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Incubating Hate:
Islamophobia and Gab

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SUMMARY

Islamophobia has become a digital rallying cry for white supremacists and other extremists online. Xenophobic, derisive, and disinformative content appears with regularity in conversations about Islam on the fringe social media site Gab – a platform that bills itself as "the free speech social network" but that researchers argue features high levels of hate and conspiracy in comparison to Twitter, which it is modeled upon (Zannettou et al., 2018). We provide an overview of Islamophobia online, detailing prior research that describes the integral role that sites like Gab, 8Chan and Voat play in spreading harmful and defamatory content to larger publics on Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter. Then, in collaboration with the social media analytics firm Graphika, we describe results from a quantitative analysis of Gab. Pulling from the complete database of all Gab messages assembled by Pushshift.io, we focus in on four months of data from the Summer and Fall of 2018. We then search the set for Islam-relevant hashtags, derogatory terms, and the names of Muslim U.S. political candidates who ran in 2018 – in the end compiling a set of 188,763 posts. We find that a significant proportion of the material about Islam and Muslims is derogatory.

The most cited URL in our dataset is YouTube.com. Users on Gab consistently link to YouTube in order to share conspiratorial and disinformative videos on the platform. Qualitative analyses of the top 100 linked YouTube videos reveals that many contain graphic and patently false rumors about Islam and topics like pedophilia and violence. Twitter is the second most cited URL in the dataset, suggesting that Gab users also use this larger micro-blogging platform for reference in anti-Islam conversations.

After YouTube and Twitter, the websites most linked to in the dataset are: jihadwatch.org, breitbart.com, barenakenislam.com, gellerreport.com, creepingsharia.wordpress.com, kek.gg, voiceofeurope.com, dailymail.co.uk, bitchute.com, gab.ai/.com, infowars.com, foxnews.com, and streetnews.one.Two of the top ten most cited URLs in the set are jihadwatch.org and gellerreport.com (3rd and 6th most cited, respectively), sites linked to active anti-Muslim hate groups documented by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015). Jihad Watch is run by Richard Spencer. The Geller Report is run by Pamela Geller. The two are

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Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative
the co-founders of Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA). Two of the other top ten most cited URLs in the dataset, barenakedislam.com and infowars.com (5th and 13th most cited, respectively), have been categorized by Stanford researchers as clear purveyors of disinformation (Allcott et al., 2018).

We believe that fringe platforms including Gab are important to watch as they will likely to be instrumental to the spread of Islamophobia online, and to the ecosystem of political divisiveness and manipulation more broadly. The content on fringe sites often serves as a harbinger, a signal of what is to come, for problematic and divisive communication across mainstream social media platforms. As we continue to grapple with the effects of disinformation in our democracy and another Presidential election approaches in 2020, researchers, civil society groups, and others should watch content on Gab to help generate early warnings for forthcoming "information operations" and computational propaganda campaigns that may migrate to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

This paper contains several key findings:

- Four of the ten most cited domains in our Gab dataset of Muslim-related content contain links to anti-Muslim hate-groups or sites that have documented records of disseminating disinformation.

- A quarter of users in the dataset use terms coded as derogatory. Additional initial qualitative analysis of the dataset reveals that even when messages in this set don't make use of specific derogatory terms, instead referring simply to "Muslim" or "Islam," they nonetheless tend toward defamation and demonization of this community.

- The second most used hashtag in the dataset was *#BanIslam*.

- YouTube is a key node in the promotion of conspiratorial, Islamophobic disinformation on Gab. The most frequently cited domain in the Gab dataset was YouTube. Twitter is the second most cited domain in our dataset – suggesting a connection between discussions of Islamophobia on Gab and use of larger social media platforms like YouTube and Twitter as resources and references.

- The 15th most cited domain in the Gab dataset, streetnews.one, was a sensationalist website active only in the months leading up to the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. Qualitative assessment of the behavior of the Gab profiles spreading links to the site suggest that they made use of promotional automation. It is possible that this could be an example of a targeted information campaign during the election.

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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE U.S.

In 1765, a law student in Williamsburg, Virginia named Thomas Jefferson purchased a copy of the Quran. Years later, as a founding father of the United States, Jefferson authored the *Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom* with the stated goal of preserving the right to worship for "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan" (Manseau, 2018). As Jefferson wrote, "[I]t does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." (Spellberg, 2013, p.213) However, this conception of Muslims as potential American citizens remained, for the founding generation, just that: a *concept*, not a practical reality. Although many African slaves in the United States were Muslim, their voices are not represented in these early accounts of Islam in America.

Jefferson likely could not have imagined the sight that greeted witnesses in the Capitol rotunda early in 2007: Representative Keith Ellison, a descendant of slaves and a Muslim-American, was sworn into office on Jefferson's very own Quran (Karas, 2019). But despite the progress made by Ellison and others like him, there remains a separation between Jefferson's idealized concept of religious freedom and lived reality in the United States. Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, anti-Muslim sentiment has been persistent. It reached one peak in the aftermath of the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, and it became an outright emergency in the years following 9/11, as hate crimes against Muslims in the United States spiked. Today, the United States is experiencing another spike (FBI, 2016; Siddiqui, 2016).

With the rapid growth of social media, anti-Muslim conspiracy theories and memes have been widely shared through mainstream platforms like Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook. Because of this, these platforms have established increasingly strict guidelines against white supremacist speech. Smaller, more "fringe" platforms such as Gab provide a haven for those seeking to attack and defame Muslims and other religious groups.

The smaller websites have become central communication platform for extremist communities. However, the most extreme and violent users from mainstream social media platforms do not simply leave the Twitters and Facebooks of the world for Gab or 8chan wholesale. As the social media intelligence organization Storyful points out, content that begins on sites like 4Chan, Voat and Gab "first [has] to creep into larger communities like Reddit forums and gain traction on a

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

popular, algorithmic platform like Twitter before drawing attention from newspapers and broadcast television" (Gonimah, 2018). Analysis from Storyful and other research outlets makes it clear that disinformation and hate that begins on these types of fringe platforms does often "migrate" to more mainstream ones. Storyful provides the April 2018 example of a hashtag and widely circulated piece of disinformation about fake Starbucks coupons for African Americans that began spreading in the wake of an incident in which two African American men were wrongly arrested in a Starbucks store in March year. Conservative pundits Laura Ingraham and Ann Coulter then referenced the fake coupon on Twitter. But according to Storyful:

> The fake coupon, which originated on 4chan's Politically Incorrect message board, was amplified in a coordinated disinformation campaign stemming from the fringes. The campaign, dubbed "Operation Mermaid," first appeared on Voat, a "no censorship" alternative to Reddit. Another person in the same Voat thread shared images of the fliers printed out and claimed they placed them inside Starbucks stores in Philadelphia (Gonimah, 2018).

After the hoax began on Voat, it quickly spread to mainstream social media platforms and to influential users like Ingraham and Coulter. It also allegedly spread offline. There are many examples of hateful and distorted content that is incubated on Gab, 8chan, and Voat surfacing back onto mainstream platforms, sometimes circulated by different users – or even by "de-platformed" (suspended or blocked) users deploying other identities. In the aftermath of the Christchurch shootings, for instance, the shooter's manifesto was originally posted to 8chan, but then rapidly circulated among users on Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter (Timberg et al., 2019). *Buzzfeed News* published a timeline illustrating how disinformation blaming Muslims for the Notre Dame fire spread from fringe outlets (Lytvynenko & Silverman, 2019).

High-level American politicians at times act as "influencers" spreading Islamophobia on and offline: President Trump has even retweeted known far-right figures (Weaver, Booth, & Jacobs, 2017). The group Muslim Advocates identified no less than 80 anti-Muslim ad campaigns during the 2018 midterm elections. Many of them were based on false claims, such as the disinformation campaign perpetrated by California congressman Duncan Hunter against his rival Ammar Campa-Najjar which alleged that Campa-Najjar had ties to terrorism (Muslim Advocates, 2018; Lartey, 2018). Researchers have found that when mis- and dis- information is spread by politicians, it is subject to less vetting and enforcement from social media platforms because they often label it as having high "newsworthiness" (Kadri & Klonic, 2019).

RESEARCH ON DIGITAL ISLAMOPHOBIA

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

There is existing research that can help us make sense of the changing climate around Islamophobia onlineand help us to come to informed hypotheses about the way in which Islamophobia might be deployed online as a political tactic during elections in 2020 and beyond.

Discourse targeting Muslims is often inserted into a larger anti-immigration nationalist political debate. For example, anti-refugee sentiment became entangled with Islamophobic ideas and disinformation in Europe during the runup to and aftermath of the Brexit Referendum and in the U.S. during the 2016 election (Evolvi, 2019; Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018, p. 105).

This kind of incendiary and divisive content is promoted by both foreign state and domestic actors. State-run operations including Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) have used Islamophobia to generate political polarization in both the U.S. and in the European Union and UK (Hope not Hate 2018; Howard et al., 2018). The 2016 election was a wakeup call for Facebook and Twitter for the need to investigate this so-called "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (CIB) by foreign actors (Facebook, 2018; Roth, 2019). Despite the focus on how bots and foreign actors interfered with the flow of information throughout the U.S. 2016 elections, a good deal of Islamaphobic content seems to be spread as well by actual people living in the United States (Pakzad & Salehi, 2019).

Many have described how these computational propaganda practices can be easily replicated by far-right groups *domestically* (Apuzzo & Satariano, 2019). Indeed, a recent study showed that similar "inauthentic" practices were leveraged by radical evangelical Christians (the Kullberg network) on Facebook. In this case, a network of Facebook pages was repurposed to spread conspiracies and Islamophobic bias (Kasprak, 2019). Facebook and other mainstream platforms do indeed work to mitigate the effects of coordinated inauthentic behavior domestically, but the rise of domestic computational propaganda and domestic digital hate seems to have received less public attention than, say, investigations into Russian interference online. Domestic extremism, particularly in the form of white nationalism, has recently spurred new policies and questions about terms of service at both Facebook and Twitter (Koebler & Cox, 2019).

Newer, smaller social media platforms (including Gab, Voat, 8Chan, and 4Chan's /pol forum) have helped anti-Muslim groups to form social bonds, generate new content, and coordinate their activities. These groups spread their messages by manipulating the ranking algorithms of more mainstream platforms (Daniels, 2018). "Algorithms speed up the spread of white supremacist ideology," writes Professor Jessie Daniels, "as when memes like 'Pepe the Frog' travel from 4chan or Reddit to mainstream news sites."

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

Muslim Americans themselves have tried to take control of the narratives on social media using "counter-narratives" to disentangle and diffuse digital Islamophobia through humor and creative content creation. Such initiatives have either poked fun at anti-Muslim sentiment or engaged in storytelling and voter education. They have made use of hashtags including: #MuslimsAreSpeakingOut, #MuslimsReportStuff, #CanYouHearUsNow, #Islamophobin (Khamis, 2018; Foran, 2016). These efforts are often aimed at people who might be vulnerable to anti-Muslim rhetoric because they would otherwise lack access to quality counter-narratives in their regular social media feeds.

There is a great deal of work to be done on how increasingly popular "closed" platforms like WeChat, WhatsApp, and Telegram are used to spread Islamophobia and other forms of hate. These platforms are difficult to study because they are structured around private chat groups rather than public feeds. According to early research from Columbia's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, mis- and dis- informative content involving keywords such as "Muslim," "Islam," and "Terrorism" topped communications among Chinese American users of WeChat (Zhang, 2018). In another example from India's recent election, almost 24% of the content disseminated among India's Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) WhatsApp groups were Islamophobic, aiming to amplify hate and division between Hindus and Muslims (Basu, 2019).

ISLAMOPHOBIA ON GAB: JULY-OCTOBER 2018

For our quantitative analysis of Gab data, we used the Gab archive of Pushshift.io, which consists of over two years' worth of Gab data spanning from August 10, 2016 to October 29, 2018 and represents the bulk of activity that has taken place on the platform historically (Gab was launched in private beta in September 2016 and publicly in May of 2017). In an effort to understand and analyze the conversations about Muslims and Islam before a major election in the United States we zoomed in on four months of data within this larger dataset. Specifically, we focused on the four months that preceded the 2018 midterm elections in the United States. We assembled a subset of relevant Gab data relating to discussion of Islam and Muslims spanning these months. From the larger set of over 10 million Gab posts spanning from July-October 2018, we extracted 188,763 posts that contained at least one of a list of 123 keywords relating to Islam. The dataset contained 12,590 users, which represents 8.8% of all users active on Gab in this same timeframe[1].

Our keyword list consisted of three categories of keywords:

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[1] This estimation is based on the total number of users found in the Pushshift.io archive in this time frame, which was 143,053 users.

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

- General keywords**:** We assembled a list of twelve general keywords relevant to Islam and Muslims. Examples include: *Muslim, islam, sharia, cair,* etc.
- Derogatory keywords: We compiled 30 derogatory slurs referring to Islam and Muslims. For this and the general keywords section, we followed antecedents established by Pakzad and Salehi (2019), using the same list that the authors themselves used in their study of Islamophobic rhetoric in the U.S. 2018 midterm elections.
- Candidate keywords: Finally, we compiled a list of all 37 Muslim Americans who ran for office at the state and federal level in the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. This list was compiled from multiple sources, including lists from Voice of America and CAIR (McCaw et al., 2018; McKitterick, 2018).

These three categories gave us 75 base keyword terms to search for. For bigram keywords in the set (keywords composed of more than one word, such as "*Muslim ban*" or "*Keith Ellison*"), we also included variant spellings of the keyword that had no space character between the two words (e.g. *muslimban* and *keithellison*), with hopes of capturing slang usage common to the Internet (in the form of hashtags, for instance). Including the alternate spellings of our base keywords left us with a final list of 123 Islam-relevant keywords.

Out of our 123 keywords, 69 were used in our dataset. This keyword-containing dataset can be expected to represent most conversation around Muslims and Islam in general, including those that are derogatory, on the platform. This subset of keyword-containing Gab data consists of 188,763 total posts and contains 12,590 unique users; 11,380 unique hashtags and 37,896 unique URLs.

Our exploration of data leading up to the 2018 U.S. midterm elections showed clear evidence of both derogatory and highly inflamatory content and the role of domains and outlets known to spread disinformation in discussions around Islam and Muslims on Gab. We will examine both sequentially below.

Top Hashtags:

The top hashtags in the set of Gab posts we extracted showed several popular hashtags criticizing Islam. *#BanIslam* was the second most popular hashtag in the set, behind *#Islam* the top 20 also *included #shariakills, #muslim(s), #terrorism, #muslimsaretheenemy and #expelallmuslims.*

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The wordcloud above represents the most frequent hashtags in our dataset of 188,763 Gab posts discussing Islam from July-October 2018. The top five most frequent hashtags in this set were #islam, #banislam, #bansharia, #q, and #shariakills.

Derogatory Content:

As alluded to in our methodology description above, our team compiled a list of 30 derogatory terms referring to Islam and Muslims, following the methodological antecedents of Pakzad and Salehi (2019). A table containing the number of terms in each category, the terms' raw frequency count in the dataset, and number of posts containing at least one keyword in the relevant keyword category follows below:

Keyword Category	Total number of Keywords in Category	Raw Frequency in Dataset	Number of Posts Containing Keyword in Dataset
General	12	240,445	193,539
Derogatory	34	20,772	18,531
Candidate Name	77	6,007	5,672

In the period from July-October 2018, 27% (3,417/12,590) of Gab users posts using our keywords were derogatory. Put another way, over a quarter of the users in our dataset of Islam-specific Gab messages make use of derogatory keywords. Initial qualitative analysis of the dataset reveals that even when messages in this set don't make use of specific derogatory terms, instead referring simply to "Muslim" or "Islam," they are often defamatory and demonizing. For example, a message from one user reads:

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

> "Why do the French Canadians Swedes and the Germans continue to accept the muslims when the muslims refuse to accept them? Mosques are hotbeds of caliphate propaganda weapons transfers & human trafficking. The French Canadians Democrats deny all that in spite of the volumes of evidence of jihadi strategy of spreading Islamic mental illness."

Domain Analysis:

To understand the interaction between Gab and other outlets in spreading disinformation and Islamophobia, our team first examined all domains cited within our dataset of over 188,000 posts containing Islam-relevant keywords. The top 15 most highly cited domains in this set follow below.

Domain	Citation Count (in 188,763 posts)
youtube.com / youtu.be	13751
twitter.com	10206
jihadwatch.org *	4083
breitbart.com	2091
barenakedislam.com **	2010
gellerreport.com *	1955
creepingsharia.wordpress.com	1782
kek.gg	1528
voiceofeurope.com	1510
dailymail.co.uk	1112
bitchute.com	1108
gab.ai / gab.com	958
infowars.com **	911
foxnews.com	829
streetnews.one	722

The table above displays the 15 most frequently cited domains in 188,763 Gab posts containing Islam-relevant keywords in the four months preceding the 2018 U.S. Midterms, along with their

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

citation count. One asterisk (*) denotes that an outlet has significant ties to organizations designated as anti-Muslim hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Two asterisks (**) denotes that the outlet is on the list of disinformation domains compiled by Stanford researchers Allcott, Gentzkow and Yu (2018).

Of the top 15 cited domains, at least two have links to active anti-Muslim hate groups documented by SPLC (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015, n.d.). Jihad Watch and the Geller Report are run by Robert Spencer and Pamela Geller, respectively. Spencer and Geller are the co-founders of Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA). Spencer's writings were referenced several times in the manifesto written by Anders Breivik, a Norwegiean far-right terrorist motivated by Islamophobia who killed 76 people in July 2011 (Shane, 2011). As FiveThirtyEight pointed out in 2015, a small number of individuals drive the anti-Islam movement in the United States, and Spencer and Geller are at the vanguard (Libresco, 2015). SPLC designates Jihad Watch, Spencer and Geller's SIOA, and Geller's American Freedom Defense Initiative as "anti-Muslim" hate groups active in the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.; Steiback, 2011). *Barenakedislam.com* was also categorized as a disinformation outlet in a previous study from Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research (Allcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2018).

Overlap with disinformation domains

To analyze disinformation domains in this set, we followed the precedent set by Kumleben (2019), who used a list of 677 domains known to disseminate disinformation in the United States originally compiled by Stanford researchers Allcott, Gentzkow and Yu (Allcott et al., 2018; Kumleben, 2019).[2] These sites were compiled from five separate sources, including two academic papers, several articles from BuzzFeed, and lists compiled by FactCheck.org and PolitiFact (Gillin, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018; Schaedel, 2017; Silverman, 2016; Silverman, Lytvynenko, & Pham, 2017; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016).

This approach allows us at a glance to understand the prominence of unreliable sourcing on Gab through the lens of citations of domains known to have disseminated disinformation in the past. However, this approach does have some limitations. While the list of domains has been vetted by experts in academia and journalism, the time-intensive compilation and verification process necessarily precludes inclusion of more recently created disinformation domains. Additionally, it is of course to be understood that the list is not comprehensive, and that not every single story published by these domains is false. Conversely, false information emanating

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[2] The list of these URLs is available at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1OW8qg_ PqOzaclNXeZMVJXfKhx86UzbuCa8jQEEuOqQQ/edit#gid=0

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

from domains that are not traditionally conceived of as "publishers" or news organizations, such as YouTube, are also not taken into account. While cognizant of these limitations, our team nevertheless believes the insight yielded by this methodology is one reliable barometer to better understand the circulation of false information in a given online conversation.

We found that 82 unique domains cited within our own dataset were also in the list of above-mentioned disinformation domains. Those 82 domains represented 9% (7,071/77,858) of total domain citations in our dataset. Due to the fact that our data was gathered from a period during and after the Stanford study it is possible that some new disinformation domains (i.e. streetnews.one) were not counted among the number of total disinformation-related domains in the dataset. Moreover, other top domains in our dataset best categorized as right-wing or "partisan mainstream" media outlets (i.e. breitbart.com, dailymail.co.uk and foxnews.com) were not categorized by the Stanford team as clear disinformation sites but are known for disseminating polarizing political content (Faris et al., 2017).

URL Citations

The top two most frequently cited domains in this set are other social media platforms – YouTube and Twitter. To examine the role these platforms played on discussions of Islam on Gab during this timeframe, our team examined video titles for YouTube URLs that occurred within the top 100 most frequently cited URLs in this set. Of the 28 videos in this set, 9 were unavailable at the time of analysis, 4 of which were unavailable since the associated YouTube accounts hosting the videos had been "terminated,", the platform's version of [suspension for violation](#) of Community Guidelines and/or Terms of Service. As the titles below show, several of these videos promote links between pedophilia and Islam. [One of the videos](#), the 55th most frequently cited URL in our dataset, claims that "*Child rape and child marriage [are] a core plank of Islam.*"

URL	Citation Count	Video Title
http://youtu.be/aAyxyItCcbg	655	"A Time For Choosing" -Tribute to the U.S.A HD"
http://youtu.be/je-ViSR0Cbo	294	The Democratic Play Book Vol. #1 The "Wrap Smear"'

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

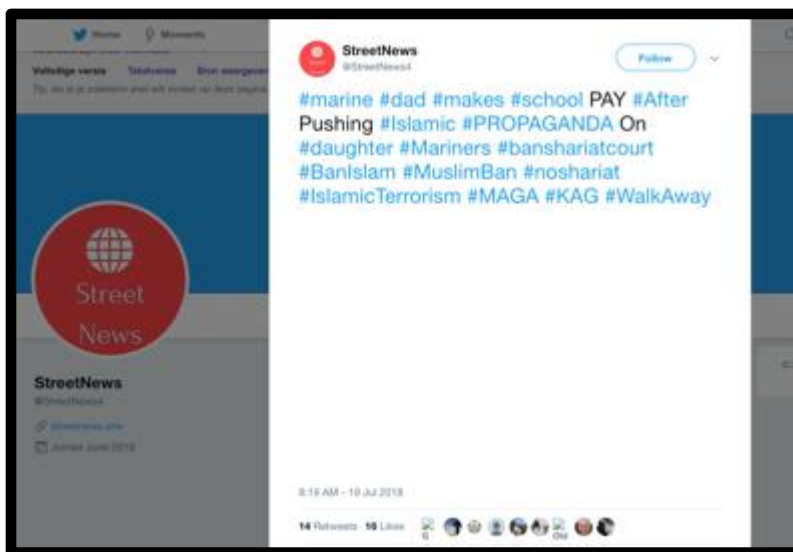|		
http://youtu.be/x4NR6e5JZp8	202	Video Unavailable
http://youtu.be/d_lKajUJrAo	202	"5 Dark Dirty SECRETS of Catholic Church EXPOSED"
http://youtu.be/0YrGQt89DAo	202	"Jewish Pedophile Ring In Israel, MK Ultra, Legal Kidnapping W/Candy. #TheGoyimKnow"
http://youtu.be/0dXD2H0m74g	201	"Top Illuminati Grand Wizard: "We Control Islam and We'll Use It to Destroy the West." (WW3)"
http://youtu.be/V7wGRVAYazM	199	"Qanon August 27 - We Don't Say His Name"
http://youtu.be/g4Z8oCLGMcw	179	"George Soros-New World Order"
fdomai	173	"Brigitte Gabriel's Thoughts on the Kavanaugh Smear Campaign"
http://youtu.be/wO9m6OstwNo	126	Video Unavailable
http://youtu.be/ElM597LzxB8	126	"The Age of Aisha - Mohammed's Child Bride (Pedophilia in Islam)"
http://youtu.be/GiuFzpI28io	119	"Ronald Regan Patriotic Speech"
http://youtu.be/L0EzSIJU9oQ	109	"Using the Refugee Migration Crisis to Build the New World Order"
http://youtu.be/cssfD0KlHxA	109	"Video unavailable This video is no longer available because the YouTube account associated with this video has been terminated."
http://youtu.be/b9nfhwAqrv4	109	Video Unavailable

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

http://youtu.be/RLOqz_izSho	106	"3,000 Muslim Mosques - 35 Jihadi Terrorist Cell's "Camps" in America!"
http://youtu.be/UZPCp8SPfOM	102	"Joe Rogan Experience #911 - Alex Jones & Eddie Bravo"
http://youtube.com/watch?v=j_3msrjjudc	86	"Video Unavailable"
http://youtu.be/s1vm7CVe6t0	82	"Ann Barnhardt Man Boy pedophilia A near universal Muslim phenomenon"
http://youtu.be/-W7FFs8nKUU	76	"Video unavailable This video is no longer available because the YouTube account associated with this video has been terminated."
http://youtu.be/Dmt-jdgmsew	74	"THE PROJECT -- PART 2"
http://youtube.com/watch?v=prw6a4mr76s	73	Video unavailable
http://youtu.be/ko0a6DGZ9YU	63	"Video unavailable. This video is no longer available because the YouTube account associated with this video has been terminated."
http://youtu.be/C8sWK2fp3DM	58	"SHARIA LAW IN dearborn michigan"
http://youtu.be/7yBVmvpczPl	57	"MIDTERMS PROPHECY: TRUMP WINS in BIBLICAL SCOPE (2018)"
http://youtu.be/cAcnOcGOJbY	45	"Bill Warner PhD: Forbidden to be Afraid"
http://youtu.be/AAnKJ8y9ZNY	35	"Police Won't Investigate Death Threats Because Victim Criticized Islam"

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

http://youtu.be/HuQNWthR5Co	34	"Video unavailable This video is no longer available because the YouTube account associated with this video has been terminated."

Suspicious highly cited domain

The 15th most widely cited domain in this dataset, *streetnews.one* (with 742 citations), is dubious on several accounts. It appears to have been specifically designed for spreading sensationalist news and disinformation in the months preceding the election. The site, privately registered in March of 2018, shows signs of activity on both Twitter (from April to September 2018) and Gab (during all four observed months in 2018). While the site is currently offline, the Wayback Machine, a free online archiving service, has several copies of the site available from 2018 at https://web.archive.org/web/*/streetnews.one – the most recent being from August 2018. A Twitter account found in the source code of an archived version of the site from August 2018, @StreetNews4, has been suspended. Archives of the Twitter handle show that streetnews.one was linked in the account's bio, and that it promoted anti-Islam hashtags such as *#BanIslam* and *#MuslimBan* (see photo below).

Screenshot of an archived Google cache of the now suspended Twitter handle @StreetNews4. This handle promoted the website streetnews[.]one, which distributed news portraying Muslims in a negative light in the months preceding the 2018 midterms.

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

An investigation of what remains of the site's articles in caches and archives show a penchant for reporting on controversies that paint Muslims in a negative light. An examination of article titles from the top 10 most frequently cited streetnews[.]one URLs in our dataset indicate with high probability that the site was, at least in part, focused on spreading controversial news on the topic of Muslims and Islam. No articles available from the site show a named author, and several articles have been recycled from other news outlets without explicit credit given. (Take for example, an article entitled *"Muslim rapes his daughter as punishment because she had become 'too Westernized' living in Norway,"* which originally appeared in Daily Mail, or another article, *"Trump supporters are willing to suspend democracy – if it means keeping other races down,"* originally in the Daily Kos.)

The site appears to have recycled at least one demonstrably false story from another outlet in May 2018. As of May 21, 2019, Google's search engine still shows the site as having run a story on May 27th, 2018 with the same title and leading text as one that originated on madworldnews.com on August 11, 2017 (archive). Madworldnews.com is one of the domains that is on the aforementioned Stanford researchers' list of disinformation domains (Allcott et al., 2018). The false story claims that a group of Muslim teens in Morocco contracted rabies after taking turns sexually abusing a donkey. Though the story was picked up by mainstream media in Morocco, it was quickly debunked by a Moroccan news outfit, LeDesk, on August 27, 2017 (Filali, 2017). According to Google's remaining search results for streetnews[.]one, the site ran the same story exactly 9 months later, on May 27, 2018, after it had been thoroughly debunked.

URL	Citation Count	Article Name in URL
http://streetnews.one/german-school-tells-christian-girls-to-dress-in-muslim-clothes-to-avoid-bullying/	49	german-school-tells-christian-girls-to-dress-in-muslim-clothes-to-avoid-bullying/
http://streetnews.one/muslim-refugee-beat-western-wife-with-hammers-upon-seeing-what-she-forgot/	48	muslim-refugee-beat-western-wife-with-hammers-upon-seeing-what-she-forgot/
http://streetnews.one/horror-islamists-slaughter-	48	horror-islamists-slaughter-thousands-of-innocent-dogs-using-brutally-sick-weapon/

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

thousands-of-innocent-dogs-using-brutally-sick-weapon/		
http://streetnews.one/watch-rivers-of-blood-fill-streets-as-muslims-celebrate-eid-al-adha/	47	watch-rivers-of-blood-fill-streets-as-muslims-celebrate-eid-al-adha/
http://streetnews.one/are-you-ok-with-a-muslim-judge-being-sworn-in-with-a-koran/	46	are-you-ok-with-a-muslim-judge-being-sworn-in-with-a-koran/
http://streetnews.one/somalian-dem-representative-in-minnesota-violated-house-ethics-rules-allegedly-married-her-brother/	45	somalian-dem-representative-in-minnesota-violated-house-ethics-rules-allegedly-married-her-brother/
http://streetnews.one/council-asks-non-muslim-woman-to-wear-hijab-to-help-fight-islamophobia/	38	council-asks-non-muslim-woman-to-wear-hijab-to-help-fight-islamophobia/
http://streetnews.one/radical-islam-wins-in-sweden-number-of-islamists-increases-by-900-with-children-being-raised-to-hate-the-west-study/	37	radical-islam-wins-in-sweden-number-of-islamists-increases-by-900-with-children-being-raised-to-hate-the-west-study/
http://streetnews.one/muslim-refugees-get-6k-month-in-welfare-want-you-to-pay-for-something-else/	37	muslim-refugees-get-6k-month-in-welfare-want-you-to-pay-for-something-else/
http://streetnews.one/tory-suspended-after-claims-that-islamist-extremists-rape-	30	tory-suspended-after-claims-that-islamist-extremists-rape-british-girls-to-create-muslim-babies/

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

[british-girls-to-create-muslim-babies/](#)		

The majority - 89% (659/742) - of citations linking to this specific site in the dataset come from one particular user. Quantitative analyses of this user's posting frequencies indicate likely that that this user is very likely a bot or cyborg, using automation to promote the outlet. Over 50% of this user's citations of streetnews[.]one were posted within 10 seconds of each other (331 separate pairs of posts); the number climbs to 80.4% if the interval is widened to 15 seconds. Nearly 18% (116 pairs of posts) of the user's successive citations of streetnews[.]one occur within 8 seconds of each other. While this post frequency is arguably achievable by a human user, the user's devoted promotion of 659 links to the site on 16 isolated days in the observation period with short intervals between successive posts hints at artificial, paroxysmal promotion of the website. The Twitter account with a handle matching this user's handle has been suspended from Twitter, along with the official Streetnews[.]one's Twitter account (@StreetNews4). The disappearance of Twitter accounts promoting the website, as well as most of the content on the website itself, bears partial resemblance to "*ephemeral disinformation*" techniques recently described by the Citizen Lab[3] (Lim et al., 2019).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our analyses reveal that a significant amount of the discussion about Muslims and Islam on Gab contains derogatory content about Muslims, much of it highly incendiary. A noteworthy amount of this anti-Muslim communication contains links to domains that spread disinformation including links to known purveyors of purposely false content dressed up as "news." In considering our findings alongside prior research, we can see how anti-Muslim rhetoric and Islamophobia incubate on Gab. Known white supremacists and other extremists use Gab and platforms like it (8Chan, 4Chan, Voat etc.) to communicate with one another but also to coordinate the spread of hate and political manipulation on mainstream digital outlets like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter (Lewis, 2018).

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[3] The authors are however careful to note that Citizen Lab's coining of the term *ephemeral designation* designates not only the disappearance of accounts and websites promoting false narratives, but the usage of spoofed websites imitating established, mainstream media outlets, which eventually redirect to those outlets' real websites after a false narrative has gained desired reach among a target audience. Website spoofing techniques and misleading redirection were not used in the case of streetnews[.]one, for that reason, *ephemeral disinformation* technically only applies partially as a descriptor here.

Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative

As a result, fringe platforms including Gab are likely to be integral to the spread of Islamophobia – but also to the general online communication of disinformation, hate and political manipulation – during the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections. The content on fringe sites often serves as a harbinger, a signal of what is to come, for problematic and divisive communication across mainstream social media platforms. Researchers, civil society groups and others might find ongoing analysis of content on Gab useful in generating early warnings for forthcoming "information operations" and computational propaganda campaigns across Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

It is clear that users on Gab find power through their ability to link to mainstream social media platforms – especially YouTube. YouTube was the most referred to URL in our dataset and appears to play a crucial role in spreading both Islamophobia and other forms of hate across the internet. The connections between sites like Gab and YouTube, or 8Chan and Reddit, are of crucial importance to the communication of hate and disinformation online. These connections must be explored further in order to generate understandings of how manipulative and harmful communications campaigns begin and spread. Sites like Gab do not stand alone and must not be treated as isolated outlets of hate. In order to fully combat online Islamophobia and the larger problem of computational propaganda, policy-makers and technology firms must address the connectivity of social media platforms in proliferating disinformation and hate speech.

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G|M|F The German Marshall Fund of the United States

STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

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