Framing and praising Allah on YouTube: Exploring user-created videos about Islam and the motivations for producing them

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What is This?
Framing and praising Allah on YouTube: Exploring user-created videos about Islam and the motivations for producing them

Lela Mosemghvdlishvili and Jeroen Jansz
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Abstract
Islam is a hotly debated topic on YouTube, comprising approximately a half-million videos, tagged with this word. The study presents empirical material regarding three aspects of Islam’s representation: (a) how Islam is framed in user-created videos; (b) how it is visualized; and (c) what are the motivations of the YouTubers who create these videos. The theoretical framework of the study is based on two pillars. The concept of valence framing was employed to identify positive/negative patterns of representation. The motivations to videoblog about Islam were examined from the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Data comprised a content analysis of 120 videos and 15 in-depth interviews with content producers. Despite a number of extremely attacking videos about Islam, the overall tone of the coverage appeared to be balanced. However, images and ideas that are inappropriate for broadcasting on mainstream media repeatedly appear on this website.

Keywords
Framing Islam, Islam, user-generated content, Uses and Gratifications Theory, valence framing, YouTube

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Introduction

“‘There will be time when your religion will be like a hot piece of coal in the palm of your hand; you will not be able to hold it’”. The prophet of Islam was gazing into the future while he talked to his followers early in the 7th century in Arabia’ (Ahmed, 2003: 1). Seemingly in accordance with this prophecy, Islam has indeed become ‘a hot piece of coal’, interest in which has been augmented in related media and public discourse (Said, 1997; Shadid and Van Koningsveld, 2002). Scholars commonly agree that the attitude towards Islam in the Western media has a negative slant, and the religion is often discussed in the context of threats, violence and terrorism (Karim, 2000; Poole, 2000, 2002, 2006).

Whereas the representation of Islam has been widely examined with respect to the traditional media (Abbas, 2000; D’Haenens and Bink, 2007; Hussain, 2007; Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2003; Poole, 2002, 2006; Ter Wal, 2004), fewer studies have addressed this issue in terms of online media (Berkeley, 2006; Wall, 2006), and even less in the context of user-generated content (Van Zoonen et al., 2011).

Correspondingly, the aim of the present study is to contribute to this burgeoning literature on how Islam is represented in media, but from a different angle, namely with the focus on user-generated content. Among various 2.0 platforms we selected YouTube, one of the most popular sites for user-generated videos, which has been recognized as a portal of ‘participatory culture’ (Burgess and Green, 2009). According to Alexa (2011), an online ranking service, YouTube is the third most visited website globally, comprising an archive of more than 100 million video clips, which arguably increases daily by 65,000 uploads (Cha et al., 2007).

What makes YouTube a particularly interesting case for investigating the representation of Islam is the finding by Paolillo (2008) that among the diverse content shared and stored on YouTube, religion (Islam predominantly, followed by Christianity) forms the second biggest thematic cluster, after music videos. Islam is one of the most hotly debated topics among YouTubers (Heffernan, 2007), and unsurprisingly some 4900 videos a week tagged with the word Islam are uploaded to the site.

The paper reports two interrelated studies. The first study is concerned with content, i.e. self-produced YouTube videos (tagged with the word Islam). It aims to answer the question of how Islam is framed (from the perspective of valence framing) and visualized in YouTube clips. The second study shifts attention from the content as such to the producers of the content, i.e. the YouTubers. It explores why they create videos about Islam by analyzing their motivations (from the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory) for videoblogging about this religion. Combining the analysis of video content with an exploration of the producer’s motivations aims to contribute to a more profound understanding of how and why individuals communicate Islam on YouTube.

Study 1: Exploring the content: how is Islam framed and visualized in the user-created videos?

Theoretical framework

Framing is increasingly applied to help us understand the coverage of religions in the media. As Stout and Buddenbaum (2003: 2) note, in the changing environment of media-mediated
religious discourse, framing is a ‘particularly relevant and useful’ theory. As Entman’s (2007: 164) widely cited definition explains, to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation and/or moral evaluation.

Generally, frames are conceptual tools for both media creators and audiences to convey, interpret and evaluate information. In a media text, frames serve as a central organizing idea and, through the use of selection, emphasis and/or exclusion, promote a particular interpretation of an event. Among the frames manifested in media texts, distinctions can be made between issue-specific, generic and valence frames. Issue-specific frames are relevant to a specific topic, e.g. ‘the Lewinsky Affair’ (Mark, 2003), whereas generic frames are broader and can be applied to various events, thus transcending issue-specific limitations (De Vreese, 2005). The most common examples of generic frames are human interest, conflict, economic consequence, morality and responsibility frames (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

The third type of frames used in communication studies are valence frames. Whereas frames are recognized as different ways to interpret a complex reality, they are also capable of carrying an inherent valence (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003). In other words, valence frames can cast the same information in either a positive or a negative light (Levin et al., 1998), transmit valence, and depict a framed issue or object ‘in terms of good–bad or positive–negative dichotomies’ (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003: 362).

In the present study we focused on valence framing. This was because of the nature of the content stored on YouTube, which is mainly produced by individual YouTubers, without editorial supervision, in different cultural, political and social contexts. With such diverse content, using an inductive method and analyzing clips with an open view in an attempt to reveal the array of possible issue-specific frames is not feasible. On the other hand, utilizing generic framing has the pitfall of overlooking frames that are not predefined. In contrast, analyzing valence frames enabled us to study video content at a level that transcended the diversities in background and context.

**Negative attitudes towards Islam**

In theory, the representation of Islam could be positive as well as negative. The contemporary situation in Western countries underlines that this is indeed a theoretical issue, as public discourse on Islam is dominated by negative perspectives. Shadid and Van Koningsveld (2002) present five ‘causes’ (or models) that are used in scholarship to explain how Islam came to be perceived negatively in the West. The first relates to changing power relationships, and points at the historical rivalry between the Islamic and the Western world. As Ahmed (1992) explains, historical events such as the Crusades, the defeat of the Byzantine Empire, the rise and decline of the Ottoman Empire, colonialism and the establishment of the state of Israel were the key encounters between the Islamic and the Judeo-Christian world, resulting in a kind of atavistic memory of events. The second model of the clash of civilizations is rooted in Huntington’s (1993) assumption that the major conflict in the New World Order will be between civilizations, primarily Western culture on the one hand and Islamic and Confucian cultures on the other. The reason for such conflict, according to Huntington, is the essential differences in cultural values, with religion being one of the key factors. Although Huntington’s claims...
were roundly criticized by the academic community (Abrahamian, 2003: 530), this paradigm turned into ‘a successful political myth’ and was established as conventional wisdom that is widely cited in the mainstream media (Bottici and Challand, 2006: 315). The third model is the rise of political Islam. Undoubtedly, some extreme Muslim political movements, which are far from being representative of more than a billion Muslims, have provided a more than adequate opportunity to present a negative image of Islam. The model of Muslim immigration in the West constitutes the fourth ‘cause’ (Shadid and Van Koningsveld, 2002). The last, but certainly not the least, important model is the oversimplification of information about Islam. Unsurprisingly, a significant number of scholars attribute the salience of Islam in the Western world to the media and argue that through the selectivity of news about the religion and its adherents, the press contributes to its negative image (Hafez, 2000; Karim, 2000, 2006; Richardson, 2001).

Drawing on the rationale of valence framing, and using content analysis (with quantitative and qualitative sections) as a research tool, we explored to what extent YouTubers framed Islam in a positive or negative light. The five models used in the scholarship to explain the negative attitude towards Islam were used as an interpretive tool to contextualize the results from the present study.

Research design and data

The dataset we drew our sample from comprised all user-created YouTube videos which were tagged with the word Islam. A preliminary inquiry on 10 February 2008 retrieved 126,059 such videos. Two months later, when the sampling process was conducted, this number had risen to 460,000.

During the period of coding, the YouTube search option allowed users to list the results of a query in two distinct ways: (1) according to relevance and (2) in order of the date the video was uploaded. Although there was no description on YouTube about how relevance was determined, a systematic observation of the videos in the list suggested it was based upon at least three criteria: tags in the titles, user ratings, and large numbers of views and comments. Displaying videos in a relevance list is a default mode of YouTube search and one can safely assume that users will most likely use this option. However, we did not want to rely exclusively on relevance and therefore combined two sampling procedures. The first was to include the top 50 videos shown in the relevance list. The second was to include 100 videos selected through random systematic sampling from the corpus of clips uploaded during the period between 10 and 31 March 2008.

Within this sample of 150 videos, the overall majority of clips were produced in English or contained English subtitles; however, four were in Arabic, three in Dutch, two in German and one was in Kurdish. All videos were translated except the Kurdish one, which was excluded from the sample. Five videos were removed from the website (three by YouTube administration for violating the General Terms and Conditions and two by the producers themselves). The sample contained 24 repeated videos, which were also excluded from the analysis. Thus, the total number of coded cases comprised 120 videos (from which 41 were from the relevance list and the remaining 79 videos were from our random list).
The codebook contained both quantitative and qualitative variables and were organized into five categories:

1. **Characteristics of a video** (duration, number of views, number of comments, format, etc.).
2. **Demographics of a producer** (for the variables in this category, the channel page of a producer served as a coding unit).
3. **Valence framing** operationalized with a set of five indicators and adopted and modified from the work of Schuck and De Vreese (2006). The prevalence of positive/negative (a) emotional (verbal) expression, (b) visual expression, (c) quotes, (d) rational argument and (e) the general tone of a video was coded on a five-level scale, ranging from very negative to very positive.
4. **Thematic variables** included the topic of a video, the type of denomination (Sunni or Shia), country of reference, etc.
5. **A qualitative section**, aimed at exploring the portrayal of Islam on YouTube in greater depth. The coders were asked, among other things, to record their observations about the hidden/implicit meaning of a video, to note which particular words were used to describe Islam and to record how Islam was visualized (choice of images, colors, captions and symbols).

Before the actual coding started, the codebook was tested and intercoder reliability was established. We used the third part of the codebook (i.e. agreement in measuring valence frames) for our reliability assessment, since this section required cognitive evaluation from the raters. Ten randomly selected videos were coded by both raters. The value obtained yielded satisfactory results ($\alpha = 0.76$) according to Krippendorff’s (2004) criteria.

**Results of quantitative analysis**

**Video characteristics and producer demographics.** The average age of the users who created and shared videos about Islam was slightly older than we expected ($M = 30, SD = 10$). A gender bias was also observed within the sample; of those who reported their gender on their channel pages (68 percent of the users), 56 percent were male and 12 percent female. In terms of geographic span, there were videos in the sample by YouTubers from 26 different countries. These results correspond with the general view of YouTube as a Western phenomenon (31 percent of users were from the United States alone), although the appearance of countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan and even Iran (where access to YouTube is restricted) is notable. With reference to religion, of the 57 percent of producers whose religion was coded, 23 percent ($n = 27$) were Muslims and the rest, 34 percent ($n = 41$), adherents of other religions.

As expected, on average the videos posted on YouTube were short clips of an average duration of six minutes ($M = 5.7; SD = 4.4$). Although the content was diverse, this user-generated material could be divided by format into: short videos ($n = 59$) containing video footage, animation and/or photos (with or without music and/or a voice over);
presentations \((n = 36)\) – moving text in the style of a PowerPoint presentation; and vblogs \((n = 25)\) – a speech recorded on a webcam. All of the coded videos were uploaded by individual users and were not shared by broadcasting companies or other institutions. However, 30 percent of the videos in the sample used ‘second-hand’ material (footage from TV reports, documentaries, movies, etc.), while the great majority of the rest (70 percent) contained original, self-produced video content.

Valence framing. One of the core objectives of the study was to identify the prevalence of valence framing in the user-created videos about Islam on YouTube. As seen in Figure 1, all five indicators of valence framing were present in the overall majority of the coded videos. The variable emotional expression was identified in 83.3 percent of cases, rational argument in 70 percent, quotes in 48 percent and visual expression in 63 percent. The least utilized indicator was the use of positive or negative quotes, meaning that the YouTube material was often self-referential. The tone was coded in all cases, and the values were distributed as follows: very negative, 29 percent; negative, 18.3 percent; neutral, 7.6 percent; positive, 30.4 percent; and very positive, 14.7 percent.

In order to display the pattern of valence framing more visibly, the variables (emotional expression, visual expression, quotes, argumentation and tone) were re-coded into new categories. The cases where the evaluations were reported to be very negative or negative were coded as a negative frame, while those with positive or very positive evaluations were denoted as a positive frame. As seen in Figure 2, the overall tone of the videos in the sample was almost balanced (51 percent vs. 49 percent). When visual
expression was coded, 71 percent of the videos were positive toward Islam. However, the indicators of emotional expression, rational argument and quotes yielded more negative cases.

In order to establish patterns of relationships between variables, contingency tables were constructed by cross-tabulation and correlations were calculated for various combinations of variables. Video characteristics (number of comments, views) did not appear to be significantly correlated with the framing of Islam, either positively or negatively. The same was also true for the demographics of the producer, save in respect of religion.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of tone according to the producer’s religion revealed significant differences across the groups ($F(1/64) = 8.501$, $p = .005$). As expected, Muslim users were positive towards Islam ($M = 4.2, SD = .6, \text{min} = 3, \text{max} = 5$); those who were adherents to other religions tended to be more neutral ($M = 3.2, SD = 1.7, \text{min} = 1, \text{max} = 5$); whereas the third group (the producers who did not explicitly mention their religion on their channel pages) were the most negative ($M = 2.1, SD = 1.2$).

A two-way factorial analysis of variance was used to identify the main effect of being negative or positive towards Islam, as well as to determine whether there was an interaction effect between the producer’s religion and country. The results revealed that the main effect ($p < .001$) was the producer’s religion, rather than his or her country of residence ($p = .004$).

**Results of qualitative analysis**

Although the thematic spectrum of the videos was quite diverse, some topical patterns nevertheless occurred. The commonest category was educating/preaching Islam ($n = 20$),
whereby Islam was explained, preached or promoted as a religion. In terms of the target audience the clips could be divided into two groups: (1) those aimed at non-Muslims and (2) those intended for Muslims. The former usually explained the five pillars of Islam and verses from the Koran, or tried to refute the common negative stereotypes of the religion. The latter, on the other hand, often had the format of a public lecture and were generally recorded with an amateur camera (or with a mobile phone).

With 17 videos containing both attacking (61 percent) and critical (39 percent) material about Islam, anti-Islam was the second most common category. A video was considered to be attacking when it contained rude language, verbal abuse or other extremely radical (visual) expressions. For example, a vblog produced by 17-year-old student from the USA, entitled ‘Hit the Floor, Muslims’, was grouped under the attacking category. The producer recorded the following on his webcam: ‘this [protest against Muslims] is what fucking has to be done, and this shit [Islam] has to go down, to make this [sic] fucking criminal organizational assholes realize they can’t go along with this shit in my society’. In this category, some producers edited emotional photos, footages of protesting Muslims and images of terrorist attacks and presented these with verses taken from the Koran. For instance, a user from Canada in the video ‘Islam: Religion of Peace’ shows photos of soldiers holding guns, with the caption: ‘Slaughter and decapitate the unbelievers, Sura 4-47’. This was followed by another image of protesting Muslims (in London) with the text: ‘He [Mohammed] said: “fight them so that there is no more rebellion, and religion, all of it, for Allah only. Allah must have no rivals”’.

The next two categories practicing Islam (performing prayers or recitation of the Koran) and wars and conflicts (depicting military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and/or Palestine) were each identified in 16 videos. It should be mentioned that all the videos addressing conflicts in the Middle East or Afghanistan were positive toward Islam, while footage about the Balkan war framed it negatively. The overall sentiment expressed against war in Muslim countries was criticism of coalition forces or the Israeli army (in the case of Palestine). For example, a video ‘Tragedies: Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon (For Those Who Have Hearts)’, which was produced by a 31-year-old male from the USA, shows a mix of extremely emotional photos (without any reference to the context or source) of wounded and dead children, mourning parents, the aftermath of bomb attacks, a coalition soldier aiming a gun at a woman with children and explicit photos of detainee abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison. The video is very emotional and hard to watch. It ends with a photo of a mosque, which stands among ruins (apparently, it was taken after an earthquake), with the caption ‘Despite the earthquake the mosque stood still. So will Islam and Muslims despite injustice and tragedies’.

The fifth-largest topical group Islam in the media united the videos where the producers reacted, discussed or criticized Islam’s representation in the traditional, mainly broadcast, media: for example, videos in response to the controversial short film Fitna by the Dutch right-wing MP, Geert Wilders (Van Zoonen et al., 2011), or the cartoons of Prophet Mohammed in the Danish press. It thus appears that Internet users commonly utilize YouTube as a platform to react to, discuss or re-upload particular content that was earlier broadcast in the mainstream media.

Muslim women’s issues were another hot topic on YouTube and emerged as the sixth most common category (n = 11). There were two distinct ways of approaching this issue. The overall sentiment in these videos, which were critical and (or) negative towards
Islam, was that women in the Muslim world are ‘second-hand citizens’ (as one producer puts it); they are represented as victims of oppression, abuse and mistreatment who are deprived of their basic human rights. To illustrate, in a video entitled ‘Women of Islam’ the producer used emotional and disturbing photos with the following text: ‘everyday women are violently abused and/or killed in Islam … Everyday women are forced in Islam to wear [the] hijab. This is not [the] dark ages … Some Muslims think that Islam gives them [the] right to abuse women’. Often, in such (negative) videos, Islam (as a religion) is held responsible for ‘women’s oppression’. However, the videos that were positive toward Islam put women’s issues in a different perspective and were typically produced by Muslim women themselves. For example, in the video ‘Poor Oppressed Muslim Women’, a 19-year-old female from the USA asks viewers why Muslim women are thought to be oppressed when, in reality, they are not. She argues that it is the West that abuses women and ‘forces them to display their bodies’, while in Islam women benefit from respect and protection.

The final thematic category discussed is Islam and terrorism \((n = 8)\). Many Muslim users on YouTube express fear that terrorism is becoming associated with Islam, and they blame media bias for this stereotype. On the other hand, some users generalize and claim that all terrorists are Muslims and the Koran inspires their violent acts. For comparison purposes, stills relating to 9/11 from two different videos are presented (see Figures 3 and 4).

In the first case, the producer includes verses from the Koran ‘Those who follow him [Allah] are ruthless to the unbelievers’, while in the second, over an image of the burning World Trade Center, the producer accuses the (former) US president of staging the terrorist attack to justify the subsequent ‘war on terror’ (the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in particular). Here, the image has the text: ‘World Trade Center “Attack” exposed! Bush did it with bombs and planes’.
Valence visualization. The results of the qualitative data regarding the visualization of Islam revealed the prevalence of several reoccurring patterns that were used for communication about the religion in either a positive or a negative context. In Table 1 the most frequently used visual dichotomies, with some illustrative stills from the videos in the sample, are presented.

To summarize these findings, one can clearly see patterns of the visualization of Islam in either a positive or a negative context, with recurring visual signifiers. Images of terrorist attacks, the aftermath of bombings or the victims of such violent acts repeatedly appear in the negative videos, while material that is positive towards Islam often shows holy places, victims of war, Muslim women in a social context, or calligraphic writing of the words Allah and Mohammad in Arabic.

Study 2: Exploring producers: what motivates YouTubers to videoblog about Islam?

Following the analysis of YouTube videos, we conducted interviews with producers of videos on Islam. The second study focused on the question of why they created and shared videos on YouTube. This enabled us to gain an understanding of individual factors that may play a role in the production of user-generated content. The Uses and Gratifications perspective (Rubin, 1994; Ruggiero, 2000) provided the theory to guide our research into the producers’ motivations. The theory holds that individuals actively select and use media in order to gratify certain needs. In other words, motives are understood as common predispositions that determine people’s willingness to engage with media content (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Recently, Uses and Gratifications Theory has been applied to the most active form of media engagement: that is, the production of self-created media content (Daugherty et al., 2008; Shao, 2009).
Table 1  Identified visual dichotomies with selected stills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative towards Islam</th>
<th>Positive towards Islam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Koran depicted with guns or in the hands of soldiers/militants.</td>
<td>The Koran in the hands of children, believers, women, often on a background of flowers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footage/photos of terrorist attacks/bombings are often presented with captions holding Islam as a religion responsible for terrorism.</td>
<td>The holy places of Islam (for instance, Mecca or the Great Mosque) are often used in positive videos, accompanied with recitations of the Koran or prayers. Muslims praying or performing Salaat. Photos of veiled women, with(out) children, while working, playing sport or in a social environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footage/photos of Muslim demonstrations. Photos of veiled women from rural areas of Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan, depicting them as subjugated and ‘second-hand’ citizens.</td>
<td>Soldiers/militants (often from Palestine and Lebanon) depicted as Nazis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldiers of the Coalition army shown as crusaders/invaders/aggressors.</td>
<td>Photos of detainee abuse from the Abu Ghraib prison.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footage/photos of terrorists executing hostages.</td>
<td>Muslim children holding (toy) guns or photos of child soldiers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded or dead children (mainly from Iraq and Palestine) as victims of invasion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall the reasons for producing media are linked to motivations to ‘create’. Studies inquiring into the motives of Internet users to produce various types of user-generated content (Daugherty et al., 2008; Oreg and Nov, 2008; Shao, 2009; Trammell et al., 2006) have identified particular motivational factors, of which self-expression, social recognition, entertainment and information dissemination are arguably the most prominent.

Research design and data

Producers of videos from the first study were contacted through YouTube’s integrated emailing tool. In addition to the individual requests, a short video invitation was uploaded on the site.

An exploratory technique of qualitative interviewing (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) was used to assess the motives of YouTubers for creating videos about Islam. As a consequence of the international nature of the producers, an online process was considered to be the most efficient way for gathering data. Accordingly, 15 synchronous interviews were conducted using text-based instant messaging programs. The reason for choosing this type of interview was determined by its interactive character (Crichton and Kinash, 2003) and the semi-private nature of the conversation, which gives participants ‘contextual naturalness’ (Mann and Stewart, 2002).

A diverse group in terms of geographical composition, comprising highly-educated participants overall, with an average age of 30, was interviewed in the manner referred to above (for demographics, see Table 2). The interviews were guided by a topic list covering possible motivational factors, although respondents were permitted to discuss motives other than those that were predefined. As a consequence of this flexibility, a new factor communicating Islam emerged from the answers of the Muslim respondents. The original list, however, was developed on the basis of previous research about reasons for creating and publishing content (Nardi et al., 2004; Oreg and Nov, 2008).

Table 2. Demographic information of interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>College degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The analysis revealed three dominant motivational factors: communicating Islam, self-expression and social recognition. The factor communicating Islam emerged as a primary motivation among the Muslim producers. It is inherently linked to the topic under investigation and was not identified in previous research on user-generated content. A 29-year-old producer from Pakistan explained why he was driven by the desire to communicate Islam through videoblogging:

I use YouTube primarily to remove the misconceptions people have regarding Islam. I try to propagate Islam in its pristine form as opposed to what people (especially in the Western country) [sic] think … it to be, due to the influence of the biased media like Fox News and CNN … It is a platform where I can deliver the message of my religion from Pakistan all across the world.

Self-expression, on the other hand, transpired to be the most important driving force among the non-Muslim participants. All respondents agreed that they could express themselves more openly and freely on YouTube; they could also experiment with their look, appearance and style. These users defined creative self-expression as producing an interesting (creative) video about their thoughts/ideas. For example, a 20-year-old student from the UK said:

that’s very much how I would see it [YouTube as a platform for self-expression]. You get a much larger audience and also are able to communicate in a kind of creative way that isn’t as common to be able to do in real life.

It was another 20-year-old user from the UK who raised the interesting point referred to above, namely that he could express himself without social constraints on the platform. He said: ‘it is often said that we are very different people online than we are in the real world and I think to an extent that’s very true. Your opinions are expressed without any of the social conditions around them’. Our respondents’ need to express themselves was rather similar to self-expression as it was established in previous work on user-generated content (Daugherty et al., 2008; Shao, 2009). When it comes to social recognition, the desire to get more subscribers, attract more viewers, or become the most discussed and highly rated YouTuber was a feature in a third of the cases. However, it was striking that the majority of the respondents did not use this platform to maintain contact with their real-life friends. Indeed, they even tried to keep their online YouTube activity clearly separate from their offline life.

In addition, all the respondents were asked whether they discussed Islam offline, with half of them admitting that they did not. The lack of contact with people of other beliefs was mentioned as a reason for this. For instance, a student from Egypt said: ‘No, I do not engage because I do not have contact with them [non-Muslims].’ Some users accentuated the social constraints that exist in the real world as a reason for not engaging in public discussions about Islam. For example, one of the producers of anti-Islam videos explained that although he had contact with Muslims, he never discussed Islam with them: ‘they [my Muslim acquaintances] DON’T know about my channel. I like Muslims that I meet, as a group. But the relationship would only become sour if they knew I disagree with their religion.’
Discussion and conclusion

The two interrelated studies explored Islam on YouTube from two complementary angles, first, analyzing content of user-created videos and looking for positive and negative framing, and, second, interviewing producers to reveal their motivation for creating and sharing such content. The first study was guided by the assumption that valence framing towards Islam is prevalent in self-produced videos posted on YouTube. The results revealed that in the overall majority of the videos in our sample, Islam is presented and evaluated in either negative or positive terms.

However, in contrast to previous research (Karim, 2006; Poole, 2000, 2002, 2006; Richardson, 2006), where coverage of Islam in the mainstream media is reported to be negative overall, the present study does not provide empirical evidence to support such a generalization. By a very small margin (51 percent negative vs. 49 percent positive), the overall tone of the videos was found to be balanced, rather than negative. The existence of ample educational and promotional videos about Islam, which emerged as the largest thematic category among the coded contributions, can be regarded as accounting for this balance.

Unsurprisingly, videos aiming to refute stereotypes about Islam, promote its religious merits, and explain its teachings are produced almost exclusively by Muslim users. This is further supported by findings of the second study, which found that the primarily motivation for videoblogging about Islam among Muslim participants was to communicate their views on Islam. We interpreted this result as being indicative of the fact that the activity of the Muslim YouTubers positively affected the balanced representation of the religion.

Moreover, one could generalize and state that in terms of the under-representation of Muslim sources in the Western mainstream media (Richardson, 2006), YouTube offers them a revitalized ‘public sphere’ in which to present their own perspective and interpretation of events. This argument is in line with Anderson’s (2003) conclusion, which emphasizes that the Internet has allowed Muslim individuals, who are dispersed in different states, to create and expand their own public sphere. The emerging picture, then, is one of a generally balanced representation of Islam on YouTube.

Nonetheless, the existence of very negative videos, including attacking content, cannot be overlooked. In negative videos, Islam is often framed as a violent religion inciting terrorism, and espousing values incompatible with Western culture. To understand the context it is helpful to refer to the models given by Shadid and Van Koningsveld (2002). The negative sentiments expressed in the anti-Islam videos can be related to two models in particular: the clash of civilizations model and the rise of political Islam model. Our results are in line with earlier studies documenting the fact that the recent actions of Islamist radicals have contributed to the association of Islam with terrorism (Mohammad, 1999; Norris and Inglehart, 2003; Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira, 2008).

However, when making inferences from our results, it is very important to differentiate between those producers who explicitly held Islam as a religion to be responsible for terrorist acts, and those who contested such simplification. Producers often compile various emotional photos of the aftermath of bombings, or add a particular title or verses from the Koran, and thus manifest their own position. The titles, for instance, ‘What Muslims did’ and ‘What Muslims did NOT do’ over a collage of 9/11 photos are vivid examples of such contrasting framing.
In addition, videos that are negative toward Islam often addressed issues like the status of women and homosexuals in Muslim societies, Sharia law or the dress code. The practice of veiling turned out to be a hot topic. Muslim women wearing a hijab in the negative videos were framed as victimized, oppressed, poor and uneducated, whereas the positive material showed them in a social context, while performing their duties at work or being engaged in sport (e.g. photos of women in the hijab playing tennis, basketball or windsurfing). Veiling is often emphasized as a symbol of women’s oppression by those on one side of the argument, while conversely it is held up as a symbol of respect, purity and a woman’s personal choice by the other.

YouTube, unlike the mainstream media, is far less restricted in terms of political, social or ethical constraints. Whereas in the traditional media we can talk about implicit meanings or biases, in YouTube videos the message is generally conveyed directly, explicitly and emotionally. Moreover, the so-called ‘hating behavior’ of some YouTubers, as documented by Lange (2007), is a common practice on the platform. Some users do engage in flaming and ‘hating’ by making rude comments and producing attacking videos filled with verbal abuse. However, these so-called ‘haters’ comprised only a small group of the YouTubers in our sample, and their negative interpretations of Islam were often contested by videos produced by Muslim users communicating an opposite perspective.

When it comes to the visualization of Islam, it should be noted that videos on YouTube are more emotional and explicit than footages in the mainstream media. Images that would be inappropriate to be broadcast on television repeatedly appear in user-created content. Photos of victims of war or terrorism, wounded or dead children or oppressed women are often used to exacerbate the emotional side of a story. Some of the material is so explicit that it is published with a content disclaimer, warning that the images may not be suitable for minors. The most shocking images are often replicated in different videos. Since it is technically possible to download a YouTube video, for some producers the clips and imagery found there serve as material to create their own content.

Various patterns of visualizing Islam were identified and dichotomous visual signifiers distinguished. Whereas some images are exclusively used in a negative or a positive context, some material appears in both contexts. For example, Hezbollah militants in some anti-Islam videos were portrayed as extremists/terrorists, whereas in the positive content they were heroes. Likewise, soldiers of the coalition forces were referred to as crusaders, evoking what Shadid and Van Koningsveld (2002) discuss in the model of changing power relations as the atavistic memory of the historical rivalry between the Islamic and the Judeo-Christian world. In addition the attribution of several inherently valenced visual signifiers, such as the swastika, was documented repeatedly. Whereas in one video a swastika was placed on the flag of Israel (instead of the Star of David), in another it appeared on a photo of Iran’s current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In sum, our analysis of video content and the interviews with producers showed the proliferation of diverse, opposing and even radically contrasting opinions about Islam on YouTube, with some individuals expressing the most straightforward stereotypes and prejudices about Muslims, others criticizing the religion constructively and engaging in discussion, and still others trying to explain, advocate and promote Islam. In order to assess the results, it should be taken into account that our study was limited with respect to sampling and scale. The limitation with respect to sampling videos on YouTube is not.
caused by the obscurity of YouTube’s search options. Over the past few years YouTube has frequently modified how searched videos are retrieved. For example, when we gathered our data it was possible to filter videos based on their location of uploading, giving researchers additional control over the retrieved material. However, this option was later revoked. Similarly, the procedure of rating videos was changed in March 2010, from a five-star system to binary codes of like or dislike. Currently, the default mode to display results is according to the videos’ relevance. However, YouTube does not provide any information on how relevance is determined. The quality of future research on YouTube would improve considerably if Google becomes more transparent about the (search) protocols employed on YouTube (Van Dijck, 2009). The second limitation of our study was obviously its scale. The results of this systematic exploration warrant a follow-up study covering a larger number of videos from a longer period. The balanced results with respect to framing Islam also invite a study of the representation of Christianity on YouTube. A comparative study would enable us to contrast the framing of both world religions on YouTube and allow us to draw conclusions regarding the state of religious videoblogging on this popular platform.

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**Notes**

1. Thirty-two users were from the USA, 15 from the UK, nine from Canada, five each from Pakistan and Egypt, four each from Australia, Norway and the United Arab Emirates, three from Germany and the Netherlands, two from Brazil, Denmark and India, and one each from Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Finland, France, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Malaysia, New Zealand and Oman (the country was not reported in 17 cases).
2. In the variable country, a distinction was made between Muslim and non-Muslim countries. A country was regarded as Muslim where Islam is a state religion or a Muslim population comprises the majority.
3. The remaining topics were: anti-American/anti-Israel videos (four); defending (advocating) Islam (four); comparison of Islam and Nazism (three); Islam and homosexuality (two); American presidential election, referring to Obama as being allegedly a Muslim (one); slavery in the medieval Arab Empire (one); exorcism in Islam (one); prophecies about Jerusalem from the Bible and Sufism (one).

**References**

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