

Satirical, cosmopolitan, hostile and absurd: *Fitna* prompts massive reaction but not interaction on YouTube



In March 2008 Dutch anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders released a 16 min anti-Islam video called *Fitna*. It generated immense global controversy. European mainstream media coverage of this controversy offered little space for ordinary citizens, including Muslims, to participate, and young people across the world felt compelled to post protest videos on YouTube. Between 2009 and 2010 Liesbet van Zoonen, Sabina Mihelj and Farida Vis set out to investigate this on-line reaction, funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#). The team discovered young, actively Muslim women from around the world amongst those responding on YouTube, including an exceptional group of young Egyptian women, contrasting greatly with *Fitna's* Orientalist portrayal of Muslim women as victims of oppression. Yet, the great majority of communications surrounding *Fitna* (85%) consisted of reactions without interactions: one off 'acts of citizenship'. On average, Muslim YouTubers displayed a more open, cosmopolitan attitude than posters of a 'western' background who generally argued from a freedom of speech perspective. Rare cases of discussion turned YouTube into an antagonistic battlefield. So, YouTube offers a unique space for young people to express their views in their own ways on a global platform and opportunities for public recognition of irreconcilable differences and conflicts, but few take the opportunity to expand this into dialogue.

The team found YouTube to be in constant flux and struggled to keep track. Thus, they developed with Professor of Information Science Mike Thelwall, a new electronic tool for capturing and analyzing its videos. This helped them analyze over 700 posts and discover 4 main types of video response to *Fitna*: Muslims expressing their own understanding of Islam as a peaceful religion; organized sets of 'Sorry-videos' apologizing for Wilders; 'cut and mix videos' satirizing and parodying Wilders and frequently using the Bible in the same way as *Fitna* uses the Qur'an, paralleling 17th century pamphlet culture; popular stand-up comedy responses (those by the Muslim America Foundation and Pat Condell were particularly popular). These all showed a desire to connect and were more humorous, denigrating and absurdist than violent or aggressive. Having shown *Fitna* to different groups of Dutch young people, the team concludes that the more informed about debate viewers are, the less susceptible to *Fitna's* Islamophobic message they are, suggesting that silence around Islamophobia is counterproductive.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's website: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/research/FITNA/index.html>
- Download for free the electronic tool for capturing and analyzing YouTube video data developed: <http://lexiurl.wlv.ac.uk/searcher/youtube.html> and read more about it here: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/news/show/fruitful_spontaneous_cross_disciplinary_collaboration_results_in_free_e_research_tool
- Zoonen, L. van, Vis, F. and S. Mihelj (2010) 'Performing citizenship on YouTube: activism, satire and online debate around the anti-Islam video Fitna', *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol. 7, no 4, pp 249-262.
- Vis, F., Van Zoonen, L. and S. Mihelj (2011) 'Women responding to the anti-Islam film Fitna: voices and acts of citizenship on YouTube', *Feminist Review*, in press.
- Van Zoonen, L. Van, Mihelj, S. and F. Vis (forthcoming). YouTube interactions between agonism, antagonism and dialogue: video responses to the anti-Islam film Fitna. *New Media and Society*.

You might also be interested in...

- The *Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion* conference which the Religion and Society Programme co-organised in 2010 and Farida Vis and Mike Thelwall presented this project at. They are contributing a chapter to the book to come out of it: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/innovative_methods_in_the_study_of_religion
- 'Being British and being Muslim' – the podcast of an interview with Dr Kaye Haw about her Religion and Society funded work with young Muslim women in Britain: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/being_british_and_being_muslim
- Listening to Professor Kim Knott talk about her project about media portrayals of religion and the secular sacred: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/kim_knott_short_version_oct_2009
- A Programme supported project about modest fashion and on-line retail: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/modest_fashion_launch_event
- A one day event about faith and policy co-organized by the Programme, especially discussion of the 'active citizen': http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/faith_and_policy_session_3_the_active_citizen
- *Performing Islam*, an exciting new journal which has developed out of Kamal Salhi's Religion and Society funded research network [Performance, Politics, Piety](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_08/1281612711_performingislam(callforpapers).pdf): [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_08/1281612711_performingislam\(callforpapers\).pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_08/1281612711_performingislam(callforpapers).pdf)

Project Details

Award Title

Fitna, the video battle

Team

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Award Type

Phase II Small Grant

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