

Triggers & Tropes: The Affective Manufacturing of Online Islamophobia

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Islamophobia, the idea that Islam is an insurmountable cultural threat to Christianity and “the West,” is widely circulated online. Right-wing populists, affectively perform their identities and Islamophobic worldviews in ways that trigger fear, rage, and a range of other emotions in both themselves and sets of significant others. Here I examine typical online Islamophobic metanarratives, emotional triggers and tropes, and the ways in which they are designed to spread and heighten negative emotions and orchestrate collectives of political emotion. Using a Norwegian right-wing alternative media platform as an empirical example, I demonstrate how Ruth Wodak’s seminal work on “the politics of fear” can be paired with my conceptual framework “the politics of affect” to make better sense of affective performances of Islamophobia on social media.

Keywords: Islamophobia, right-wing populism, politics of affect, emotional triggers, fictionalization, social media

Mathilde: Good riddance! 🙌🏻

Janet: Let them drown!!!!!!

Nicolas: Yeah. Better now than later 🙏🙏

Sigurd: Muslims deserve to die anyway 😞😞😞🙏

These utterances declaring death on Muslims are reconstructions of comments from my online ethnography (2015–2018) of a Norwegian Facebook group called *Yes to Wearing the Cross Wherever and Whenever I Choose*. The Facebook comments were posted under a news story describing the rising death toll of Syrian refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015. The simple yet highly affective sentence “Let them drown” has stuck with me ever since. This article is a scholarly exploration of the affective fuel that drives metanarratives of online Islamophobia and what Ruth Wodak (2015) calls “the politics of fear.” Right-wing populist platforms circulate near identical ideas, claims, and even *utterances*—this is what I refer to as a metanarrative. An overarching metanarrative consists of particular tropes, arguments, and emotive vocabulary, and is founded on what Wodak (2015) refers to as “the fictionalization of politics” (p. 12). According to Wodak (2015) the fictionalization of politics entails “the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the fictional, between the informative and the entertaining” (p. 12) while simultaneously brushing over the complexities of real contemporary societies by painting an alluring picture of an oversimplified

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world. The rhetorical techniques of “provocation, calculated ambivalence and denial” are integral to right-wing populists’ modus operandi (Wodak, 2015, p. 12).

By focusing on affect, this article aims at deepening our understanding of online Islamophobia. While populism is typically discussed in terms of common tropes such as the people versus the elites, without affect there would be no populism. I am particularly interested in the affects that fuel right-wing populism, and I consider Islamophobia to be an essential part of the objects that right-wing populists are highly invested in. My goal here is primarily conceptual and theoretical. I aim to demonstrate how essential it is to grasp the multitude of ways in which affect fuels the circulation of Islamophobic content on social media. Anger and strong forms of antipathies are among the flow of emotions that wash over the right-wing populist metanarratives. There are varying degrees of antipathies, ranging from wishing to bar Muslims from the nation to violent social imaginaries that condone the use of violence (Thorleifsson, 2019).

Here, I focus on the circulation of right-wing populist and affective metanarratives on social media and in alternative right-wing forums and media outlets. I am especially interested in the affective processes that lead to Islamophobic outbursts online and how these are in play with typical right-wing populist tactics of “provocation, calculated ambivalence and denial” (Wodak, 2015, p. 14). It is the (re)production of fear and anger in the right-wing populist Islamophobic metanarratives that intrigues me. This article develops from my keen interest in gaining a deeper understanding of the triggering processes and how different affective performances of Islamophobia inflate and propel right-wing populist critique of Islam forward. I am also interested in how some emotions numb or drown out others. For instance, how does fear for oneself come to manifest itself into loathing others? And, how do individuals and collectives come to translate the fear of losing their identity, religion, culture, or nation into an antipathy so strong that they wish death on all Muslims?

“Islamophobia” is a contested term, some scholars believe in its descriptive and analytical merits, while others dismiss it as unhelpful. I care less about whether Islamophobia is technically a phobia and more about the sentiments of fear and anger and any other emotions that may fuel utterances that can be labeled as Islamophobic and constitute what Ekman (2015) calls “the manufacturing of the Green Scare” (p. 1986). This article aims to (1) understand and analyze the breadth and intensities of emotions that fuel online Islamophobia and right-wing populist ideas, (2) theorize affect and its role in the manufacturing of Islamophobia, and (3) examine how affect is performed in religious and identity conflicts that play out on social media. My overarching argument is this: Unless we delve into the intricate ways in which various emotions fuel right-wing populist identities, worldviews, and their contestations, we will not be able to fully understand how Islamophobia is manufactured or reels people in.

This study can be situated within the interdisciplinary field of “religion, media, and culture.” Still, my understanding of affect is multifaceted, and draws among other things, from my training in social anthropology, gender studies, and counseling. I also conceptualize affect based on decades of inhabiting a body of mixed ethnicities, a body that has, in and of itself, triggered a series of politicized, emotive reactions to my very existence. Following Sara Ahmed (2014), I am especially interested in “the making of emotions” and in what emotions *do*—and for *whom*. I believe that understanding the interconnectivity and performativity of affect is of essence when seeking to understand the manufacturing of online Islamophobia.

As I have argued previously (Abdel-Fadil, 2019), social media are particularly fertile ground for intensifying emotions and directing social media users into antagonistic affects that serve to divide collectives.

While my primary goal with this article is conceptual, I will illustrate my overarching theoretical points with empirical examples from the Norwegian right-wing alternative media platform Human Rights Service (HRS). HRS is an excellent example of a social platform that performs affect and intensifies negative emotions in ways that direct social media users away from Muslims. Despite having been the center of many controversies, HRS has gained an influential agenda-setting role and has received significant state funding for many years. More importantly, HRS runs a calculated fine balance between its scandalous, affective, fictionalized, and antagonistic content and its self-identification as neither Islamophobic nor racist. Here is a brief example of the type of speculative content that is run on HRS.



Figure 1. Screenshot from HRS (Karlsen, 2020a). Translation of image caption: "Alcohol is strictly prohibited for Muslims, a prohibition that leads to many outcomes—also in these Corona-times."¹

Under the heading "Muslims and alcohol," HRS claims that Muslims in Norway refuse to use hand sanitizer because alcohol is strictly forbidden in Islam. The image is of three faceless Muslim women wearing hijabs and a graphic representation of the coronavirus as if to suggest a face-off between Muslims and the virus. While the premise of this story was debunked by the fact-checking website Faktisk.no, HRS spokespersons stood their ground, stating that HRS had undeservingly become victim of ridicule despite the fact that many Muslims refuse to touch alcohol (Karlsen, 2020b).

¹ All translations from Norwegian into English cited in this article are mine.

This article is structured as follows: First, I discuss Islamophobia and briefly sketch out the main pillars of a right-wing populist Islamophobic metanarrative. Second, I summarize important conceptual and theoretical points about affect and why they are relevant to the case at hand. And third, I analyze examples from HRS as a springboard to illustrate the conceptual and theoretical points, before presenting my conclusion.

Contextualizing Islamophobia

Islamophobia is often viewed as a discourse of its own, which is simultaneously similar to and different from racism (Bangstad & Døving, 2015). In today's political climate in Europe and the United States, Islamophobia is a key element of right-wing populist discourses and is often circulated in populist right-wing online forums and on social media. Here, I shall briefly summarize the main pillars of the Islamophobic right-wing populist metanarrative, as documented across multiple studies (Abdel-Fadil, 2016; Andreassen, 2020; Bangstad & Helland, 2019; Ekman, 2015; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haanshuus & Jupskås, 2017; Marzouki, McDonnell, & Roy, 2016; Wodak, 2015). To paraphrase Mattias Ekman (2015), online Islamophobia entails both prejudices about and aversions against Islam and Muslims that are socially reproduced and circulated to wider audiences. Aversion is key here; it is an emotional response that signals an "awayness" from Muslims and Islam, to use Sara Ahmed's (2014) vocabulary. Islamophobia entails "actions and practices that attack, exclude or discriminate people on the basis that they are, or perceived to be, Muslims and associated with Islam" (Ekman, 2015, p. 1989). Giulia Evolvi (2019) efficiently defines Islamophobia as "unfounded hostility toward Islam" (p. 6). Evolvi (2019) elaborates, "Islamophobic narratives essentialize Muslims as a homogeneous and monolithic group that holds solely negative characteristics" (p. 19).

Much of the academic literature on Islamophobia focuses on the United States and Europe. Still, Islamophobia is also a toxic phenomenon in other corners of the world. This article is largely a conceptual and theoretical contribution. To decolonize the academy, I build on the work of several scholars who may be marginalized from the "academic center" due to (un)conscious biases about cultural background, gender, queerness, skin color, and/or location.

Within a European Islamophobic right-wing populist universe, Europe is defined as a priori Christian, and Islam is seen as a threat to religious and national authenticity. In consequence, Christianity is perceived as *intrinsically* French or Polish, British or Hungarian (Marzouki et al., 2016). Similarly, in my ethnography of *Yes to Wearing the Cross Wherever and Whenever I Choose*, I often came across declarations such as "Christianity should be protected from Muslims, because it is *made in Norway*" (Abdel-Fadil, 2018, p. 105; emphasis in original). Drawing on orientalist fantasies, Islamophobia paints the picture of Islam as the diametrical opposite of Christianity and as a backward monolithic entity that reigns over irrational Muslims who are incapable of ruling themselves or adhering to democratic principles. Islam is thus perceived as irrefutably violent, sexist, and oppressive as well as a threat to Europe and/or the United States (Bangstad, 2014; Beydoun, 2019; Ekman, 2015; Evolvi, 2019).

The mythical "Orient" is no longer envisioned as a faraway threat but is instead envisioned as an internal threat to the "West" in the shape of Muslims, who are considered alien to the region. This vilification of certain citizens based on (assumed) religious and cultural belonging echoes the anti-Semitic stereotype of "the enemy within" that was applied to Jews before World War I, as argued by Kumar (2012, as cited in Ekman, 2015). Rather than the mythical Orient, today's mythical construction is "IslamLand," to use Abu-Lughod's (2013) term for the cursory and imprecise references to various Muslim countries as if they were one. Islamophobia is founded on the idea that there are insurmountable cultural differences between "Islam" and "the West." Islam is envisioned as monolithic, undemocratic, backward, and a culture of oppression and violence (Said, 1979). There are distinct lines of continuity from classic Orientalism as depicted by Edward Said (1979), but the focus has shifted to an enemy within the nation rather than in a "far-away land." Within an Islamophobic worldview Muslims (real or imagined) are reduced to negative, emotionally charged stereotypical representations. Muslims are construed as having a near-animalistic, violent, sexual nature reminiscent of orientalist fantasies. Muslim women are depicted as victims in need of heroic saving (Abu-Lughod, 2013), and much like the original colonial white savior complex, "saving" brown women in the current political climate is not without its ironies. It tends to go hand in hand with a regressive and/or conservative gender perspective (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Ahmed, 1993). Muslim immigrants are framed as a threat to Europe and the United States and considered unwanted. Abu-Lughod (2013) discusses the birth of "the new common sense" (p. 54) and how right-wing populist "moral crusades" (p. 78) claiming to save Muslim women from the oppressive culture of "IslamLand" move out of the margins and into mainstream media discourses. She demonstrates how there is an increasing tendency to frame right-wing populist and Islamophobic content in moralistic terms with clear references to the defense of human rights (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Muslim women become pawns in a right-wing populist metanarrative of suffering under an oppressive block of "Muslim culture." Spectacular and sensationalist autobiographies and fictionalized stories of abuse often fused with pornographic details encourage spectators to devour narratives of suffering Muslim women as a "pornography of pain" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 80). As I argue shortly, the Islamophobic metanarrative also entails an element of self-inflicted trauma by which spectators are directed toward objects and symbols that enhance and intensify their own feelings of suffering.

Eurabia conspiracies and fears of a Muslim takeover are entangled with "the new common sense" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 54), which depicts Muslim women as oppressed. Islam is seen as an oppressive totalitarian ideology that dictates Muslims to pledge militant jihad against the West. Muslims are seen as disloyal citizens who put Sharia' over national laws, a significant security threat from within who could (literally) explode at any given time. Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking (2011) coin the term "banal securitization of Islam" (p. 275) to depict how the lives of Scandinavian Muslims' lives are deeply affected by global events. Islam is frequently framed as the antithesis of Western values, and at odds with "the people" in Western societies (Wodak, 2015, p. 21).

Several studies document how online Islamophobia tends to promote a strong us versus them in line with Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis, which pictures cultural differences between Islam and the West as insurmountable (Huntington, 1996). Multiculturalism and Islamization are seen as two sides of the same coin within right-wing populist perspectives. Islam is equated not only with Islamism but with a crude version of militant Islamism. Western politicians are accused of caving into Muslim demands for special treatment and for slowly but surely adopting Sharia' practices. Cultural diversity is seen as a threat

to national values and ways of life. More importantly, multiculturalism is equated with Islamization and considered a monumental threat to national cultural heritage. Muslims, foreigners, migrants, and refugees are considered one and the same, "national Muslims" are considered an oxymoron. Islam and Muslims in Europe or Western societies are considered "matters out of place" in Mary Douglas' (1966) terms; they are perceived as dirt or impurities that need to be cleaned out. The concept of "cultural Marxism," a popular reference in right-wing and Islamophobic online circles, is meant to denote how (particularly leftist) Western politicians have been duped by Muslims into turning Europe into an Islamic enclave, Eurabia, and that Sharia' laws are imminent (Bangstad, 2014; Ekman, 2015). Another central element of an Islamophobic worldview is the idea that Europeans will be outnumbered by Muslims any day now. The argument is that Muslim women have a much higher fertility rate, which again is seen as further evidence of Islam's global ambition to take over the world. Indeed, the Islamophobic metanarrative often frames Islam as a social actor with a will of its own. Western governments and (leftist) politicians are portrayed as either being too naïve and oblivious to Islam's global ambition of domination or as being in bed with the enemy. In sum, Western governments are perceived as caving to Muslim demands and "giving away" the nation. This feeds into a larger conspiracy in which Muslims are used as scapegoats for a wide range of offenses.

Social media have been deemed "affective media" by Kristin Peterson (2016) and its users "affective publics" by Zizi Papacharissi (2015). I could not agree more. Social media are technologically structured in ways that encourage specific media dynamics. Interactions on Facebook and Twitter, for example, are fertile soil for affective responses because of the format of speedy and informal responses and the fact that you can reach thousands, if not millions, of people in a matter of seconds. Still, many social media users seem to still perceive their online discussions as private. Social media's (false) sense of intimacy in combination with speed and wide reach provide a unique platform for the affective performance of conflict. The extensive use of caps lock, extreme punctuation, or repeated typos, suggests that many social media users are hammering out their inner turmoil onto a keyboard (Abdel-Fadil, 2018). Affect rides especially well on the wave of immediacy. I argue that social media are very well-suited for conveying different levels of emotional intensity.

I am interested in how social media actors perform their Islamophobic views in affective ways. And I am particularly intrigued by the social and connective aspects of emotionality that feed into manufacturing online Islamophobia and the ways in which populist right-wing ideas seep into mainstream public debates about Islam and immigration. According to Kumar (2012, as cited in Ekman, 2015), Islamophobic actors can be viewed as "engines in creating a political 'climate of fear'" (p. 1990). I think this is a fruitful approach. Affect is such an essential part of manufacturing Islamophobia that it warrants a brief discussion of affect theory.

Introducing the Politics of Affect

Despite an "affective turn" (Koivunen, 2001) in the social sciences and humanities, affect remains a somewhat blurry category (Skoggard & Waterson, 2015). Still, I believe that the study of online Islamophobia has much to gain from a more thorough understanding of affect and emotion. Definitions of "affect" vary a great deal (Ahmed, 2014; Gibbs, 2011; Gregg & Siegworth, 2010; Massumi, 1995; Mazzarella, 2009; Papacharissi, 2015; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995; Skoggard & Waterson, 2015).

Some definitions do not specify *which* emotions but speak mostly of affect as a generic category. I believe that affect theory would be enriched by drawing on the decades of grounded, anthropological, postcolonial, feminist, and queer scholarship on emotion, much of it conducted by female scholars of color (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Ahmed, 2014; Joseph, 1999; Lutz & White, 1986; Rosaldo, 1984). These pioneering studies elucidate how emotions are a fundamental part of (everyday) politics, and that affect is integral to both social and political interactions. Anthropology of emotion studies also delve into the intricacies of different emotions.

The politics of affect framework (Abdel-Fadil, 2019) draws on research from the field of anthropology (of emotion), feminist and gender studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, media studies, and the interdisciplinary field of religion, media, and culture. It is also informed by my online ethnography of a Facebook group with strong Islamophobic undercurrents.

I hope the framework will help us move toward a deeper analysis of affective performances of political opinions online. The conceptual framework aims to address the following theoretical gaps: (1) the lack of distinction among various emotions, (2) affect as performative, and (3) various intensities of emotion. Here, I briefly outline the parts of the politics of affect framework that are particularly relevant to understanding online Islamophobia and developing an in-depth analysis of the interplay of intensified emotions that are at the core of Islamophobic worldviews.

Recognizing that we “feel our way” into political thoughts, religious orientations, and identity formations is an essential insight for any in-depth analysis of the relationship between emotion and politics (Ahmed, 2014; Gibbs, 2011; Papacharissi 2015). Affect and political subjectivity are intertwined. We must, therefore, strive to understand how affect is performed as part of online Islamophobia and analyze what different emotions do.

Certain topics classify as “trigger themes” in a European context (Hagen, 2015, pp. 116–118). For instance, the topics “Islam” or “immigration” are extremely likely to induce spiraling arguments, an escalation of emotional intensity, and draw in audiences who are ready to battle it out online (Figenschou, Thorbjørnsrud, & Larsen, 2015; Michailidou & Trenz, 2015). In my view, trigger themes that are in essence about identity politics are especially well-suited to draw out strong emotive responses.

Emotional outbursts tend to successfully latch onto themes designed to trigger emotions (Hagen, 2015). Affective modes of performing conflict are emotive responses to these trigger themes (Abdel-Fadil, 2016). While mediatized trigger themes have gained scholarly attention (Averbeck-Lietz, Hepp, & Venema, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2015; Hjarvard, Mortensen, & Eskjær, 2015; Michailidou & Trenz, 2015), anger is often the emotion discussed. There have been fewer studies that analyze a spectrum of emotions or discuss how several feelings may merge or interact, or how certain emotions may be better suited to escalate emotional intensity in a collective (Abdel-Fadil, 2019).

“Feelings not only heighten tension, they are also in tension” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). This insight, I believe, is essential to understanding how emotions spiral and that affective performances of conflicts can sometimes make a room (digital or physical) seem to vibrate with emotion. Sara Ahmed (2014) convincingly

argues that emotions are "intentional" because they are invariably *about* something or someone. Thus, emotions are "inter-relational" (p. 7). Ahmed (2014) also views emotions as relational in the sense that they signal a "towardness" or "awayness" to or from an object such as a flag, nation, religion, or people. This towardness and awayness to or from objects, is, I believe, the emotional fuel that identities, worldviews, and their contestations run on. Indeed, Sara Ahmed (2014) argues, "Objects can become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (p. 11).

Reiterating Ahmed (2014), we must acknowledge that certain objects are particularly sticky and may trigger an avalanche of emotions. In other words, emotions move *through* objects (Ahmed, 2014). Similarly, Lövheim and Lied (2018) speak of "emblematic symbols," which are infused with a range of meanings. I believe emblematic symbols are sticky objects. Contentious objects tend to be stickier since so many people have diverging vested interests in the object(s). The stickiness of an object, in my interpretation of Sara Ahmed (2014), is tied to the readiness of social actors to imbue it with affect. Still, it is important to note, it need not be the *same* emotions that are traveling through the object. In fact, the very same artefact (be it a minaret or a hijab) may trigger diametrically different emotions in different people. For instance, the sighting of a hijab may trigger such diverse feelings as hope, anger, pride, sadness, or indifference, depending on the ideological and religious leanings of the "feeler."

Affects can run high in a collective bursting with emotionally charged responses to a particular object or specific viewpoints. Still, all the individuals in the collective will not necessarily feel the same way or even harbor the same emotional intensity that signals a towardness or awayness to or from the object in question. Nonetheless, there may be a palpable intensified level of affective engagement that reels others in and draws them into feeling more and more intensely about the object in question (Ahmed, 2014; Skoggard & Waterston, 2015). In this sense, affects are heightened and contagious within collectives. In my view, individual and collective expressions of self and emotion are highly connective and inter-relational and thus key components of the politics of affect.

Emotional intentionality is at the very core of the politics of affect. Understanding *how* and *why* objects come to be saturated with affect is important to grasp. I argue that affect is performed *for* someone and that it matters a great deal *which emotion* is being performed, and who the audience (real or imagined) is envisioned to be. Analyzing who (and what) the performance is *for* goes right to the crux of what makes "affective media," "affective publics," and "collective affect" both affective and social (Peterson, 2016).

The process of intensifying and transmitting affect through affective publics online is, I believe, key to understanding the inner workings of Islamophobia. Feelings such as indignation, pride, disgust, anger, fear, loss, exasperation, sadness, and outrage swell, shift form, and disperse. Both affect and emotional intensity are contagious in that feelings swell and draw social actors into feeling more *intensely*. Of course, it matters *which* emotion is being boosted.

In-depth analyses of politicized emotions require that researchers acknowledge that (1) numerous sentiments may be in tension at the same time, and (2) emotions ignite, shift, intensify, and die out in

response to the multitude of modes in which (in)significant others enact the conflict in ways that direct, trigger, and manipulate feelings into a variety of emotional states.

I do not operate with a sharp distinction between emotion and affect.² Emotions are messy, and affects can be deeply entangled with one another, or a sentiment can be mistaken for another. Frequent use of emotional cues is an integral part of performing both affect and conflict. Emotional cues are thrown out with the intent of triggering a range of emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear, empathy, pride, compassion, and joy. Emotions and emotional intensity are “transmittable,” in the sense that they swell and draw people into feeling more intensely. Thus, emotions and emotional intensity travel both through objects and people. Still, which emotion is being boosted matters a great deal. With regard to sticky objects, people have contrary sentiments but may feel equally intensely. For instance, a Muslim prayer mat can trigger a range of feelings at various levels of intensity. Different people may intensely feel disgust, pride, anger, or love, depending on the way they construe Islam as a religion or view religion as a phenomenon. For this very reason, affect has the potential to both bind and divide collectives (Abdel-Fadil, 2019).

Here, I continue to develop the politics of affect as a conceptual framework, which can be used to lean on when trying to make sense of affective interactions on social media. My thesis is that by being more attentive to which emotions are in circulation and how they are performed, we will be able to follow in Sara Ahmed’s footsteps and make a more sophisticated analysis of what different emotions *do*. Lest there be any doubt, I believe that in politics—as in everyday life—emotions *do* a great deal.

In a highly distilled form, these are the main insights of my politics of affect framework:

1. Trigger themes ignite intense emotive reactions and are often perceived to be interlinked to individuals’ or collectives’ sense of self.
2. Differentiating among various emotions is of the essence because different emotions *do* different things. We must examine whether there are certain types of emotions or levels of emotional intensity that are more contagious or triggering in different settings.
3. Social media users throw about a lot of emotional cues in the form of metaphors, arguments, emoticons, punctuation, and rhetorical styles, to name a few. Such cues are expressed with the intent of directing collectives toward or away from sticky objects.
4. Affect is performative. It is performed with an audience (real or imagined) in mind. Serious consideration of the performative aspect reveals a lot about the emotional fuel of interactions.
5. To produce a refined analysis of affect, we must pay attention to the intensity of emotions. We must also monitor whether affects shift, multiply, merge, or pile onto other emotions.
6. Certain sticky objects acquire the status of sacred and are more likely to imbue strong and intense emotional displays. Any perceived attack on or threat to sacred objects (such as a nostalgic social imaginary of a homogenous nation) can be experienced as a “symbolic death” (Ahmed, 2014; Baumgartner, 2013; Lagerkvist, 2017). The most intense emotional attachment can be described as “religious emotion.”

² See Abdel-Fadil (2019) for details.

In brief, the directionality and performativity of affect are incredibly important to grasp. We need to pay attention to who an affective performance is aimed at, which emotions fuel it, and the level(s) of emotional intensity.

Having this backdrop on affect greatly aids in understanding the inner workings of Islamophobia. Now, I shall turn to the typical triggers and tropes within the metanarrative of Islamophobia.

Triggers & Tropes: The Affective Manufacturing of Islamophobia

Certain topics are trigger themes in and of themselves. I argue that Islam in the current political climate is a trigger theme worldwide, in that it is well-suited to trigger a range of emotionally charged opinions. A trigger theme pertains to a phenomenon that many people care deeply about and is often seen as an extension of their own personhood (Abdel-Fadil, 2019; Ahmed, 2014; Baumgartner, 2013). Caring deeply about something can at times manifest itself as a series of negative or antagonistic emotions. For instance, proponents of right-wing populist Islamophobia care very deeply about and are triggered by Islam because they have a strong antipathy toward Islam and Muslims. Against this backdrop, the onset of Islam in the West is considered an unpatriotic act of "giving the nation away." Left-wing politicians are accused of being too naive to see the real danger that Islam poses.

Islamophobia is manufactured in a highly emotive way and is fraught with emotional cues that trigger affective publics. It is founded on the idea that if Islam exists in Europe or "the West" it means the death of Christianity. To right-wing populists and those who get sucked in by their rhetoric, the nation is held sacred and must be protected from Muslim "contamination." Descriptions such as "contamination," "infestation," "invasion," "under siege," and the like are used to describe Muslims' unwanted presence. These types of metaphors are not only high in (negative) affect they are also emotional cues that trigger others into emotionally charged responses and direct collectives into a heightened state of emotionality. Often the nation is conflated with Christianity or Christian heritage, and thus by extension the "Christian nation" is seen as sacred and Muslims condemned as an imminent threat. Part of the reason for the intensity of emotion is that many social actors believe that their online Islamophobic activities serve to protect the nation/and or Christianity from extinction.

The term "hijacking religion" is employed by Marzouki and colleagues (2016) in "Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion," to illustrate how "Christianity" is infused with ideological goals of cultural belonging while simultaneously rendering "belief" redundant. Populist constructions of Christianity orbit around the tropes "restoration" and "battle" as part of the loftier goal of preserving Christian heritage from the threat of extinction and/or Muslim takeover (Marzouki et al., 2016, p. 2). Within this worldview, right-wing populists are solely interested in "Christianity in its cultural form," argues Peace (2016, p. 104). In a similar vein, Roy (2016) maintains that Christianity is predominantly expressed in terms of national identity, and its proponents "are Christian largely to the extent that they reject Islam" (p. 186). He goes on to argue that Christianity serves as a marker of identity and functions as a platform to "distinguish between good 'us' and bad 'them'" (Roy, 2016, p. 186). Giulia Evolvi (2019) deems this type of Islamophobic output as "emotional antagonism" (p. 3).

“Islam” is a trigger theme that pushes individuals and collectives into affective modes of enacting conflicts. Many people within an Islamophobic collective will experience online debates about the perils of Islam as an extension of themselves, in the sense that they believe that they are protecting their foundational worldview or values they consider sacred. This raises the emotional stakes in the conflict and renders its enactment crucial at both the personal and symbolic levels. Accentuating the need to eliminate Islam and Muslims is thus perceived as an act of self-preservation. The intense emotional agitation comes from the fear of (symbolic) death (Abdel-Fadil, 2019). It is as if their very existence in the world depends on the eradication of Islam and Muslims.

Muslims are described as cockroaches, criminals, rapists, terrorists, tumors, poison, cancer, and the like. Such images trigger negative emotions such as fear, disgust, or anger. Near-identical negative metaphors are also used about political opponents in mediatized conflicts about other trigger themes such as climate change (Abdel-Fadil, 2016). Still, the bitter aftertaste is stronger when such descriptions are projected on Muslims and perceived “others” because of the parallels to anti-Semitic depictions of Jews pre-World War II and the more contemporary racist ideologies that target Muslims and/or have spurred terrorist attacks, not least in Norway (July 2011 and August 2019).

The Islamophobic metanarrative is pregnant with emotional cues. First and foremost, the metanarrative portrays Europe and the West as being under siege by Islam and Muslim immigrants. Saving the nation is construed as very urgent (and has been for decades). Islam’s “invasion” has put an expiration date on the nation. Populist imperatives such as “Wake up!” “Act now before it is too late,” and several others are designed to trigger not just despair and anger but also resolution, and hence move individuals into both a higher state of emotion as well as action “to do something about it.” Another common trope is “We are not allowed to critique Islam because of PC [politically correct] nonsense.” The claim is that they live under a PC dictatorship, where they are censored and prohibited from critiquing Islam. Part of this narrative is the populist reference to being “the people” and “the silent majority,” who are unfairly silenced due to censorship and elitist ideologies. Transmitting this narrative of rebelling against being PC is seen as an act of bravery, speaking truth to power, and breaking the taboo of not being allowed to critique Islam in public. Leftist politicians are considered national traitors who crumble under Islamist/Muslim pressure. So much so, that Sharia³ in the West is imminent. The sensationalist and populist trope of “telling the truth as it is” is connected to the claim that there is a culture of being PC, which polices what people are allowed to say about Muslims. It also alludes to the more emotionally volatile claim that the Islamophobic narrative is essential because it unravels political deceptions and cover-ups, which typically involve, politicians, police, and the media (Abdel-Fadil, 2016; Figschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). This sets the stage for being able to tell “the real, shocking truth about Muslims.” As we shall see in the next section, HRS is an example of an influential alternative media platform that fictionalizes politics with the end of revealing the so-called shocking truth about Muslims and Islam. Affect plays no minor role in this metanarrative.

³ Sharia’ is often inaccurately referred to as either Islamic law or fixed rulings, yet laws legalizing and banning polygamy in the Middle East both cite Sharia’ as their main legal source.

HRS: Fictionalizing Politics and Heightening Negative Affects Toward Muslims

The Norwegian right-wing populist alternative media platform HRS is an illustrative example of Abu-Lughod's (2013) argument of the tendency to couch anti-Muslim and anti-immigration views in human rights jargon. Even the name "Human Rights Service" appears to be intentionally crafted to be confused with the far more reputable "Human Rights Watch." While HRS self-identifies as "an antiracist think-tank" (Fosli & Karlsen, 2021), it is categorized as a "Muslim-hate organization" by the Norwegian Centre Against Racism (Andreasen, 2020). Bangstad and Helland (2019) argue that HRS's increasing public and political influence is an indication of how far-right fringe ideas have become more mainstream post-9/11 in Norwegian media and public discourse. Andreasen (2020) defines HRS as an extreme-right organization that circulates xenophobic populism through its platform while simultaneously avoiding any direct incitement to violence, which serves as yet another example of what Wodak (2015) classifies as calculated ambivalence. The influential HRS platform has close ties to the right-wing populist party (The Progress Party). HRS is controversial not least due to it being subsidized by the Norwegian state for well over a decade, but also for its dealings with "the Muslim problem" to borrow Nilüfer Göle's (2013) term. In the rest of this section, I will delve into a few empirical examples of the type of content that HRS circulates and the affect-ridden metanarrative that it is founded on.

In 2017, HRS called on its followers to take photos of Muslims in public spaces in Oslo to "document" what they deemed a "cultural revolution." HRS ran the controversial photo series in 2018 under the heading "The Cultural Revolution in Oslo, Picture by Picture" (Storhaug, 2018; see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Screenshot from HRS (Storhaug, 2018).

Under følger en billedserie fra Oslo, tatt i sommer av HRS. Ja, det er Oslo, ikke Mogadishu, Kharian i Pakistan eller en storby i Midtøsten.



Figure 3. Screenshot from the photo series (Storhaug, 2018). Image caption: "Below you will find a photo series from Oslo, taken by HRS, this summer. Yes, it is Oslo, not Mogadishu, Kharian in Pakistan, or a big city in the Middle East."

HRS's "cultural revolution" photo series featured faceless Muslim women wearing ever-so-slight variations of dark, head-to-toe coverings, in urban settings (Storhaug, 2018). As discussed by Søren Andreasen (2020), the images appear to have been color- and shadow-manipulated to connote a more sinister and fear-inducing mood, which suggests the use of a filter highlighting tones of gray, black, and cold-blue — colors typically used in movies to create a sense of unease (see Figure 2). These dark and gloomy images of faceless Muslim women in Oslo are embedded in a "fear-appeal," as eloquently put by Andreasen (2020).

The accompanying text "Yes, it is Oslo, not Mogadishu . . ." is not exactly subtle about Muslims being perceived as out of place in Oslo and can thus be interpreted as an intentional "provocation." Taken together, the images seem to be conveying an overarching and highly affective message: *Beware of Muslims lurking about in the shadows*. Spectators are invited into a bubble of fear, and the images are intended to trigger existential anxieties around Islam. Thus, HRS's photo series ought to be understood as part of a wider context of an Islamophobic metanarrative in which Eurabia conspiracies and fears of a Muslim takeover are forever looming. Indeed, it is no coincidence that HRS opted to frame the photo series as a cultural revolution. It is a clear reference to the idea that "Muslim culture" (whatever that is) is irreconcilable with (the equally elusive construct) "Norwegian culture." The underpinning claim is that (leftist) politicians aka "cultural Marxists" allowed this "cultural revolution" and "Muslim takeover" to take place. Within this worldview, Muslims' presence in Norwegian urban spaces is invariably considered out of place or a form of "invasion."

Thus, the HRS images are intended not just to conjure up fear in spectators but to also provoke a wider range of affects such as indignation, sadness, anger, outrage, and defiance. Indeed, these muddled and multilayered affects come together in a mode of self-imposed suffering and trauma (Abdel-Fadil, 2023). In effect, the mere witnessing of Muslims in a perceived "non-Muslim space" becomes triggering to the extent that it becomes a self-inflicted form of suffering, which is intensified the more HRS-sympathizers stare at these manipulated images. Moreover, HRS intentionally sets its supporters up for self-inflicted suffering by employing what Wodak (2015) renders typical right-wing populist tools, by fictionalization of politics in ways that serve as an intentional provocation and calculated ambivalence, which in turn set the stage for performative denial of any ill intention. Thus, the HRS's cultural revolution photo series serves as an excellent example of how Islamophobic metanarratives ride not only on fear but also on multiple affects.

Another illustrative example from HRS is the personal attack on Amy Mir and her family after they participated in a national TV cooking show.



Figure 4. Screenshot of HRS (Storhaug, 2020).

Under the heading “The NRK [Norwegian Public Broadcasting Service] continues its Islamization of Norway,” HRS portrays a still picture from the TV show, featuring Amy Mir with her mother and sister, all smiling at one another, as seen in Figure 4. This image appears especially warm and fuzzy when contrasted with HRS’s own image production (see Figures 1–3). However, HRS’s accompanying text to the image snaps spectators right back into indignation and provocation mode: “NRK showcases a Pakistani family in Norway. What we see is very revealing. Mother without a head-cover, daughters in tight hijabs” (Storhaug, 2020). Packed into this very brief yet speculative sentence and the affective title are several emotionally triggering Islamophobic tropes and arguments designed to direct viewers into heightened emotionality and divisive identity politics. The main text goes on to insinuate that Amy Mir is not integrated into Norway and that it is obvious that her loyalties lie elsewhere. The use of provocation and fictionalization of politics is integral to HRS’s output. HRS claims that the mere act of featuring this family on Norwegian TV is an act of betrayal to the nation and an act of Islamization. Aiming to escalate and intensify affects, HRS goes on to state that NRK’s role in the Islamization of Norway is scandalous. Through the relentless use of provocation and fictionalization HRS embeds and circulates the following highly affective and divisive messages:

1. Children of Muslim immigrants and Muslims are a threat to Norway and Norwegian culture.
2. Muslims are working toward a full Islamization of Norway (and the world), and NRK is part of this plot (willingly or unknowingly is unclear).
3. Wearing the hijab is a sign of adherence to “IslamLand” and a lack of loyalty to Norway.

The calculated ambivalence is also very evident. Take, for example, the assertion that the Mir sisters are wearing “tight hijabs” despite the fact that the photograph clearly demonstrates that the sisters’ hijabs are rather loose-fitting. HRS’s statement that the hijabs are tight alludes to *Islam* being a tight, strict,

and suffocating ideology that requires full submission. The fictionalization is further evident in that rather than being “unintegrated” Amy Mir appears to be more of an “ideal citizen” (Abdel-Fadil & Lund, 2018). As seen in Figure 5, Mir’s Instagram account showcases her passion for adventure travel and Norwegian nature tour guiding. Mir has won over media publics, not only because of her expertise but also because of her charisma and personality. Despite HRS’s claims to the contrary, Amy Mir appears to be the antithesis of HRS’s stereotyping of Muslim women in Norway as passive, subjugated, and with no ties to the nation.

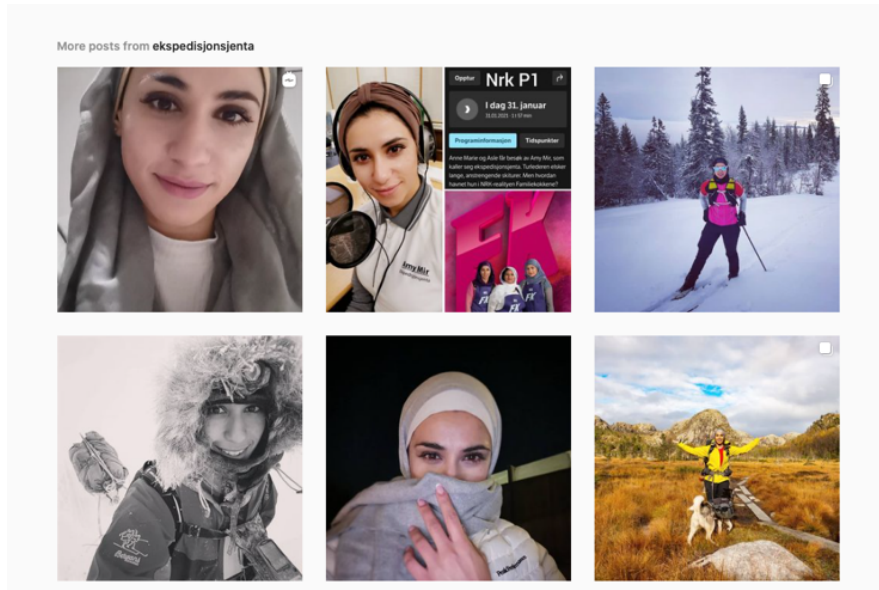


Figure 5. Screenshot of Amy Mir’s Instagram posts (Mir, n.d.).

Evidently, the only thing that is “wrong” with Amy Mir—is that she covers her hair. Yet, it is as if HRS can see nothing else. Thus, this latter HRS example illustrates how the hijab (1) becomes an emblematic symbol of the perceived Islamization of Norway and (2) in and of itself becomes an unbearable provocation to spectators harboring Islamophobic worldviews.

The emotional intensity of HRS’s aversion toward the hijab is what drives the whole outburst; but more importantly, with the added tools of provocation and fictionalization, HRS succeeds in amplifying the emotional intensity of its followers. The swelling and intensification of affects serve to (1) direct HRS-sympathizers away from Islam and Muslims and (2) strengthen antipathies toward both Muslims in general and Amy Mir, in particular. HRS’s fictionalized and provocative coverage led to Amy Mir being hit by a wave of hate speech across multiple social media platforms. After recovering from the initial shock of HRS’s accusations and their aftermath, Mir has reported HRS for acts of hate speech and used her social media following to encourage others who experience similar things to do the same.

HRS for its part continues to declare that it does not ignite anti-Muslim sentiments or anything of the sort. In other words, HRS continues to employ the typical right-wing populist technique of denial that Wodak (2015) identified.

Conclusion: Politically Orchestrating Affective Publics

HRS intentionally provokes its followers into intensified negative affects by incessantly directing them toward sticky objects and symbols that enhance and intensify their feelings of personal suffering. Moreover, HRS also performs affect for wider audiences by notoriously sharing its emotive provocations across multiple platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, and they are frequently reported on by mainstream media. The stickiness of the emblematic symbol, hijab, is used to channel a range of negative affects and to direct collectives *away* from Muslims and Islam. HRS and other perpetrators of the Islamophobic metanarrative perform affect for its users to intentionally inflate and intensify negative affects toward (imagined) Muslims and Islam. Affects such as fear, anger, and disdain are intensified through typical right-wing populist tools such as provocation and fictionalization of politics (Wodak, 2015). By repeatedly circulating the Islamophobic metanarrative, HRS illustrates how a social media platform can inflict both *itself* and its users with a symbolic trauma. Thus, HRS and its likes inflict a symbolic trauma on both itself and its users by continuously reigniting and intensifying negative affects, which puts them in a perpetual state of intensified agitation and animosity toward (imagined) Muslims (Abdel-Fadil, 2023). More importantly, this self-inflicted symbolic trauma distracts from the fact that HRS's eruptive emotional Islamophobic attacks inflict *real* trauma on real (and imagined) Muslims.

HRS uses all the typical right-wing populist tools identified by Wodak. Its emotional triggering and intensification of its collective's emotional disdain for Muslims is *intentional*. HRS's swelling of negative emotions and intensification of affects in Islamophobic and right-wing populist collectives is not coincidental, it is "politically orchestrated" (Berlant & Greenwald, 2012, p. 72). Simultaneously, there is a built-in structure of calculated ambivalence—meaning that HRS (and similar actors) deny that they circulate an Islamophobic metanarrative and politically orchestrate the emotions of their collective toward anti-Muslim hate speech.

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