labors are called into play.

It would be tempting to say that it is more appropriate to approach Islamophobia as comparable to anti-Catholicism (classic and contemporary) than racism, and indeed, there are many useful points of comparison. But the proclamation, “It’s not a race, it’s a religion,” occludes the highly racialized elements of Western discourses about Islam (plus, there has been plenty of racialized elements behind Catholic-bashing). This blurring on the lines can be at least

partially attributed to a lack of education among Americans (elites and the lay public alike) about the various ethnicities that constitute the majority of the world's Muslims.

But the disavowal of overt racism also contributes heavily to the confused lines between race, ethnicity, and religion in popular discourses. As Said, McAlister, and other critics have noted, much of the public discourses surrounding Muslims and Islamic nations during the early-to-mid 20th century overtly focused on a racial/ethnic angle, particularly regarding concerns about pan-Arab nationalism²⁸. The Middle Eastern policies of the major Western powers following World War II were predicated around keeping Arab nationalism in check through the use of non-Arab countries in the region (Israel, Turkey, and Iran) as “cops on the beat.” Rather than simply being a *realpolitik* means of holding off a political movement that jeopardized Western oil interests, much of the policy centered around distinctly racist discourses about Arabs and their capability to “take care of themselves.” More recently, various tactics employed to subdue enemy combatants in the occupation of Iraq were predicated on a highly racialized interpretation of Arab and Muslim cultures, such as policy manuals that spoke of Arab men’s “inherent vulnerability” to sexual humiliation (as if sexual humiliation is something that does not particularly bother white American men or women!) and a general tendency to speak of violence as being “the only thing that Arabs respect.”

Also significant to the formation of a racialized understanding of Islam is the rise of the Nation of Islam within the American Black nationalist movement.

²⁸ A political movement that was notably secular in character, favoring ethnic Arab ties over religious Islamic ones.

Beginning with Mike Wallace's 1959 documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced*, the NOI became one of the only visible examples of a domestic Muslim population within the United States during the post-World War II era. The fact that Elijah Mohammed's interpretation of Islam was extremely fragmented and heterodox was a nuance lost in a national discourse that was deeply uninformed about both Islam and the cultural-historical contexts of Black nationalism. By the time Mohammed's son had successfully transformed the majority of the movement into a much more orthodox form of Sunnism, the image of the "angry and armed" Black Muslim was deeply engrained into the American cultural consciousness, securely tying the words "Muslim" and "Islam" with highly contentious issues of race.

These discourses were critical in forming the foundation of contemporary images of Muslims. Even if overtly racial words and phrases began to drop from the airwaves during the 70s and 80s, the cultural logics that they helped form remain foundational to contemporary narratives of Islam and Muslims. According to MacAlister (2001), one of the most significant turning points that signaled a blurred transition from racialized, anti-Arab discourses to more religion focused, anti-Muslim discourses occurred during the Iranian revolution of 1979. Despite massive media attention given to the event at the time²⁹, remarkably little context was given for Iranian anger with the United States and its alliance with the deposed Shah. The time of the crisis also coincides with a decline of the overt use of racial terms by media and government officials, a move that ironically helped set the stage for the subtle "new racism" of the Reagan administration in the years to come, what Fiske

²⁹ The constant nightly coverage on ABC of all 666 days of the crisis served as the birth of the show *Nightline*.

(1996) refers to as “inferential racism” or “nonracist racism.” Geo-politically, the Iranian revolution shattered the “cops on the beat” policy of containing Arab nationalism with non-Arab allies in the region, while the positive response to the revolt seen from many Muslims in other nations helped shift interest in a “pan-Arab” movement to a “pan-Muslim” nationalism instead. The same time period saw increased media attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and isolated (but highly visible) incidents of terrorism committed by a confusing mish-mash of political groups originating from the Middle East, with the only commonality seeming to be “Muslim” and “anti-Western.” Each of these factors helped to blur the lines between established racial stereotypes of Arabs to a newer, broader stereotyping of Muslims in general.

One of the greatest complications of this transition comes with significant public attention to the issue of anti-Jewish attitudes displayed by Muslims, whether they come from Palestinians, Iranians, or members of the Nation of Islam. The attention given to this (very real and very serious) issue helps to form a premise within the American popular imagination upon which Islamophobic norms may be established as persuadables. The premise is the idea that Muslims are themselves extremely racist, and that Islam is an inherently racist ideology, which leads to the norm that critics of Muslims and Islam shouldn’t be seen as racists themselves, but should instead be seen as heroic *anti*-racists. Defenders of Islam, on the other hand, become apologists for a global ideology analogous to Nazism, and those who fail to “call out” Muslims for their hatred become the worst kind of cowards. As we have

seen in all three websites, one of the groups most consistently attacked for this perceived cowardice are journalists, particularly Western journalists.

New and Old Media: Criticisms and Influence

In all three subjects, we have seen lamentations of the breakdown of “objective” journalism in the post-network era. Despite popular media narratives of blogs and similar web forums for attempting to supplant traditional journalism, much of the commentary in Fark, One Good Move, and Little Green Footballs expresses a sense of nostalgia for an earlier era of news media with consistent, unifying narratives. Put in the terms of critical television studies, both the older LGF critiques against the “loony, leftist, and liberal” media and newer attacks on the “crazies at Fox News” can be seen as bemoaning the segmentation of an objective mainstream discourse into numerous substreams that are increasingly disconnected with – and hostile towards – each other. This becomes another point of intersection between Charles Johnson’s “classic liberalism,” Jensen’s reactive atheism, and Farker lamentations against “stupid people” – a solid belief in an objective reality that most journalists (and politicians, academics, etc.) fail to apprehend, with the web forums serving as havens of empirical sanity.

In the context of such premises, Islam becomes an obviously dangerous ideology that mainstream media fail to properly combat and/or an uncomfortable reminder of the limitations of rational discourse. Whether it be Chicken Kiev on LGF complaining about newspaper coverage of the War on Terror in comparison to World War II, or PotShot’s frustration that journalists speak of Muslim beliefs as if they were fact, the tone is almost always one of exasperation and a feeling of

powerlessness. As we have seen, however, many of these sites have more influence over media discourses than their members give them credit.

Real Power Within Traditional Media

All three sites are presented as media watchdogs of some variety or another, whether it be Johnson et al.'s attacks against Dan Rather and "fauxtography" or Tatsuma's "scooping" of CNN and other major news networks during the Iranian protests of 2009. Tatsuma and the Fark Epic Iranian Threads represent attempts to bring certain discourses *into* popular media; Rathergate and Fauxtography are attempts to shame other discourses *out* of popular media. With both approaches, there is a consistent goal of influencing the persuadable boundaries of numerous political debates.

Yet it becomes appropriate to ask exactly how much power these sites (or those like them) have to influence mainstream media discourses in any significant fashion. Blogs and news aggregates are frequently criticized as being "parasitic" to traditional news organizations, rendering them little more than reproducers of dominant narratives. Furthermore, the number of people who actually read these sites – much less participate in them – represent an extremely small, demographically skewed segment of the population.

While it remains unlikely that blogs exert a great deal of direct influence in most people's political attitudes, the potential exists for them to influence those who *do* have a much more wide sphere of influence within public discourses, particularly journalists and politicians. In actual practice, these websites frequently display a

degree of influence in traditional media far out of proportion to the numbers of people who directly participate in them. Rathergate serves as only one of the most blatant examples of this influence. Far more subtly, political blogs and news aggregates are frequently employed by financially troubled news organizations as a means of gauging which news stories are most likely to be of interest to a large audience. Drew Curtis, for example, claims that Fark has influence over media narratives that even he finds surprising:

One interesting thing about Fark is how many Mass Media people comb Fark for story ideas, not just for radio but for television, newspapers, and Internet media outfits. Once we switched to Google Analytics for Web traffic tracking, we discovered that the number one highest-traffic corporate Internet hitting our servers was CNN. Number two: Fox News. Mass Media even submits a lot of their own articles to Fark, sometimes with taglines so outrageous it's hard to believe these are the same people who run Mass Media (Curtis, 6).

Even putting aside cases where blogs have been directly used to determine traditional news content, there remains the potential for them to indirectly shape the discourses of journalists and others in positions to exert heavy influence on public discourse. Consider the findings of Henry Farrell and Daniel Drezner (2008), who note:

While blog exposure was limited to only 7% of the general population, over 83% of journalists had used blogs, and 43% used them at least every week. Because opinion-makers within the media take blogs seriously, the latter can have a much wider impact on politics (28-29).

At a more speculative level, it is useful to consider how blogs may be able to influence political discourse at the interpersonal level. As has long been noted by advertisers, social units tend to have informally designated opinion makers who actually bother to follow current events in detail, and who other members of the

community rely on to not only keep abreast of what is going on in the world, but also what they should think about it. The more informed opinions of these trendsetters work to set the persuadable boundaries of their interests within their social groups. Given the remarkable amount of knowledge users often display of current events, many who post on popular blogs can be assumed to influence their own real-world social groups, other bloggers, and other opinion makers who only *read* blogs rather than post to them.

Patrolling the Discourses: Front Stage and Back Stage

While these statistics and possibilities may do little to persuade individual users that they have any sort of influence over media or interpersonal narratives, the site founders at least have all displayed an awareness of how much attention can be drawn to their communities. Little Green Footballs in particular is a site that has been radically influenced by outside observers, real or perceived. More attention has led to stricter standards not just on what can be said, but even on who can belong to the community, to the point that Johnson's swiftness in deleting posts and banning members has become the stuff of Internet legend. Given the moral panics about how Internet discourses are impossible to control, the degree to which control *can* be imposed on the discourses is oftentimes surprising. This control is determined by not just by site creators and moderators, but also other users who patrol their fellows' discourses and impose sanctions through derision, harassment, or reporting violators to moderators.

Control of online discourses certainly has its own unique problems, one of the greatest being the difficulty in separating back stage discourses from the front stage. In non-mediated communities, members usually have the luxury of knowing who is present (and therefore listening) at a given discussion. Members can also depend on the their words being ephemeral – while there is always the risk that gossip will reproduce what one might say, the original utterance itself is gone, allowing for a certain amount of deniability. The mediated nature of Internet discourses, on the other hand, typically ensures that what is said in the past remains for anybody to stumble across (or actively seek out) in the present. If a community member says something that may be of interest to a hostile community outsider, said outsider doesn't need to be present at the initial discussion to hear it. Nor does she or he need to rely on hearsay, either in discovering the words or sharing them with others – material is right there for anybody to hyperlink. While Johnson's tactic of deleting problematic posts can solve this to some degree, it requires exhaustive reviews of endless forum archives to catch all violations, and what may be seen as a harmless exchange one day could prove scandalous at any time in the future.

Despite these issues, users can't seem to help but slip into a back stage mentality about their exchanges with each other. The number of online discourses is beyond staggering, and the interests within most online communities are so specialized that it is genuinely safe to assume that nobody outside of the community (and few even within it) will care about what any given person says. Once members of a community do something particularly outrageous, however (and especially if they continue to do so with relative consistency), what was once safely obscure is

now subject to thousands, even millions of readers. Users also tend to confuse pseudonymity with anonymity – the latter tends to allow for rampant disregard of common values, while the former means that a user still has to worry about her or his reputation.

The unique problems and possibilities of containing online discourses within a certain set of boundaries can in turn have an effect on overlapping discourses within the general public. Examples of back stage discussions on any number of topics on the Internet becomes trivially easy to find, and since there is a tendency to view back stage exchanges as more “authentic” than front stage exchanges, there is a corresponding tendency to look at forum posts as the way that people “really feel” about a given topic. The supposed authenticity of the discourses gives them extra weight in pushing the boundaries of popular persuadables, whether it be from supporters triumphing a newly found voice for the “silent majority,” or from opponents who reproduce the discourses out of a sense of disgust: “Look here, can you believe people actually *say* this stuff? The world is going to hell....”

This is not to say that online discussions push public discourse into unimaginable directions, but rather than they tend to accelerate, amplify, and distort shifts that are already occurring. The anti-jihadist movement, for example, had been in existence years before the founding of Little Green Footballs, and was itself predated and heavily informed by the orientalist discourses of the preceding centuries. Many of the anti-Islamic arguments encountered in the three forums can be traced back to any number of these lineages, and indeed, many of the commentators proudly do just that.

These lineages are important not just for establishing a case against Islam, but also for coping with the problem of persuadables. For example, many anti-jihadists incorporate the work of Dr. Daniel Pipes, a Harvard-trained scholar who has made a career of attacking both Islam and the Western institutions that Pipes maintains enable Islamic radicals. During the height of the War on Terror, Dr. Pipes founded “Campus Watch,” a group dedicated to exposing what Pipes saw as the five key deficiencies in the teaching of Middle Eastern studies at American universities: “analytical failures, the mixing of politics with scholarship, intolerance of alternative views, apologetics, and the abuse of power over students.” Another use of lineage to combat the problem with persuadables is the prominent use of anti-jihadist arguments made by former Muslims, similar to how many of the most celebrated anti-affirmative actions activists are women and minorities.

What forums like the ones we have explored accomplish is to disseminate these discourses at a much broader, more populist scale than was previously possible – as well as provoke their counter-arguments at a similar scale. While Islamophobic arguments have existed in Western media and academic institutions for centuries, never before has the various evidence and rationales behind those arguments been so readily accessible to the general public. Entire news aggregators exist to document every negative story about Muslims that has been written over the past decade, while sites like jihadwatch.org offer “Islam 101” pages that serve as remarkably thorough (though obviously heavily biased) overview of the religion’s fundamental beliefs, practices, controversies, etc. Blog and aggregator formats allow moderators to create arguments through collage (I’m not saying anything, just look

at what ALL these people are saying!). In short, the Internet makes possible a much larger number of well-educated, informed Islamophobes than in previous eras, as well as advance the persuadability of such arguments by virtue of their existence (This attitude exists, and I have witnessed many people express this attitude; therefore, it is an acceptable attitude to hold).

It would be easy enough to leave it at that, but fortunately, the discursive flow of Islamophobic logics becomes more complicated than simple dissemination. Anti-jihadist arguments have taken on a great level of intellectual depth out of necessity as much as opportunity, as their proponents always face the possibility of being confronted with equally well-informed oppositional arguments. Contrary to the common critique that the Internet isolates and fragments society into countless self-affirming echo-chambers, users on these web forums regularly encounter intrusion by combative outsiders (and even insiders). They also run the increasing possibility of interacting with people who hold similar ideas about Islam and Muslims but are otherwise abhorrent to their sensibilities, which can in time lead to dramatic schisms similar to LGF's break with the greater anti-jihadist movement. I would even go so far as to argue that the visible presence blatantly bigoted Islamophobes on the far right has done a great deal to discourage more subtly Islamophobic discourses amongst American liberals. It is for precisely this reason that I view Charles Johnson's defection from the American right as potentially doing more to make anti-Islamic discourses persuadable than if the break had never occurred.

Finally, it is important to consider the possibility that educated Islamophobes, by immersing themselves so thoroughly in the object of their revulsion, can have their discourses changed through their own studies. While this can occasionally result in a radical change – there are always stories amongst anti-jihadists of fellows who have “gone native” and actually became Muslims themselves – more often it involves a more nuanced influence, where the old antipathy mixes with a curious respect, creating a new hybridized discourse.

Complication: Hybridity

Hybridization can be applied to any number of historical interactions between cultures to articulate unique cultural forms. The Palestinian resistance tactic of suicide bombing, for example, was the result of tactical and ideological training from Japanese advisors during World War II, resulting in a uniquely Islamic take on the kamikaze. The tactic only began to spread to other Islamic countries once it became widely known through Western media sources.

In a remarkable way, the users we have seen in this study, whether they are radical anti-jihadists, avowed secularists, or leftist apologists, become hybridized by their encounters with Islam. Religious American conservatives begin to speak in admiring tones about the fanatical dedication Muslims appear to possess, seeing the downfall of American liberal culture to the Islamic hoards as a triumph of the (religiously inspired) will. Secular American liberals (classic and contemporary) instead identify strongly and defiantly their support for the oppressed minorities, liberals, intellectuals, and dissidents from Islamic countries, whether it be Salmon Rushdie or the Iranian protesters of 2009. They articulate themselves as living in an

analogous situation – a few sane secular voices in a wilderness of religious madness. Finally, leftist apologists go to remarkable extremes in defending not only Muslims and Islam, but will even excuse atrocities committed by some Islamic governments and movements out of a sense that they are natural allies against Western imperialism (a notion that in turn reinforces right wing narratives that such an alliance is normative for the American left).

Hybridization also occurs between various anti-Islamic discourses. The American anti-jihadist movement, for example, is heavily influenced by its encounters with European anti-Islamic sentiment. As noted earlier, the history of American encounters with Islam have been primarily a mediated, trans-Atlantic experience, while European encounters have been much more tied to domestic immigration issues. When the September 11th attacks raised the prospect of struggling with Islam on their home front, American anti-jihadist discourses on LGF and anti-theistic discourses on 1GM looked to Europe as a (cautionary) case study in how to deal with the invading Muslim hordes. Israeli anti-Islamic discourses also hybridized with their American counterparts as anti-jihadists, Christian Zionists, and secular democrats looked to Israel as a nobler (though still potentially tragic) example of Western values holding back Islamic barbarism.

As with most cases of cultural hybridization, proponents of various anti-Islamic discourses have reacted to this blurring of discourses – whether they be with pro- or anti-Islamic – with varying degrees of celebration and apprehension. LGF and 1GM, for example, both heartily embrace European anti-Islamic discourses when they fit within the boundaries of secular democratic values, yet withdraw in

violent distaste to a similar hybridization between American right wing values and resurgent European fascism. These struggles have the contradictory effect of allowing certain anti-Islamic discourses to enter the realm of persuadables while driving others away. Contemporary American partisanship in particular ensures that clear lines will remain almost impossible to draw: on the one hand, narratives of “Islamic fundamentalism on the rise,” “Muslim misogyny,” and “Islamic censorship” imply a natural animosity between Islam and the secular American left; on the other hand, narratives of “rampages immigrant Muslim hordes,” “politically correct naivety,” and “Satanic Islam” all set up an epic conflict between Islam and the religious American right. While this allows for a certain level of universal animosity for Islam across the American political spectrum, even greater animosity between the American left and right helps to ensure that there is a constant pushback against the various streams of anti-Islamic thought: American secular leftists become repelled at the notion of sharing common cause with what they view as bigoted Christian theocrats against culturally and politically disempowered minorities, while members of the American religious right hesitate to side with amoral, atheistic secularists against their co-religionists.

Defining the Boundaries of Islamophobic Persuadables

In the introduction, I theorized that overtly anti-Islamic discourses are entering the realm of persuadables within popular American discourses, but that these discourses must contend with the norms and premises of liberalism, pluralism, and multiculturalism. I also theorized that Internet forums are being used as a back stage in which anti-Islamic discourses can be rehearsed and refined to fit

within the boundaries of acceptable popular discourses. Over the course of this project, we have indeed seen the rehearsal and refinement of anti-Islamic discourses in the context of multicultural logics. Most surprising, however, is the degree to which such discourses have been changed by their encounters with both oppositional apologetics and other anti-Islamic discourses. While the tone and strategies on 1GM have changed very little over the past few years, both Fark and LGF have both seen dramatic shifts: LGF after its dramatic break with the rest of the anti-jihadist blogosphere; Fark after championing the cause of Iranian protestors and revolutionaries. As a result, today all three sites show a noticeable preference towards a liberal expression of anti-Islamic sentiment over a conservative expression.

Little Green Football's shift in political affiliation is in some ways unfortunate for the breadth of this study; despite setbacks, the right wing anti-jihadist movement within North America and Europe retains a strong online presence, and should in no way be considered "defeated" by liberal discourses (whether they be pro- or anti-Islamic). Yet LGF's shift cannot be treated as insignificant – the site and its founder have long been treated as the vanguard of the anti-jihadist community, and the vehement backlash against Johnson's "betrayal" by his former allies implies just how important LGF had become for that community. Additionally, the common attack used by Johnson's current detractors – that his shift was more about "political opportunism" than a genuine change of heart – points to a larger truth: in terms of the current governmental makeup, American conservatism has lost significant ground since 2006, leading to an inevitable loss in discursive power. While the

recent emergence of the Tea Party movement has helped to reassert conservatism's rhetorical presence, the same movement's often flagrant violations of cultural norms regarding race, class, and other volatile issues has arguably done as much to isolate their discourses as persuadables to those outside of the movement itself. Attitudes towards Islam in the apolitical realm have undergone remarkable shifts as well, as Fark's deviation from standard practice during the Iranian Green Revolution seems to indicate.

The fact that 1GM has shifted least in tone or perspective regarding Islam over the last few years bears significance as well. Where users on Fark and LGF confronted events that necessitated a change in perspective, users on 1GM have not had to deal with such dissonant events. Anti-Islamic discourses are easily incorporated under the rubric of general anti-theism, a move that offers shelter from accusations of targeted bigotry from the left and forces right-wing religious criticism into an uncomfortable choice between supporting atheists and supporting Muslims. The resiliency and relative consistency of anti-Islamic discourses on 1GM, even in the face of external criticism, suggests that such discourses are more compatible with contemporary persuadables than the other approaches we have seen.

Finally, anti-Islamic discourses frequently shift as the most significant news stories regarding Islam pass in and out of the news cycle. Much of LGF's early concerns with Islam placed a heavy emphasis on Islam as a largely foreign threat that was best dealt with militarily, a tendency that reflected the fact that most news stories related to Islam at the time were related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The later rise of domestic terrorist incidents involving Muslims (the Ft. Hood shootings, the attempted car bombing of Times Square, etc.) has shifted these discourses to Islam as a more social problem than a military one. While neither sets of discourses look upon Islam favorably, each creates its own boundaries of persuadability – talk about Islam as a foreign threat allows much more leeway in accepting Muslim immigrants and refugees than does talk about Islam as a domestic threat, for example.

To summarize, the kinds of anti-Islamic discourses that are generally more persuadable within all three communities tend to fall within the following norms and premises:

<u>Premise</u>	<u>Norm</u>
Criticizing minority races, ethnicities, genders, or religions is bigotry.	When you wish to criticize one of these groups, be sure to make it part of an attack that includes a dominant group, targets a more specific subset of that group, or people in general.
Islamophobia is a conservative phenomenon.	To avoid being called an Islamophobe, appeal to liberal values rather than conservative ones.
Islam is a conservative religion.	Liberals have a duty to criticize Islam.
Having a sense of humor is a necessary sign of rationality.	Muslims should be mocked for getting upset about being treated in a satirical light.
Islam is incompatible with fundamental values such as democracy free speech and equality for women.	Islam should not be treated as a valid system of belief.

The trouble with the above norms is that the premises they are based upon are gross oversimplifications at best, flatly incorrect at worst. Both Islam and Islamophobia are hardly restricted to conservative perspectives – both can be articulated quite effectively within frameworks that are moderate, liberal, radical, socialist, fascist, etc. Many Islamic scholars have made arguments for years that concepts such as democracy and free speech are not only compatible with Islam, but can even be articulated in a uniquely Islamic fashion. While the treatment of women in many Muslim societies is indeed beyond the pale, majority-Muslim nations such as Pakistan, Indonesia, and Turkey have all elected female heads of state (something the United States has yet to accomplish). The latter certainly does nothing to excuse the former, but it does suggest a greater complexity to the issue than it is often granted. We have also seen how “getting the joke” often relies on a high level of insider cultural knowledge, and thus cannot be said in any sense to be a fair standard by which to judge rationality (itself a highly contentious, culturally-specific term). Finally, “bigotry” is a complicated phenomenon that is not dissolved by expanding or contracting hatred of a group. Expanding attacks on the disenfranchised to include the powerful does not change the disproportionate resources each group has with which to respond to those attacks, and narrowing attacks to focus on a specific subset of a given group is problematic when that subset becomes representational of the general group in most popular media portrayals.

Despite these problems, the premises and attendant norms listed above are effective due to their high level of compatibility with contemporary American

cultural values. Those that are skeptical of multicultural norms and premises are still likely to invoke them; their advocates, on the other hand, rarely attempt to appeal to more conservative values. Whether they are correct in their assessment or not, the majority of users on the web forums we have examined behave in a manner that implies a strong belief that liberal anti-Islamic discourses are more acceptable – and thus, more persuadable – than conservative ones.

Final Reflections

For almost the entire first decade of the 21st century, I had built my academic research and reputation around the theme of combating Islamophobia. How I ended up doing so was largely by accident: When I began my graduate school career, I was a Master's student in Religious Studies. I took courses on Islamic history almost out of a sense of obligation – my area of interest was “minority religions of the United States,” and Muslims were too significant a minority for me to ignore. I did not go in with what could be considered a “generous” attitude towards Islam, as its popular image as an anti-modern, misogynistic, theocratic religion of conquest was decidedly offensive to my liberal sensibilities.

The professor I studied under, however, gave me a significantly different perspective. I listened to Reza Aslan's vivid descriptions of the complexity of Islamic history, and was astonished by his detailed claims that Islam was actually highly *compatible* with values such as democracy and women's rights. In particular, he argued that Islam is not a unitary ideology, but a hugely diverse collection of cultures and beliefs that are struggling in their own fashion with the problems and

possibilities of modernity. While Western media and governments alike have focused almost exclusively on reactionary anti-Western elements within Muslim cultures, Reza helped show me how these are a small handful of factions that are currently struggling against many more progressive Muslim philosophies for the heart and soul of Islam and how it will be defined in the contemporary world. In this struggle, Western nations serve as little more than straw men antagonists for the groups Western media tend to lump under the simplistic term “Islamic terrorists” – groups that are actually hated by the majority of Muslim populations, as the majority of their victims have been their fellow Muslims.

In this environment, any act by “the West” that can be construed as anti-Islamic becomes fodder for militants in their frustrated attempts to persuade other Muslims to join their cause. In their attempts to exterminate “Islamic terrorism,” Western powers ironically help to bring about the vision put forward by Osama bin Laden and his intellectual predecessor, Sayid Qutb – a Muslim world unified against an external Western enemy and an internal Westernized enemy.

This is a familiar mantra for those who have opposed many of the policies carried out in the name of the “War on Terror.” Yet there are other players who are culpable in the realization of Islamist goals: everyday citizens in American and European countries who view Muslims as offensive to their sensibilities, and in turn actively seek a confrontation with the “Muslim world” in whatever fashion they can. In Denmark and other European countries with large Muslim immigrant populations, such confrontations occur daily in an immediate, visceral fashion, with the riots over the Muhammad cartoons being only one of the more famous

examples. In the United States, however, such confrontations are more difficult to come by – just as many American’s experiences of Muslims are largely mediated, so are their venues of confrontation. The Internet forums we have examined only scratch the surface, and even Little Green Footballs at its most virulent can hardly compare to the level of vitriol regularly hurled at Muslims in countless English-speaking websites and chat rooms. Indeed, when I originally conceived this project, it was my intention to study the worst of the worst of Islamophobic speech, with sites like Fark and One Good Move serving as a more “moderate” point of comparison.

In the end, however, it was the more restrained, nuanced, and educated anti-Islamic speech that became my focus. Not because they were more palatable to deal with, but because I saw in them the potential to genuinely persuade. As American political spectacle degenerates further and further into armed Tea Parties on the National Mall and angry demands to see the President’s birth certificate, the comforting style of cool, reasonable discourse becomes such a relief that the content of such discourse seems to matter less and less, to the point that any number of problematic logics become acceptable to hold provided the speakers know how to behave themselves. Add in the common perception that Muslims *don’t* know how to behave themselves – that they even seem to perfectly embody everything that “reasonable people” fear in their domestic political opposition – and we end with a scenario where anti-Islamic sentiments are not simply persuadable, but persuasive.

This uneasy realism was, for me, compounded by my identification with the groups that are being positioned as oppositional to the encroaching Muslim world,

whether they were my relatives in Denmark or my fellow Internet addicts trolling around on Fark. It was compounded even further by my liberal politics and atheistic tendencies, both of which had made me a long-time reader of One Good Move and triggered a great deal of involuntary sympathy for Charles Johnson as he broke his ties with the anti-jihadist movement. Put simply, these are my people, and it becomes all too easy for me to be swept up in the feeling that they are under attack.

It is in moments like this that Reza's lessons are at their most valuable, because they remind me of the nuance and complexity of Islam and Muslims that is so easily lost in the moral panic of my fellow reasonable liberals. It's a nuance that I was heartened to see develop in the viewpoints of jaded Farkers who found themselves typing, "Allahu ackbar!" in support of religious revolutionaries that they had never met, or had even previously been able to acknowledge existed. There are over a billion Muslims in the world – if even one in a hundred were truly dedicated to destroying the Western way of life, then there would be no breathless news reports of lone Muslim gunmen and sleeper terrorist cells, because the killing and violence would simply be too common to be newsworthy.

There is no question in my mind that Islamism is a dangerous ideology, or that those who use terrorism as a tactic must be stopped by every legal and ethical means. But panic and overreaction are the very things that make terrorism an effective tactic, and conflating whole religion of Islam with the very specific political movement of Islamism only advances the latter group's agenda. These are facts that were regularly employed by liberals when arguing against the invasion of Iraq and the detention of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay under the Bush regime – the overt

and virulent Islamophobic attitudes of many American conservatives during those years were enough to create a sense that Muslims were a persecuted group worthy of protection. Yet the ascendancy of the Democrats and disempowerment of American conservatism has ironically removed the need to defend Muslims from those who had done so out of a sense of political obligation. Now, it is far more easy for many to conflate both Muslims and American conservatives under the umbrella of “religious extremists,” and to treat both with similar levels of dismissive contempt and overblown fear.

In such an environment, it becomes all the more reasonable to expect to hear Islamophobic sentiments – they simply become a part of the discursive culture, making sense even to those who disagree with it. This is not to say that such discourses go unchallenged, or that they have achieved adherence from even a majority of the population. But they are present, they are known, and they are persuadable.

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