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# **Tweeting Grenfell: Discourse and networks in critical constructions of British Muslim social boundaries on social media**

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## **Abstract**

The Grenfell fire has yet to be analysed to understand the event's implications in relation to construction of social boundaries for British Muslims. In this current research, two methodological approaches are applied to gain understandings of social boundary construction on twitter: thematic analysis of the content of tweets and social network analysis (SNA) of how messages are diffused and contested. Twitter is shown to be an important platform in spreading positive narratives about Muslims during the fire, enabling individuals to spontaneously contest fake news and hate narratives. Social media acts counter to established knowledge, demonstrating that it is not, per se, a conduit for fake news and hate speech. Furthermore, it demonstrates how twitter offers Muslims an international space to voice and articulate themselves where they can be influential in debates that effect Muslim diasporas in other national contexts.

## **Keywords**

Austerity, British Muslims, critical discourse analysis, Grenfell fire, social boundaries, social network analysis, twitter

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## **Introducing politics, society and the social media construction of minority groups**

As news of the Grenfell fire spread around the world, the gaze of the world was directed at the failings of the British welfare state and the resilience of North Kensington and its residents. A video would emerge, taken on a mobile phone and shared via social media, of a woman, distraught, praising local Muslims for their activities during the relief effort:

If it wasn't for all these young Muslim boys round here, helping us, coming from Mosque, people would have dead, nuff more people would have dead. Nuff more people there, they want to talk about them when they are doing wrong, and all this kind of things, when they doing bad, when they doing good they were the first people with bags of water giving to people, helping people, running and telling people. (Storyful News, 2017)

She directly engaged with the dominant discourses constructing British Muslims as problems requiring regulation, control and surveillance (inter alia Poole, 2002; Saeed, 2007; Sian et al., 2012). Media coverage of the fire would be indelibly marked by the context of 21st century British lived multiculturalism in North Kensington. This area has had a history of poverty and diversity since the 18th century; modification occurred through an influx of Irish and West Indian migrants in the early 20th century, and was renewed by arrivals from Morocco, Spain and Portugal in the mid-20th century (Haas et al., 2011). The conflicts of the late 20th and early 21st century brought asylum seekers and refugees from across the world, including those from countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, creating a 'super-diverse' Muslim and non-Muslim population (Vertovec, 2007). However, it is the Moroccans who are most strongly associated with the area, coming as labour migrants (Haas et al., 2011), with Grenfell tower being colloquially known as the 'Moroccan tower' (Graham-Harrison, 2017).

The chronology of the Grenfell fire also renders it an important lens through which to understand the narrative of British 'Muslimness'. The disaster occurred during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month where residents of the tower were awake because of Ramadan when the fire broke out and as such took up roles as first responders, waking and evacuating neighbours. British Muslims would also be discussed within 'fake news' during the Grenfell fire: in forms of media content purposefully fabricated and/or manipulated (Edson et al., 2018). The conspiracy theory website 'Infowars' used Grenfell to diffuse narratives about Muslims celebrating the fire and restating the trope of Islam being both 'obsessed with death . . . fundamentally barbaric' (Joseph and Watson, 2017). The fire was also 'editorialised' (Rustin, 2018), becoming a battleground for competing political ideologies. Leader of the opposition Jeremy Corbyn on the 28th of June tweeting an extract of his discourse at Prime Minister's questions, narrating the Grenfell fire as exposing 'the disastrous effects of austerity and the Tories' disregard for working class communities' (Corbyn, 2017).

This context of divergent narratives of the Grenfell fire intersects with digital practice on social media and begs the following question: *What kinds of narratives does social media spread?* It has been argued that social media 'memed' into existence Donald Trump (Nussbaum, 2017). Thus, the starting point of this article is rooted within the

quest to uncover what insights can be gained about how narratives are created and spread on social media about minority populations, in this case British Muslims situated as they are in a complex web of national, transcultural and global belonging (Hoque, 2018) in the British Muslims hyphenated space. This is important because while research has considered mainstream media constructions of British Muslims (Poole, 2002; Saeed, 2007; Sian et al., 2012), construction through social media platforms remains underexamined, although some progress has been made in the French context (Downing, 2019a; 2019b). In applying an interdisciplinary, collaborative approach, this article seeks to offer insights that inform scholarly arguments about the role of social media and citizen participation in constructing political, social and national identities.

Muslims are rendered all the more important here because of the ineptitude of local and national governance; relief work was dominated by spontaneous efforts and work of transnational aid agencies such as Islamic Relief (2017). Important in this were the local sites that provided space both for displaced residents to sleep and aid activities to be coordinated; these gave local mosques and Muslim organisations – as well as churches and leisure centres – prime position in media narratives about the fire's aftermath. This significantly contrasted usual 'securitised' (Cesari, 2009, 2013; Eroukhanoff, 2015; Mavelli, 2013; Downing et al., 2015; Downing, 2019a; 2019b) forms of media attention given to British Muslims, which have been found to overwhelmingly focus on security, terror, extremism and debates about best policy response to these issues.

## **Conceptualising constructions of British Muslims through social media**

Bringing a collaborative digital methods approach to bear in this article requires utilisation of a number of literatures. The first step is to understand the current context of the dominant discourses around British Muslims and how they are constructed. Second, we must understand how online platforms are important sites for the narration of social and political events and the creation of social boundaries. This is important because the dynamic process of boundary making online has entered its Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) phase with increased use of social media platforms. It is no longer limited to static website content such as online memorials, but construction now occurs interactively through read-write interactions across large social networks as events unfold in real time.

Discussing a 'Muslim' group raises the spectre of essentialism – thus, it is important to re-iterate there is no single homogeneous understanding of social, economic, cultural and political realities of over a billion Muslims. 'Islam' is often used discursively as an explanatory framework that overrides all others; Muslims do and think things because they are Muslims, and not because of other social, political and economic realities (Semanti, 2011). This is false, as even politically there is a multiplicity of ways Muslims mobilise in Europe (Adamson, 2011).

This anti-essentialism dovetails with dynamic and constructivist social boundaries (inter alia Alba, 2005; Bhabha, 2006). Central to social boundary theory is that cultural difference is not objective, but constituted by relational processes that 'enunciate' difference (Bhabha, 2006). These relations and processes take many forms – Tilly (2004) identifies a plurality of ways in which this occurs in lived experience. However, these conceptions are too convoluted to suit this study.

More suitable is Alba's (2005) conception of brightening and blurring of social boundaries; it highlights ways in which Muslims are constructed in religious, but also ethnic and racial terms. For Alba, a 'bright' boundary has 'no ambiguity in the location of individuals with respect to it' (Alba, 2005: 24) and as such is a boundary that is sharp and difficult to cross. This reflects a sentiment that 'they are not like us' (Alba, 2005: 22), clearly seen when Jihadists differentiate themselves from broader society or in European political discourse of Islam and political violence where Muslims are situated as the counterpoint to liberal European values (Cesari, 2013; Eroukmanoff, 2015).

The brightening of boundaries for British Muslims can be topologized into pre- and post-9/11 periods. Pre-9/11, the constructivist origin of the category 'British Muslim' emerged through successive political and social discourses indivisibly linked to security. Before this, Muslims in the United Kingdom were subsumed within the 'black' category in the early race relations era; the British Muslim category began to form after the Iranian revolution and Satanic verses episode (Modood, 2006) where the definition of Muslim became situated as an existential threat to liberal political and social order. This accelerated and metamorphized post-9/11, an event which rapidly increased coverage of British Muslims in the UK press (Poole, 2002; Saeed, 2007; Sian et al., 2012). This coverage is dominated by recurring concerns of terror, religious and cultural difference and extremism. Two thirds of coverage during this period situated Muslims as a threat and/or problem (Abbas, 2004; Moore et al., 2008). This coverage stripped British Muslims of their agency; they were reported on, written about, yet rarely given a voice (Ahmed, 2009). Yet, British Muslims have conversely exerted agency in their social and political representation (Adamson, 2011; Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2010).

This brightening of boundaries also creates sub-categories of good and bad Muslims. Thus, as Alba (2005) argues, boundaries can also be blurred where 'individuals are seen as simultaneously members of the groups on both sides of the boundary' (Alba, 2005: 25). The dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims (inter alia Maira, 2009; Mamdani, 2008; Sirin and Fine, 2007) demonstrates this can happen in uneven ways; for example, post-9/11 'good' Muslims have been encouraged to denounce the 'bad' (Sirin and Fine, 2007), or even where the 'good' require coercive liberation from the 'bad' (Maira, 2009; Mamdani, 2008). Furthermore, the United Kingdom has made calls for 'good' Muslims to denounce 'bad' extremist Muslims, within government policy through the prevent strategy (Mohammed and Siddiqui, 2011; Qurashi, 2018). Both are deeply problematic, but the good-bad Muslim dichotomy remains common trope, heightened within the context of North Kensington where Grenfell takes place, because of a cluster of British Jihadists from the area committing atrocities in Iraq and Syria (Herrman, 2014). Here, the applications of the 'good'-'bad' Muslim dichotomy can be seen through approaches to the local mosque leadership of 'good' Muslims to understand how 'bad' Muslims commit heinous acts (Herrman, 2014).

Events like the Grenfell fire occur within a context where the online world is where conceptions of political and social phenomena are made, remade and stored (Robertson, 2017). The creation of online memories for 9/11 is an example of the earliest forms these took, where boundaries both within and between societies are structured from the bottom up beyond 'official' top down accounts online (Haskins, 2007; Jarvis, 2011). Absent here is analysis of social media communication that means boundary making takes on a Web

2.0 form; here, narratives can be and are made from actors within an online socially connected network. An exception being discussions of online expressions of Muslim sub-culture identity (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017), but this still does not entirely link social media and social boundaries. The Grenfell fire also highlights the symbiosis of social and mainstream media; for example, mainstream media used real-time footage of the fire from Facebook and Snapchat to globally broadcast the victims' last moments inside the tower. Importantly, for this analysis, uncertainty reigning during and in the days that followed the disaster enabled social media platforms to become battlegrounds for its 'editorialisation' (Rustin, 2018) and a conduit for the spread of fake news. Indeed, social media has come under scrutiny for being a mechanism through which fake news spreads during large political and social events (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Fake news has generated a rich vein of both empirical (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) and conceptual (Edson et al., 2018) literature. This article adopts the definition of Edson et al. (2018) that fake news is constituted by either/both the fabrication of news or the manipulation of actual events that can be both positive and negative. For example, it was reported, and retracted, that a baby had been thrown from Grenfell tower and caught by people on the ground (BBC News, 2017), while both labour MP David Lammy (Oppenheim, 2017) and British pop singer Lilly Allen (Gentleman, 2017) contributed to diffusion of negative 'fake news' by declaring official causality figures underestimated.

## **Methodological approaches to understanding construction of Muslims on social media**

### *Data collection and twitter*

The collection of reliable and robust social media data sets is difficult and costly. Free and open access to firehose twitter data is not possible. In this case, these data were purchased through Texitfer, which has now been decommissioned. Generating an historical data set requires stipulation of keywords. In this case, the specific search query were tweets that contained both keywords 'Muslim' and 'Grenfell' over a 96-hour period which generated a data set of 44,007 tweets. A sacrifice made was to use a signifier of difference, 'Muslim', within search terms, limiting this study to only mentions on twitter where 'Muslims' are referred to by this signifier of difference and not neutrally. This has conceptual implications, as Muslims are not just reported on *as such* but are covered in many different ways. In an ideal world, where data were freely available, it would have been beneficial to collect a more general data set and then examine discourse and networks where 'Muslims' were also covered without this signifier of difference being mentioned to get a broader picture of discursive constructions. The tweets that were collected using these limiting search terms were then processed in two different ways to generate the two different outputs analysed in this article.

### *Applying discourse analysis to large twitter data sets*

To conduct an analysis of the content of the discourses created in the tweets, the tweets were ranked by influence score with the top 5% of tweets being taken for thematic coding,

which gave 2200 tweets. Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary methodology that seeks to understand how language enacts social and cultural perspectives and identities (Gee, 2004). Within this, critical discourse analysis (CDA) seeks to bring power relations into the analysis to examine how power relations are established and re-produced through the use of language (Fairclough, 2010). This is important in a context discussing British Muslims because of the clear power relations that exist when they are described and covered in the media as security threats and/or extremists (inter alia Poole, 2002; Saeed, 2007; Sian et al., 2012). However, regardless of the theoretical underpinnings, discourse analysis requires operationalization in how it is robustly and systemically applied to any given data set. This study chooses to operationalise discourse analysis via a thematic analysis approach applied using the six-step coding process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). This involved familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, designing and naming themes and then producing the final report. This reflective approach is very suitable because one cannot know the content of a twitter data set even when searching with specific keywords or even hashtags because of the unpredictable nature of how narratives are created using such platforms. Thus, the first step enables one to become familiarised with the data set to enable the generation of the initial codes. Within this, the specific tools offered by Discovertext were extremely helpful, with the ability to use its machine learning classifier to aid in coding the tweets. These are the features, however, that can come at a significant cost – while this study received free access to the machine learning functions of Discovertext, the cost of an enterprise licence required to use this aspect of the software can run as much as several thousand US dollars per month. Thus, if a scholars' institution is not willing to commit to this cost, or if Discovertext withdraws support for a scholar to use these functions on a pro-bono basis, these important and very useful features remain out of reach for most academics. Discovertext allows the export of twitter data, up to 50,000 items per day, in .csv format that with some modification and various computer science data analysis packages, the necessary .graphml files can be created and used to generate social network analysis (SNA) graphs.

### *Using Gephi to map twitter social networks*

Once these .graphml files were generated, the entire data set was exported for import into Gephi. Gephi was used to generate the social network graphs used here that demonstrate

- how individuals share messages,
- how their behaviour forms clusters,
- the relationships that are between clusters of different messages.

The raw data set was further analysed through SNA. Here, Gephi enabled the rendering of large data sets like those in this current research into complex 'sociograms'; these are seen as a fundamental feature of SNA. Within these graphical representations, individuals are represented by points (nodes), and their interactions with each other by lines

(edges). Thus, a fundamental feature of SNA is that it examines the structural relationships between socially connected actors (Davies, 2009). SNA offers many insights into social media behaviour, including establishing patterns of situational awareness, alongside insights into the salience of particular messages (Ahmed and Lugovic, 2019); with this in mind, it is possible to examine conversations on twitter not just in terms of their content, but also in their particular patterns of information flow (Isa and Himelboim 2017). Some scholars have viewed social media as the ‘new public square’ and here SNA enables us to map the various constituents of this space and their relations to each other (Smith et al., 2014).

In addition, Gephi can classify the nature of shared tweets into different clusters of colours; this enables the researcher to separate individual graphs from the whole to not only see how particular narratives spread, but also understand whether narratives are exchanged between groups or simply remain within an ‘echo chamber’. The value in this is that individual graphs can be extracted from a whole network and also can be gathered and analysed instead of considering the network as a whole, creating value when analysing network domains (White, 2008). This is important to understand in an era of highly polarised politics where it is conceptualised that messages spread within separate ‘echo chambers’ without crossing into each other. Thus, the fundamental concern of SNA is to examine what structures relationships between individuals (Ahmed et al., 2017; Gardy et al., 2011; Scott, 2017), here with the sharing of ideas and narratives between actors and organisations. SNA is somewhat limited, however, because it sites analytical primacy not at the level of the individual, but rather the connections in which they are embedded in (De Nooy, Mrvar and Batagelj, 2018). However, using Gephi to analyse social media data does overcome some of these limitations because it can offer the ability to identify key ‘influencers’ – that is, individuals who are responsible for creating narratives that go on to be spread by others and thus the most frequently interacted with narratives can be identified.

## **Two dimensions of construction: discourse analysis and social networks and the spread of messages**

Employing two methodological approaches gives this article insight into two aspects of the way that social media activity constructs British Muslims – through the discourse analysis of the thematic content of messages spread and the analysis of the way that messages spread through the analysis of social networks. Each of these gives different, yet important, insights into these processes of construction and sheds light on how social boundaries are constructed from two different viewpoints – one being the actual content of tweets, and the other the means by which certain notions of boundary making become salient and spread through social networks. Discourse analysis is particularly important here because it gives insights into the content of messages that are spread using twitter about Muslims during the Grenfell fire. This gives us the ability to identify how Muslims are constructed and then to align this to questions of social boundary making. At a time when the ability to spread marginalising messages on twitter is well documented, this offers an important insight into whether in this specific context such messages were



**Table 1.** Proportion of tweets in the top 5% of influence score and their narrative content.

Coding category	% of sample
Positive coverage of saving lives during fire	74
Condemning far-right protest outside mosque	15
Parodying conspiracy theories about the fire	3
Tweets negative about Muslims, that is, using fire to convert Christians	1
Un-encodable (non-Latin characters/foreign languages)	7

dominant in the discourse or were rather overshadowed by other kinds of narrative. Thus, here we seek to complement existing literature on the media construction of British Muslims (inter alia Sian et al., 2012) with an analysis of how discourses occur on social media.

### *Saviours or protagonists? The capacity of mainstream media to create positive narratives about British Muslims*

Referring back to the conceptualisation of the Grenfell fire as a highly ‘editorialised’ event (Rustin, 2018), analysing the discourse of the tweets involved in the fire is an important step in understanding what kinds of narratives were created and shared on twitter. This is important because this article has also demonstrated the paradoxical nature of events, which *could* be spread about the role of Muslims during the fire, both positively as first responders during the fire and negatively as celebrating the fire (Joseph and Watson, 2017). This is made all the more relevant by the significant uncertainty that rained during and after the fire where objective, reliable facts about any aspect of the fire and the response to it were hard to come by. Thus, it is important to pose the question how these objective occurrences translated into subjective social constructions on social media. To examine this, this article takes the top 5% of tweets by influence, that is, a metric of how much certain messages spread through, and were engaged with, on twitter. This provides interesting results because, despite the possibility of negative narratives to spread through the network, the overwhelming twitter coverage commented on Muslims as making a positive contribution to the relief effort during and after the fire. This accounts for 74% (see Table 1 for total thematic tallies and Table 2 for the discourse contained in some of the most influential tweets by betweenness centrality) of the most influential tweets during the fire. Betweenness centrality is a measure of influence in a network and measures how central a user is to the spread of messages between other users in the network (Grandjean, 2016).

As such, while social media responses to political events have received significant coverage in the news for being conduits of ‘fake news’ (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017) and ‘hate speech’, this example actually presents a countervailing logic. Rather, here the stories that spread concentrated on Muslims raising the alarm and alerting neighbours to the fire, partially due to them being awake due to Ramadan. This can be seen in several of the most influential tweets featured in Table 2, where the tweet with the second highest betweenness centrality score shared a news story from *The Independent* newspaper, detailing how Muslims awake for Ramadan helped save lives.

**Table 2.** Key influential nodes ranked by betweenness centrality within the complete network.

Twitter User:	Betweenness Centrality within the network:	Content shared:
@Channel4News	529798346.5	<i>A far right leader protests about Islam outside a mosque – while those inside do all they can to help the victims of the Grenfell fire (@Channel4News, 2017).</i>
@MuslimIQ	136578639.2	<i>Rising for prayer to escape the personal hellfire &amp; meanwhile helped neighbors escape a literal fire. #GrenfellFire <a href="http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-fire-muslim-wake-early-ramadan-fast-grenfell-tower-resident-live-save-north-kensington-a7789111.html">http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-fire-muslim-wake-early-ramadan-fast-grenfell-tower-resident-live-save-north-kensington-a7789111.html</a> (@MuslimIQ, 2017).</i>
@ajplus	124026737.9	<i>Muslims in London are sharing food, water and clothing for victims of the Grenfell Tower fire. (@ajplus, 2017)</i>
@Telegraph	116499409.6	<i>Mustafa Almansur: Who is the organiser of the Grenfell Tower protest movement? <a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/16/mustafa-almansur-organiser-grenfell-tower-protest-movement/">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/16/mustafa-almansur-organiser-grenfell-tower-protest-movement/</a> (@Telegraph, 2017)</i>
@JackBMontgomery	107167912.3	<i>Mr al-Mansur used to be spokesman for [Abu Hamza's] Finsbury Park Mosque . . . arrested ten years ago on suspicion of terrorism offences. (@JackBMontgomery, 2017); this content contains a link to the above Telegraph article.</i>
@joetidy	103537795.1	<i>Inside the largest and closest mosque to the Grenfell Tower. What a response. Some people have driven down from Leicester to help. (@joetidy, 2017).</i>
@hassanrizvii	103409142.8	<i>Witness on Sky News said Muslims who were awake for Suhoor were a 'lifeline' for people who were evacuated from #GrenfellTower (@hassanrizvii, 2017).</i>
@PrisonPlanet	84295776.74	<i>Trump to blame for Grenfell Tower fire, not a faulty fridge. Incredible. <a href="https://www.infowars.com/muslims-celebrate-london-tower-fire-despite-many-of-the-victims-being-muslim/">https://www.infowars.com/muslims-celebrate-london-tower-fire-despite-many-of-the-victims-being-muslim/</a> . . . #LondonFire' (@PrisonPlanet, 2017a) and UK colonialism to blame for Grenfell Tower fire, not a faulty fridge. Who knew? <a href="https://www.infowars.com/muslims-celebrate-london-tower-fire-despite-many-of-the-victims-being-muslim/">https://www.infowars.com/muslims-celebrate-london-tower-fire-despite-many-of-the-victims-being-muslim/</a> . . . #LondonFire' (@PrisonPlanet, 2017b)</i>
@MiddleEastEye	67559068.96	<i>'Thank you for Ramadan'. As people come together after the Grenfell Tower fire, local residents thank the Muslims who saved their lives. (@MiddleEastEye, 2017)</i>
@shahed	62753311.98	<i>Muslim boys saved people's lives. They ran around knocking on people's doors. Thank God for Ramadan (@shahed, 2017).</i>

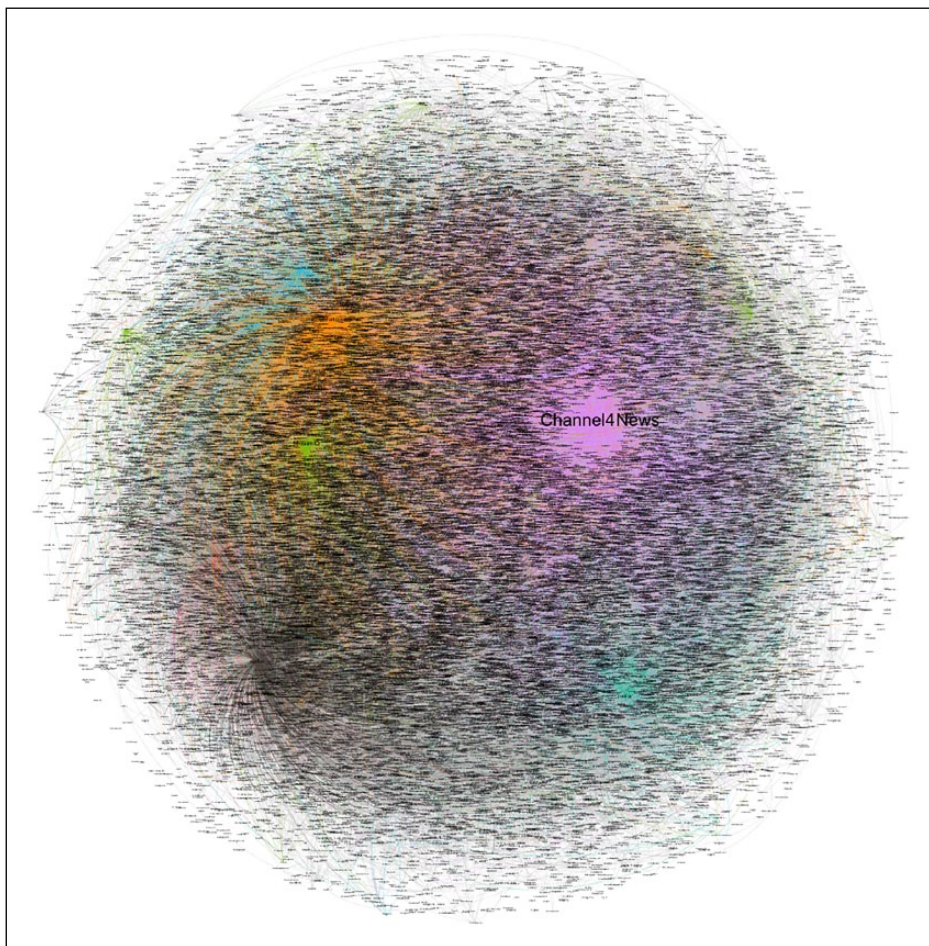
Indeed, the influential tweets went further simply spreading positive stories, with the second most numerous category condemning a protest outside a mosque that was offering relief by the far-right group 'Britain First' who have been linked to spreading hate speech about Muslims in the United Kingdom. Again, this is reflected in the influence score with the tweet with the highest betweenness centrality score in the complete visualisation was a Channel 4 News story about a Britain First protest outside a mosque (see Table 2). Here, the negative coverage of Muslims totals only 1% of the most influential tweets, with this concentrating on an emerging conspiracy theory that Muslims were using the fire and its aftermath to convert Christians in the area to Islam.

There is, however, an issue in this positive coverage in that such narratives spread by these stories of Muslims acting as saviours during the fire could be seen to reinforce the 'good Muslim'–'bad Muslim' dichotomy so prevalent since 9/11 and the war on terror (Mamdani, 2008; Sirin and Fine, 2007).

Here, a dichotomy is created both within the Muslim diaspora and within Muslim societies where 'good' Muslims should be protected from, or indeed armed to violently confront, 'bad' Muslims who violate human rights and/or take part in terror episodes. While not explicitly mentioned, the Muslims acting in interest of their neighbours during the Grenfell fire did so not to make a point of being 'good' Muslims, but rather on humanitarian grounds. However, it is possible that this action could be used to contrast with other 'less good' or 'bad' Muslims who either are not presented with such a dramatic opportunity to aid in saving lives, or were physically unable to. The micro theatre of British *Muslimness* in which this operates is particularly relevant here, as the broader North Kensington/North Westminster area in which the tower sat has produced a large number of British Jihadis who committed atrocities for the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (Herrman, 2014). This includes Mohammed Emwazi 'Jihadi John' and the 'hip-hop jihadist' Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary. Thus, although not prominent in the coverage of the fire, the micro-politics of the area produces both 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. However, turning the logic on its head somewhat, given the chronology of the narratives about British Muslims which emerge out of North Kensington, jihadis appeared before the Grenfell fire saviours, and as such, by highlighting positive Muslim actions during such an event, it greatly nuances the coverage of Muslims in the area as not simply security threats, ready to depart to the next jihadi theatre of war to commit acts of violence (Herrman, 2014). Thus, on balance, this has clear implications for social boundary construction, because in this particular case, the dominant narratives that emerge in the discourse about British Muslims were positive, and constructed them as important humanitarian parts of British society, even stepping into the gulf left by the British state. Here, as Alba (2005) points out, 'individuals are seen as simultaneously members of the groups on both sides of the boundary' (p. 25) by being both Muslims, and also part of the relief effort in one of the most significant national disasters in British living memory.

### *SNA and Grenfell: contesting fake news and spreading the influence of mainstream media outlets*

However, now it has been asserted that the content of the narratives overwhelmingly constructed British Muslims positively during the fire, and indeed enabled their



**Figure 1.** SNA visualisation of the complete network showing the key influential nodes within the network and interaction between the 812 sub-graphs within the network as a whole.

boundaries to be blurred; it is important to also analyse how these particular narratives spread. The below visualisation is a rendering of the complete network for the time period in which data were gathered (Figure 1). The networks formed within this graph are not entirely whole, and as such, conversational data pass in between individual sub-networks, of which there are 812, resulting in boundary issues between networks. Broadly speaking, these different networks, some of which are very small, are represented in Gephi by different colours. At the higher end of the spectrum, larger, more substantial, data-rich graphs have been formed, an example of which is the large pink cluster focused on a particular piece of content shared by Channel 4 News (@Channel4News, 2017). This sub-network has been extracted from the whole and will be considered later in further detail.

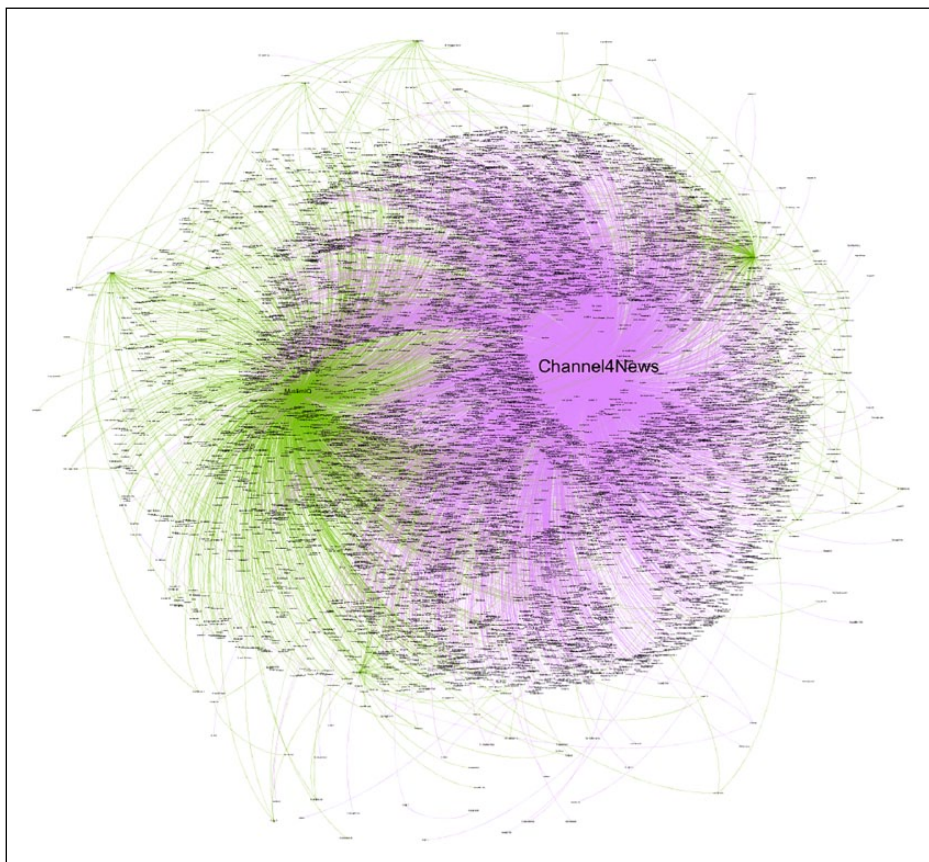
Consideration of the complete graph (Figure 1) enables further understanding about details and nature of connected actor conversations. The most influential users within visualisations have created larger circular node sizes caused by the number of interactions through retweets and comments made in relation to their content, and have higher betweenness centrality (Barthelemy, 2014) within the network.

Betweenness centrality in effect is measuring the number of times a node lies on the shortest path to other nodes, accounting for their influence flowing around a system in that they act as bridges within the network as a whole, as well as in connected sub-networks. Such nodes with higher betweenness centrality have both followers and the connectivity that others within the network do not have, which indicate the level at which they have potential to influence. Furthermore, analysis has allowed this research to metricise the influence of the actors within the network. As an example, within the complete network, the content shared by @Channel4News has the highest centrality score of any actor, expressed as the number 529798346.5, whereas an actor within an entirely disconnected graph with only a single interaction that has not been shared or commented on, comparatively have scores of 0. With this in mind, it is possible to classify these connected actors by influence and connectivity and to further understand the interaction with their content. This is important because this establishes that the most important source of information about Muslims after the fire was actually a mainstream media source and not one that used 'fake news'. Thus, this further strengthens the findings in the thematic discourse analysis above that challenges some conventional beliefs that social media networks are ripe for manipulation.

### *Muslim influencer account interacting with mainstream media*

Findings here demonstrate that rather than being a conduit for such messages, twitter users actually interact with mainstream media in the form of Channel 4 News. The below graph shows the Channel 4 News coverage extracted as a separate network graph (Figure 2).

The above visualisation is two individual graphs that intersect with content making up 22.79%, the largest single sub-network, of the complete network graph discussed in the previous section. The magenta network (17% of the graph) is focussed on direct response to content shared by Channel 4 while the green network (5.79% of the graph) on response to the sharing of positive content by a highly connected Muslim influencer (@MuslimIQ) whose thread began primarily in reaction to the content of the larger magenta network. Although there are other discussions occurring within these intersecting graphs, they are both primarily focussed, in different ways, on engagement with this content shared by Channel 4 News which was titled on Twitter 'A far-right leader protests about Islam outside a mosque - while those inside do all they can to help the victims of the Grenfell fire' (@Channel4News, 2017); the Channel 4 content, furthermore, contains multimedia through the form of a short video that documents Britain First activists protesting outside East London Mosque while those inside prepare relief supplies for the Grenfell fire survivors.



**Figure 2.** Channel 4 News Network Graph extracted.

The green network shown in tandem with Channel 4 News above demonstrates how another story was shared by a key self-identifying Muslim influencer on twitter who shared an article from the British newspaper *The Independent* (2017): ‘London fire: Muslims up early for Ramadan may have saved Grenfell Tower residents’ lives’. This share had engagement driven by nodes with higher levels of betweenness centrality, with the ability to diffuse information to the network as a whole. An example of this is a key-influencer Node, who is discussed earlier in the table of influencers with high centrality, shared content: ‘Rising for prayer to escape the personal hellfire & meanwhile helped neighbors escape a literal fire. #GrenfellFire’ (@MuslimIQ, 2017). His tweet contained the URL of *The Independent* article and was shared in the sub-network only 38 times, yet far more within the complete network; furthermore, within the comments, there lies numerous responses by connected actors containing further messages and positive depictions of the Muslim Community. Thus, here the visualisation demonstrates that social media in the context is not just a place where others are influential in the discussion of

Muslims, which would echo the voiceless of mainstream media sources that discuss Muslims, often in negative terms, without giving voice to the plurality of opinions within the community itself (Ahmed, 2009). Here, albeit a technologically savvy sub-set of Muslims has the ability to engage and shape narratives about events that directly concern them. It is also further interesting that the new twitter handle of @muslimiq (@QasimRashid) now identifies this user in more depth as an 'American Muslim' who is advertising his candidature for the Virginia senate's 28th district. Twitter here acts as an international Muslim social space where narratives can be articulated, and indeed can become influential, across international borders where an American Muslim can be the top twitter influencer for an event that narrates a Muslim community some considerable distance away.

This is especially important from a discursive perspective because both of these influential tweets stand in stark contrast to the Britain First demonstration, and thus the resulting coverage in the text and video attempts to construct British Muslims as extremists and as a security threat. This is contrasted heavily in the article with the reality that actually Muslims are inside preparing humanitarian relief. Once again, we have a case here where the coverage resulting from the fire on twitter directly engages with the question of whether social boundaries for British Muslims should be blurred or brightened. The demonstrators clearly are trying to 'brighten' social boundaries by depicting Muslims as religious extremists and violent, which sit outside of mainstream society, while the news story and response within the green graph blurs social boundaries with Muslims being shown to actually be productive, valuable parts of society and central to the relief efforts at the Grenfell fire. Importantly, the twitter comments that came with the sharing of the news story overwhelmingly focused on condemning the demonstration and expressing disgust at the activity of such far-right groups. Indeed, this incident lays bare in one event an expression of the good-bad Muslim dichotomy that is problematic and is not picked up on in the twitter coverage. The protests outside not only concentrate on constructing 'bad' Muslims, but also, by taking place outside this mosque, attempt to link these 'bad' Muslims with those who use this public facility. However, the work of those inside clearly puts them squarely at the 'good' Muslim end of the dichotomy as those working for the betterment of British society. This construction is neither mentioned nor indeed resolved in any of the coverage analysed here.

Table 2 considers the 10 most influential actors within the network ranked by betweenness centrality score, their profile and the content they shared that has been tagged by network actors with the hashtags #Grenfell and #Muslim, driving interaction within the network as a whole, although these hashtags did not find the widespread adoption as they did in other social media campaigns of responses.

While some content shared constructs British Muslims in a negative way, the majority of content shared within the network discuss the positive contribution made by the Muslim community in the aftermath of the fire. Thus, again we can see here the dominance of narratives that blur the social boundaries of British Muslims. Furthermore, the 10 highest volume URLs shared within the complete graph in the majority align with this positive portrayal. This is important because this closely relates back to the notion that during the coverage that the Grenfell fire received on twitter, it blurred the social boundaries of British Muslims. It did this through the dominance of narratives that have been



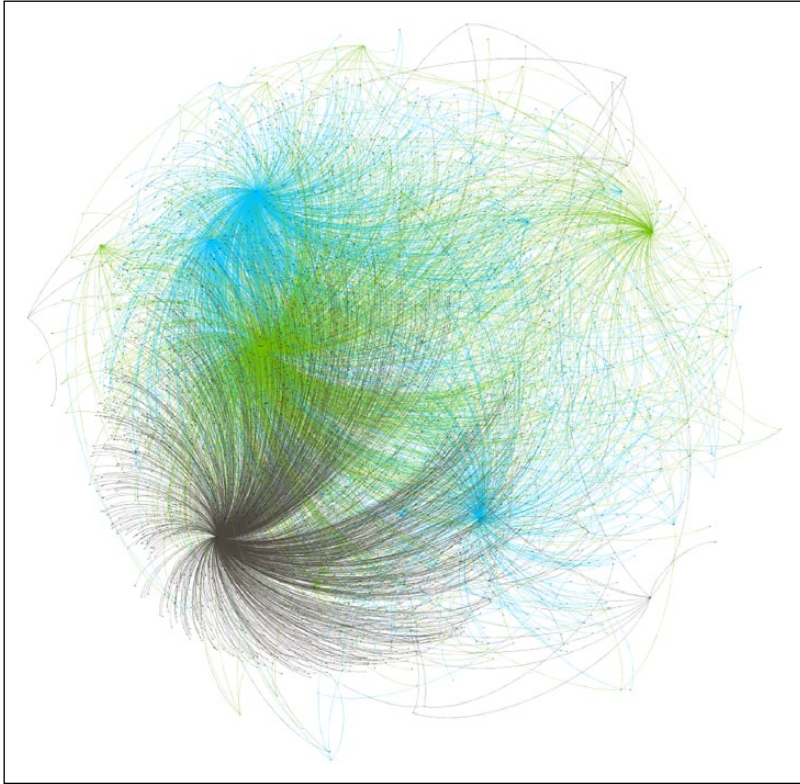
both produced and circulated that showed Muslims as not only socially responsible in a broad sense, but that they also put themselves at the forefront of both the initial emergency response and the relief effort in the days which followed the fire. This contrasts dramatically with the dominant media coverage of the community as vectors of extremism and insecurity.

While not generalizable to other situations per se, it is interesting that some of these positive narratives actually specifically relate the ability of British Muslims to save lives during the Grenfell fire to the specific ritual cycle of Ramadan where many Muslims would have been up later than perhaps usual to take advantage of the night-time hours where they are permitted to not fast. Here, the Huffington Post article discussed above titled 'London Fire: Muslims Beginning Ramadan Fast May Have Saved Lives In Grenfell Tower' is the highest volume shared in total, but was shared over multiple URLs which when added together means that it was shared 3631 times within the complete graph. Furthermore, the majority of these 14,608 shares of articles are positive (83.78%) in relation to the role of Muslims in the aftermath of the fire in comparison to the negative constructions (16.22%) within the graph. Again, this demonstrates the overwhelmingly positive coverage of not only Muslims in the Grenfell fire but also of Islamic religious practices, such as Ramadan, that by keeping adherents awake late serendipitously put them into positions where they could, and did, act as an early warning system in the early stages of the fire.

However, this is not the only story demonstrated within this SNA. It is also important to understand that one of the most highly ranked narratives by influence score relates to a conspiracy theory website article (having an influence score of 84295776.74) that seeks to diffuse the narrative that Muslims were blaming UK colonialism as the root cause of the Grenfell fire. However, exposing a limit to the analytical data attainable from twitter for investigating such social science questions is that the influence score does not have a sentiment attached to it. Thus, it is simply a metric of engagement and does not differentiate between positive and negative engagements. This is important because engagement comes in many forms on social media and can construct social boundaries in many different ways. While as in the case of the Channel 4 News story above, a high influence score can be indicative of agreement with the sentiment expressed and can also be indicative of individuals contesting narratives. Understanding this is important in asserting the arguments of this article that this example demonstrates fake news narratives being contested and not only spread on social media platforms.

The above network graph focuses (Figure 3) on 'fake news' content shared by @PrisonPlanet and its refutation driven by key-influencer interaction with the content and the sharing of positive stories and narratives in response. Both the @MuslimIQ and @AJPlus Twitter profiles interact within the complete network with the content of @PrisonPlanet. Their high betweenness centrality scores allow them to reach out to the extremities of the network and actors connected to all three key-nodes; in doing so, the volume of positive stories that respond to and create threads in response to @PrisonPlanet is comparatively higher than the three networks in unison. This is important because it demonstrates that rather than simply being an empty vessel for the spread of hate speech and fake news, in this case, twitter offered an opportunity for an influencer, but also individuals, to contest fake news and hate speech. Here, the anti-Muslim sentiment





**Figure 3.** Twitter interaction and refutation of 'Fakenews' diffused by @PrisonPlanet.

spread by @PrisonPlanet constitutes 4.71% of the network while the refutation of this negative content constituted 10.43% of the network – over double the amount of activity.

## **Conclusions on social media, Muslims and Grenfell**

This article sought to further open up debates about not only how social media is conceptualised in its relationship to the creation of social boundaries for British Muslims, but also how it spreads and contests fake news and hate narratives. This article demonstrates two important findings that show that twitter, in this case at least, did not act as a vector for the spread of such narratives.

Examining the data from the perspective of a thematic discourse analysis demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of the most influential narratives spread on twitter in the 96 hours after the fire constructed Muslims in a positive light as humanitarian saviours during and after the fire. This is interesting because it challenges dominant conceptions about how Muslims are constructed in the United Kingdom, being tied for several decades to concerns of security and integration (Poole, 2002; Sian et al., 2012).

This demonstrates that the twitter activity worked to blur the social boundaries of British Muslims by depicting them as taking an important humanitarian role in a national disaster, allowing them to hybridise their identities both as part of the norms of British society and as Muslims. Going deeper into this analysis, it is important that these constructions drew heavily on the sharing of stories and narratives from established, non-social media, news sources. This suggests a close and very symbiotic relationship between social and news media. As news media during the fire drew heavily on firsthand testimonies, pictures and videos shared by those trapped in generating news content, social media also drew on established news media sources for information about British Muslims that would then be spread across networks.

This meant that both individually created or editorialised tweets did not play an important part in this process. In addition, this thematic discourse analysis also demonstrates that fake news and hate narratives hardly feature in the analysis of the most influential tweets and as such do not in the case find social media as a conduit for such messages. This is important because there have been cases where it has been argued that social media have been key vectors for fabricated, manipulated and propaganda content (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017). From a purely discourse perspective, the Grenfell fire was not such an event.

Importantly, this study did not just rely on measuring discourse around Muslims during the fire, it also sought to take this analysis a step further by not simply analysing which messages were spread, but importantly how they spread. Conducting the SNA on this twitter data further buttresses these findings, but importantly adds a second dimension to understanding how these messages spread. Here, it shows that when hate speech and fake news narratives did emerge, from the conspiracy theory website 'Infowars', social media not only spread them in very limited ways, but also offered an important platform for the contestation of such ideas. Here, individuals users spontaneously contested narratives about Muslims celebrating the fire and the SNA demonstrates that such activity was more than double the spreading of fake news narratives. This is an important finding in an age where social media has been conceptualised as an important avenue through which such social and political narratives spread as discussed above (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017); they do not account for the ability of social media to at least in part to 'police' itself with users spontaneously contesting fabricated and manipulated content. This is especially important for this case in the context of analysing the social boundary construction for Muslims because the Infowars piece that was spread did not just talk about the role of some social media users celebrating the fire; it also leveraged an article as a means to further conceptions that Islam is fundamentally 'barbaric' (Joseph and Watson, 2017) and is thus problematic outside of the context of the Grenfell fire. Thus, as existing media studies on the constructions of Muslims in Britain conceive of media representations as 'one way streets' where discourse is generated and disseminated with seemingly no ability to be contested on the platforms through which is shared (Sian et al., 2012); social media does give that ability in this case and demonstrates that social media can drown out manipulated content spontaneously.


On a more conceptual level, this article has demonstrated that social media is an important arena in which social boundaries are unsettled, contested and remade in real time. In this example, users are engaged in a discursive battle over the conceptions of

social boundaries for British Muslims between ‘blurring’ and ‘brightening’ (Alba, 2005). Here, boundaries are argued to be blurred through narratives about their roles as lifesaving Britians who fulfilled, and indeed went beyond, their civic duty during and after the fire. Other users who shared the content of @PrisonPlanet and Inforwars can be said to be ‘brightening’ them by furthering narratives about the barbarity of Islam, while these are contested spontaneously by those who want rather to blur boundaries. Thus, this shows that social media is extremely dynamic in these processes and it would be very interesting to see how other current, and indeed future, tools for social media analysis can be deployed in future research on this subject to gain even greater insights into the micro and macro processes of social boundary creation. There exist some important future directions for research, which come out of this analysis. Further studies would do well to consider other ways in which mainstream media sources are used in social media debates and the synergy between the two, thinking more carefully about how and why Muslim users of social media interact with international debates concerning Muslims on social media.

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