

The video *Three Things About Islam*

Islamophobia online or a religious dialogue?

Introduction

The possibility of dialogue online, even in the third decade of the internet, remains a questionable prospect. Some scholars view the internet as a place of democracy, where free speech leads to sincere dialogue (see Campbell 2010). Others see it as a place which, instead of endorsing dialogue, actually promotes the offline social order and creates even more animosity between different groups (Barker 2005, Campbell 2010, Larsson 2007). This paper will explore the option of online dialogue in the media of YouTube.

I will do so by addressing the rather heated issue of Islamophobia, through the case study of a YouTube video titled *Three Things About Islam* (2012b).

The video *Three Things About Islam* was posted on YouTube by a Swedish group called the White Roses in July 2010. The video makes an attempt to be critical and logical, giving evidence from Muslim sources, using intelligent argumentation, and so forth. Two main questions arise from exploring this video: 1) Is the video Islamophobic? That is, what is an acceptable definition of Islamophobia? 2) Does the participatory nature of YouTube allow for a dialogue between the consumers of the video?

In order better to identify Islamophobic ideas, there is a need for a clear definition of Islamophobia. For example, should all criticism of Islam be read as equivalent to Islamophobia? What tools can we offer to distinguish between hate and criticism? Once such a definition is established, an analysis of the video can be produced. In the second part of this paper, special attention will be devoted to the role of media in the message of the video.

The paper will first present the video from a qualitative and quantitative perspective. Then, the definition and features of Islamophobia will be examined and applied on the video. Last, I will look into the reactions to the video, and show how these responses create what I consider a dialogue.

The video

The video *Three Things About Islam* was originally posted in English, and later translated by the group into German, and by other YouTube users into Russian and Spanish. When trying to understand the spread of this phenomenon, or any other YouTube video, Limor Shifman argues that we should observe not only the number of views ('hits'), but also the mirrors¹ and reactions to the video (Shifman 2011). Similarly, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green show that videos on YouTube should be understood to be not only a media product, but also a producer of interactions and reactions (Burgess and Green 2009). When examining this video, I would like to point to the importance of the reactions it has evoked.

The original video has acquired around 2.5 million hits.² Concerning the proportions of reactions to and mirrors of the video, further and deeper research needs to be done. In my independent research, carried out between the four-month period between September 2011 and December 2011, I tried to distinguish between mirrors, which can be seen as supporting the videos, and reactions which I found to be solely disputing the video. This initial research yields the results presented in the table on the following page.

In *Three Things About Islam* the video makers present to the public information about Islam that they believe most people do not know, and should be aware of. The video's introduction stages a general claim that every opinion can be counter-attacked, and that most people are aware only of information that fits their existing worldview. In the second part of the video, the White Roses share three claims about Islam that they consider to be 'surprising information'. This consists of three statements, which the authors claim to be principles held by Muslims:

1. The Qur'an is different from other holy scriptures; it is to be understood literally and by using the traditional Islamic, exegetical rule that later verses are most authoritative.
2. Striving to institute a worldwide Shari'a law is a religious duty, to which all Muslims must adhere.
3. Muslims are allowed to deceive non-Muslims in order to promote Islam.

1 'Mirror' is the action of re-posting a video under another account, in order to spread the video to more people.

2 2,448,815 'hits' in the English version and 241,713 in the German version (White Roses 2011b).

Table. Reactions and mirrors to *Three Things About Islam*

	Supporting	Objecting
Mirrors	Total videos: 38 Total views: 1,026,007	—
Reactions	—	Total videos: 15 Total views: 138,540 (German: 3 videos, 9,844 views)

The video concludes that there might still be much more about Islam that people do not know, and that one should strive to learn about Islam as soon as possible, or, in their words: ‘this subject will affect you in the near future, take the chance to inform yourself now – before it does’ (*Three Things About Islam* 2011a).

The video itself contains only text, which is narrated by an off-screen voice. No images other than the text can be seen in the video. However, as the text unrolls, certain words are emphasized and enlarged.

Unlike some opinion videos, where the speaker shows himself and takes responsibility (Condell 2011), the White Roses prefer anonymity. Their YouTube page presents a short description of the group, which changed from a Swedish group in 2010,³ to a European group approximately midway through 2011.⁴ In their profile, they write the following: ‘The White Roses are located in Europe. We have no religious affiliation and are not members of any political party’ (White Roses 2011a).

The information about the group is limited, and when I tried to contact them, the response was negative. The group wished to stay anonymous and refused to answer any questions, claiming that ‘they do not want any attention drawn to them’ (email correspondence between the group and the author in December 2011).

However, the group’s choice of name is also part of their group identity, and it promotes their motives and way of thinking. The original White Roses was a non-violent resistance student group in Nazi Germany, which was famous for spreading leaflets calling for active opposition to the Nazi regime (White Roses 2011c). By choosing this name, the group associates themselves

3 Last checked on 3.11.2010.

4 The exact date of the change is unknown to me, but as I have been frequently following the group’s activity, it is my estimation that the change was done around June or July 2011.

with an intellectual, non-aggressive group, and so tacitly implies that their arguments are also not hostile. They also draw a parallel between Islam and the Nazi regime, implying the dangers that Islam might hold.

Islamophobia

As mentioned previously, in order to understand the Islamophobic – or otherwise – tendencies of the video, an examination of the definition of Islamophobia is needed. Islamophobia as a phenomenon is relatively new and its definition is still somewhat unclear. This question of definition has been a ‘hot topic’ for contemporary researchers of Islam, and a few books have recently been written on the subject (e.g. Abbas 2011, Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, Sayyid and Vakil 2010). One of the most recurring sources for a definition of Islamophobia is the Runnymede Trust Report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997), which offers this simple and clear definition: ‘Islamophobia is a shorthand way to refer to hate or dread of Islam or Muslims’ (Islamophobia 1997: 4). The report also points to seven features of Islamophobia as they are presented by Thair Abbas (2011: 65):

1. Muslim cultures are seen as monolithic.
2. Islamic cultures are substantially different from other cultures.
3. Islam is perceived as implacably threatening.
4. Adherents of Islam use their faith to gain political and military advantage.
5. Muslim criticism of Western cultures and societies is rejected out of hand.
6. The fear of Islam is mixed with racist hostility to immigration.
7. Islamophobia is assumed to be natural and unproblematic.

These definitions have been used by scholars to determine if certain texts or acts are Islamophobic. For example, when Göran Larsson examines the web portal WikiIslam (Larsson 2007), he understands the Runnymede Report to distinguish between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ attitudes toward Islam. A closed attitude sees all Muslims as one group and Islam as a completely hermetic religion. In this view, all Muslims act in the same ways, being guided by a sealed, undisputed religious text, the Qur’an. An open attitude, on the other hand, sees Islam as a complex religion that consists of a variety of traditions and practices. In an open attitude Muslims are treated as individuals. Larsson argues that WikiIslam takes a closed attitude in its understanding of Islam, and so should be seen as an Islamophobic web portal.

If we take these definitions and apply them to the video *Three Things About Islam*, we see that some of the features offered by the Runnymede Report apply to the video. To start with, a closed attitude is apparent in the video. The Qur'an is presented in the video as a book which should be taken literally, and there is no 'picking and choosing' (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b). The video also refers to Muslims as one, united, entity; 'it is the **duty** of **every Muslim** to keep striving until **all governments** have been **converted to Shari'a law**' (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b, boldface in the original). According to the video makers, all Muslims understand the Qur'an in the same way, since there is only one way to comprehend it, and all Muslims act precisely according to the Qur'an.

Other aspects of Islamophobia formulated by the Runnymede report can be found in the video. For example, Islam is inclined to be a threat, as can be seen in the group's choice of name and in their video. The video asserts the unsubstantiated claim that the Qur'an commends the elimination of 'man made governments (such as democracy)' (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b). When claiming that Islam's goal is to establish Shari'a law worldwide and destroy all other governments, the video takes an Islamophobic stand that views Islam as entirely political and as a threat to Western governments.

Another Islamophobic feature in the video is the attempt to separate Islam from other religions by differentiating between the Qur'an and 'other religious books (such as the Bible or the Torah)' (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b). According to the video, the Qur'an, unlike other holy scriptures, is not symbolic and should be read literally.

According to the contemporary definitions of Islamophobia, certain features in the video correspond with the definition of Islamophobia. When the video's content is analysed as a text, it seems completely Islamophobic. But the video is not a text; rather it is a video which is posted on the unique medium of YouTube. Could the specific medium change the message?

Media

As was famously phrased by Marshall McLuhan, 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan 1964) and since this video exists in the virtual world of YouTube, it is important to try and understand how the medium influences the message in this case.

YouTube is a web portal that combines video content with the opportunity to participate. According to Burgess and Green (2009), YouTube is mainly

a space of participatory culture. YouTube is based solely (or mostly) on the participation of its users, and the company itself does not provide any content for the site. This makes YouTube a unique media tool, where each user is both the contributor and the consumer. For this reason YouTube can also be described as a community, or a market place, where different opinions, languages and needs are all shared in the same space. Burgess and Green emphasise that 'all contributors of content to YouTube are potential participants in a common space; one that supports a diverse range of uses and motivations' (Burgess and Green 2009: 57). This participation is created by posting videos as well as by reacting to existing videos. There are three main forms of response:

1. Sharing the video, or spreading it, by making a 'mirror', that is, re-posting the video without changing its content, solely for the purpose of spreading it.
2. Commenting in the video's comment section.
3. Making a video which imitates, explains or in any other way responds to the original video.

As seen previously in this article, the video *Three Things About Islam* has received all of the above-mentioned responses. First, other YouTube users have shared and spread the video. As of December 2011, 40 users have mirrored the video, adding about 4,762 views. Second, the comment section of the video is surprisingly active, even two years after the video was posted. As of April 2012, there were 44,507 comments to the English version of the video, and 59,510 to the German one (*Three Things About Islam* 2012a). The comments vary from loud support to harsh opposition and anything in between. Some of the comments are superficial, offensive or nonsensical. Others enter into discussions: either theological, citing the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, or political, referring to political or historical events. The sheer mass of the comments makes them difficult to analyse. However, a few notes can be made: 1) although the video was posted more than two years ago, the comment section is still relatively lively. Comments are constantly being added, with an estimated average of about 70 comments per day. 2) Within the comments certain dialogues are created between two (or more) specific users. For example, the user named 'ingehs' (2012) has been going back and forth answering people's questions about Islam and debating 'hot' issues. And third, video reactions to *Three Things About Islam* have been made by sixteen people. These video responses tend to use the same methodology and style as the *Three*

Things About Islam video, creating what might be considered a dialogue. For example, in a video-blog (vlog) reaction to *Three Things About Islam, Three Things You Didn't Know About Islam* (2012), the user describes his feelings on watching the video, and then analyses it claim by claim, pointing to what he thinks are missing data, misused information, or sheer error. An even stronger example is the case of videos which completely imitate *Three Things About Islam*. These are videos made entirely of text which is sometimes narrated by a voice, just like the original. All of these videos are critical of the original video. By using Islamic sources or analytical claims, these videos try to refute the video. One example is the video *3 Things About Islam* (2012), which imitates the original video in all aspects, but with a different message. This video makes similar visual (fonts and sizes of the text) and audio (narration by a man, similar music track) choices. However, already in the first minute the video makes a stand against the original video, by writing 'three things about Islam' and then adding 'they would have you believed [sic]'. Thus it creates a full sentence: 'three things they would have believed about Islam' (*3 Things about Islam* 2012: 0:05).

It could be argued that a dialogue is created between the responses and the original video. Hence, although the video *Three Things About Islam* is in itself Islamophobic, the fact that it was posted in the media of the internet means that it might become part of a dialogue.

This statement demands an underlying assumption that should be questioned, which is: *does participation culture create a dialogue?*

When looking at this particular case, both the liveliness of the comments and the language and style choices of the video responses stand as possible evidence for a dialogue. The fact that the video responses make their arguments using the same style and method of argumentation (e.g. logic and Qur'anic sources) is important in order to stage a dialogue. Another evidence for this plausible dialogue is in the comment section. Not only is the comment section still active, it seems that the arguments within the comment section are ongoing between recurring users. The same users return to debate the video daily, which strengthens the claim that these users are in an ongoing dialogue with the video.

As a more general assumption, the question of the possibility of dialogue on the internet is highly important for research in the field. Although scholarly opinions differ in their answers to this question, one interesting theory to consider is Walter Ong's 'second orality' (Ong 1982). According to Ong, oral culture is different from literate culture in many ways (Ong 1982: 2). One of these differences is that in orality communication becomes an ongoing event,

while in scripture the words and ideas become constant, unmoving and impossible to argue with, which makes them seemingly more objective. After all, one cannot argue with a book (or, to be precise, one can argue with a book, but regrettably the book does not change its mind). In the new media, Ong claims, a return to orality occurs. Well before the establishment of the world wide web, Ong observed the notion of orality in radio, the cinema and the television: the media of the twentieth century (Ong 1982: 135). This return to orality, I argue, is even more powerful online, since participation is promoted. On the internet, and specifically on YouTube, one *could* argue with a book, and indeed one does so.

Two conclusions arise from this paper – first, the video *Three Things About Islam* can and should be considered Islamophobic. The ideology behind it seems to support the notion of Islam as a threat and its presentation of Islam is closed-minded and tends to generalize. Second, in this case the participatory culture of the media in which the video was presented, YouTube, created a dialogue between anti-Islamists and supporters of Islam. This dialogue, like many dialogues, might not change the opinions of either side, but the mere fact that the online sphere embraces and promotes religious dialogue is an important phenomenon. This phenomenon still needs to be more substantially researched, but the optimist in me hopes that we are looking at a powerful tool that might promote religious tolerance.

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