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From London Bridge to Finsbury Park Mosque: humour and hate crimes

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Abstract

The former Twitter (now called 'X') is a social media platform characterized by an intense exchange of posts by users on political themes. These posts can indicate the evolution of a social phenomenon around a pivotal event. The overarching theme of this paper is to observe and examine the posts of Twitter users following the London Bridge terror attack on June 3rd, 2017, and following another attack against the Finsbury Park Mosque on June 19th of the same year. By means of a content analysis of a robust database of posts collected from the Twitter platform I was able to observe the reactions of radical right users during the attacks and reflect upon how hate was played out in terms of language and emotions. Despite the inevitable violence of these attacks, I detected the presence of humour in tweets as well as remarks that were predictably characterized by both physical and moral disgust. All tweets examined displayed at least one of Haidt's Moral Foundations. My hypothesis is that humour is a moral phenomenon which can lead to exaggerated human behaviours as well.

Keywords: Twitter, hate, humour, morality, terrorism.

1. Introduction

Jokes and humorous remarks may paradoxically present a serious stance. This may explain why people are often shocked or may take offence at something apparently said in jest. The very ambiguity of much verbally expressed humour lies in its inherent "only joking" quality. Recently there has been much debate about whether it is appropriate to humorously target sensitive issues that may concern a plethora of subjects that range from ethnic minorities and religion to body size and the victims of disasters. Furthermore, (political) humour seems to lean towards the left with many comedians being openly left-wingers, especially if we consider televised satire, almost implying that the right does not do humour. Yet social media has given everyone a space to be funny thereby democratizing humour, so it should come as no surprise if we find right wing humour there too. The present study investigates instances of right-wing humour when it targets sensitive subjects, in this case Muslim migrants at the time of two terrorist attacks in the UK in 2017.

In June 2016, following the result of the United Kingdom's referendum on European Union membership, there was a significant spike in hate crimes in the UK. Moreover, according to data furnished by the Home Office, an even higher spike in hate crimes also characterized June 2017, given the terrorist attacks that took place on London Bridge (03/06/2017), in which 8 people were killed and 48 injured, and against the Finsbury Park Mosque (19/06/2017), in which 1 person was killed and 12 injured. This study explores the presence of humour in the online behaviour of radical right Twitter users in the UK, focusing on content they posted in the aftermath of these two attacks. An examination of a robust sample of tweets from the period immediately surrounding the attacks provides examples of online humour that are valuable to our understanding of how ideologically driven users engage on social media platforms and how they use humour as a strategic moral tool to propagate their beliefs. In fact, in 2016, the dynamics of online interactions and humour were recognized as having had an influential role in the US Presidential elections (Kersten, 2019) and similar patterns can be found in the UK context too (Kampfner, 2023). The tweets examined in this study highlight how extreme, politically biased messages can be normalized when they are couched in humour.

Two underlying ideas have shaped this study. Initially, this inquiry stemmed from the notion that hate speech within the digital realm might exhibit a correlation with hate crimes in the physical world. Building on this, a secondary insight emerged. What Shaller and Park (2011) have labelled "a person's behavioural immune system," coupled with the emotion of disgust that is so often expressed in terms of humour, could be a driving force behind hate crimes. At this point, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's moral foundation theory (2012) was adopted to lay the groundwork for a hypothesis that sees humour as a moral matrix within society.

For this study, the term "radical right" pertains to individuals and internet users espousing right-wing to far-right ideologies, who reject mainstream conservatism. Although the radical right encompasses the traditional far right, it makes use of the internet for communication in new and ever-evolving ways. The landscape in the UK is especially interesting due to the upsurge in hate crimes across the nation after the Brexit referendum and the triggering of Article 50. This paper unveils how so-called "radical right" users employ humour to convey their distinctive online culture through their use of humorous tweets (see also Simon et al, 2016: 52).

Haidt's theory pivots on five moral foundations that can be applied to political tribes. According to Haidt, liberals and progressives, namely the left-wing political spectrum, focus on the foundation of Care (i.e., the cherishing and protecting of others) and Fairness (i.e., rendering justice due to shared rules). On the other hand, conservatives and reactionaries, the right-wing political spectrum, while adhering to the previous two notions tend to attribute greater value to Loyalty (i.e., standing with the group, family, and nation), Authority (i.e., following tradition and supremacy) and Sanctity (heightened disgust for foods, actions, or moral difference). This study shows that on-line remarks posted by the radical right do indeed largely adhere to the moral foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity rather than to Care and Fairness. Furthermore, these remarks are often couched in humour. Haidt himself confirms the role of humour as part of the formation of moral communities in the way that for example, trespassers of moral boundaries may be ridiculed, and repressive norms may be challenged through humour. Discussing contempt, Haidt claims that if expressed humorously it allows people "to show that they share a common moral orientation [...] a cynical story that ends with both of you smirking and shaking your heads and voilà, you've got a bond" (2012, p.169).

Based on the violent events that took place in London in June 2017, a database was created consisting of tweets posted by members of the UK radical right on Twitter during the days of these two hate crimes. Twitter's user-friendly format and the continued survival of the radical right on this platform are the main reasons for examining their activity specifically on Twitter. The collected corpus was made up not only of verbal content, but also of a variety of polysemiotic texts, namely cartoons, pictures and memes that accompany words too. Results

emerging from a qualitative analysis of this content show that radical right users on Twitter constitute a non-harmonious galaxy of people who adopt a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic techniques to propagate their viewpoints. Tweets reflect how these users especially uphold the moral foundations of Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity. However, humour, widely recognized as an effective key to unlocking the meaning of the overall on-going social, political, and cultural processes, is present throughout the dataset while coupled with the above three foundations.

Advances in technology, the widespread use of mobile electronic media and the effects of globalization prompted Slevin (2000, p.7) to declare that we now find ourselves straddling two realms. This underscores our contemporary existence, where we are continuously navigating between both the real physical environment and the virtual internet-based domain. Turning our focus towards humour, Kuipers (2005) noted that a notable shift in the landscape of humour had occurred since the 9/11 attacks, suggesting that jokes, traditionally an oral form of humour, may have largely migrated to the online sphere; more recently, Attardo (2023) expressed agreement, while Raskin discussed of the "demise of the joke" (2023).

Parallels can be drawn between traditional oral jokes that were transmitted by word of mouth and contemporary online humour which is digitally shared via electronic devices. Amongst other things, political jokes reflect society's apprehension of authority (Davies, 1998), e.g., jokes against social stagnation in Soviet Russia, jokes about Brexit in the UK and jokes about Trump, so it is conceivable that humorous tweets mirror similar attitudes and concerns through new media. If, until recently, the correlation between active political engagement and humour, especially for the far right could be considered a whimsical proposition at best, today it should be taken more seriously, as argued by Wilson (2017), "irony has a strategic function. It allows people to disclaim commitment to far-right ideas while still espousing them". Significantly, the data emerging from this study shows that irony itself is the most frequently occurring humorous mechanism.

2. The sample

Before examining instances of humorous tweets posted by radical right users during June 2017, I will provide a brief account of how they were gathered. The examples provided have been extracted from a robust sample of tweets collected throughout the month from 30 radical right accounts. Tweets that were posted on and around the dates of the two terrorist attacks highlight a connection with real events that occurred within the studied timeframe, in other words, the online interactions that involve humour seem to play a role in the radicalization of conservative users.

Given the challenges of researching Twitter, tweets were gathered not only from content linked to radical right groups, but more generally from posters adhering to so-called "Conservative Twitter". This wider net was necessary to show the blurred line between Conservatives and the radical right users. To identify the sample for this study, the criteria of "Tweet/follow/like" was adopted. In other words, these three features were used to identify meaningful radical right accounts that not only produced abundant tweets, but that were also followed and "liked" by other users, in numbers that were high enough to be relevant. The database only included the accounts that posted more than 2500 tweets in total.

The 30 accounts were randomly selected according to the above mentioned "Tweet/follow/like" criterion. They belonged to users who posted about their experiences within the political sphere. Some accounts belonged to political figures, others to users who published news and/or reported tendencies. For example, the account of a YouTuber who was mentioned in the report by the "Hope not Hate" advocacy group (Lowles & Levene 2019, 71) was included.

Other examples include an English YouTuber and Twitter personality described as alt-right/altlight in numerous sources, and that of a UKIP politician and significant campaigner for leaving the EU. In sum, 10 accounts belonged to news related posters; 10 belonged to influencers and 10 to politicians (Lobanov, 2021). These 30 accounts generated a total of 16,154 tweets in June 2017 which were compressed to a more manageable size using a Python 2.72 set of packages. All tweets that did not mirror the UK radical right talking points, or that seemed irrelevant were discarded, reducing the sample to 1582 tweets posted in the days immediately before and after the attacks on London Bridge and the Finsbury Park Mosque (not all of them humorous, of course). The most frequent keywords occurring in the tweets were obtained using the CygWin software. The tweets were placed on a Hate Crimes Timeline – a calendar that marked hate crimes on a daily basis – in order to specifically examine tweets that were posted in correspondence to these offences in the physical world. Simultaneously, each tweet was tagged according to its corresponding moral foundation (among the five listed by Haidt). The presence of humour in each tweet was also noted. This resulted in an overview of the connection between the tweets and both the London Bridge and the Finsbury Park Mosque attacks.¹

3. Radical right tweets

What kind of humorous content did radical right Twitter users post around the time of the two terrorist attacks? In June 2017, tweets contained a variety of themes and narratives in which complex issues tended to be simplified, the media, police and state authorities were delegitimized, an almost apocalyptic view of Europe and the UK was put forward, imagery was inspired by the Crusades, and the migrants and Muslims were dehumanized. The depiction of migrants and Muslims (often the same group) was a persistent narrative that used stereotypical tropes and manipulated news stories. Those whom the tweeters considered to be their political opponents, mainly left-wing politicians, were portrayed as allies of radicalized Muslims and framed as weak and ideologically contaminated traitors. Detecting humorous tweets was not easy as there were few clear-cut puns or examples of wordplay in the tweets. What does come across loud and clear, however, are scores of instances of irony and a general jovial tone of posts, often seen in tropes such as rhetorical questions, multiple exclamation marks and 'shouting' use of upper case.

What follows is a selection of tweets retrieved from the June 2017 database. They have been chosen randomly from those posted on and around the days of the two attacks. As we are dealing with over 1582 tweets, I clearly cannot include them all in this discussion but each tweet chosen is representative of the dataset both content-wise and because it is couched in humour while also displaying a moral foundation. The first three exemplars consist of tweets characterized by a humorous text below a serious image. There were many similar tweets in the database. I chose to present these first because they were representative of anti-Muslim feeling. They were posted before the two attacks. I then present six tweets posted between June 3rd and June 9th. These are mostly verbal tweets, but one consists of a serious image with a humorous text below it. The remaining verbal tweets presented were posted on June 19th following the attack on the Finsbury Park Mosque.

¹ For a more detailed description of how the database was constructed see Lobanov (2021). *Open-access journal* | *www.europeanjournalofhumour.org*



Tweet 1. "For the Many".

Corbyn refuses to rule out continued mass migration after Brexit. How can we trust him to deliver the will of the people? #ForTheMany

A common pattern in the June 2017 dataset consisted of verbal texts combined with a snapshot of a hostile looking mass of people that evoke a sense of peril. A news related poster (i.e., a user who frequently comments on news stories) posted an ironic verbal text below a serious image although Corbyn's expression can be considered somewhat humorous. The image consists of a close up of the then Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's face against a background of a boat full of migrants at sea, presumably in search of refuge in the west (Tweet 1). The remark claims that Corbyn cannot be trusted to fulfil the will of "the people", thereby accusing the Labour party of being undemocratic. The hashtag, mimicking Labour's slogan "for the many", is clearly ironic, as it is attached to an image of a boat full of refugees and can be seen as an attempt to evoke fear. A further humorous charge is provided by the odd expression on Jeremy Corbyn's face ridiculing him as confused, ambivalent and apprehensive. The slogan "the many" refers to the overwhelming numbers of the refugees, who according to the poster, are about to swamp the UK. This tweet relies on the moral foundation (MF) of Loyalty as it seems to evoke the threat that the people of the UK will be overwhelmed by foreign "others", who will take over their way of life, and it calls on people to recognize this menace and at the same time to laugh at the caricature of Corbyn, who is himself seems a little confused and not in control of the wave of refugees his policies would welcome. The tweeter seems to imply "the (real) many" need to stick together to fight this threat. Furthermore, the image includes the subliminally hidden slogan in the bottom righthand corner, "Leave EU", with an image of the Union Jack embedded in the "V" of the word "Leave". The implication of this image is that leaving the EU would mean restoring the UK to its former glory.

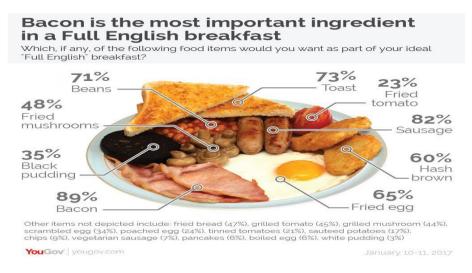


Tweet 2. "A special sort of stupid"

If you see mass immigration from the 3rd world as an economic necessity or solution to population decline: You are a special sort of stupid.

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Tweet 2, posted by an influencer, consists of a serious image with a humorous verbal text below. It uses a hypothetical statement about immigration, introduced by a conditional 'if', to claim that if the reader is one of those who emphasizes the advantages of migrants coming to the UK, they are intellectually inferior. The author does not attack users themselves, but only hypothetical supporters of immigration. The use of "special" implies that such people do not share the author's values. The closing phrase "You are a special sort of stupid" is a form of ridicule, mockery. The adjectives 'stupid' and 'funny' are semantically related and reminiscent of playground taunting. The wording of the tweet is contextualized by the picture. The image displays a dangerous looking crowd where police agents are the only barrier between the immigrants and the passing traffic of regular citizens. The juxtaposition of the verbal text and the image is probably intended to evoke the fear of being overwhelmed by alien people. In the way the author frames it, any form of acceptance shown to refugees should be unthinkable to anyone in their right mind. This tweet, by using an image showing masses of refugees invading the UK, challenges the idea that migrants from the third world could be economically necessary or a solution to a declining population. Relying on the MF of Sanctity, in other words immigration, in terms of heightened moral difference the author tries to argue against migration from the third world, a different humanity from that of "our" UK.



Tweet 3. "Full English Breakfast"

The English Rank Bacon at Number One (Definitely do not retweet to offend any of our porkhating friends...)

Migrants were not only targeted through their depiction as a mass of people. In an interesting example they are teased by what they do not eat, namely through pork. A humorous verbal text that is attached to an image of a full English breakfast refers to the results of a poll that ranks bacon in pole position as the most important ingredient of the meal. Any form of pork is *haram* or forbidden to Muslims and, showing the most popular food in an English breakfast targets a community that does not eat that food. In this way, Muslims are immediately locked out of being really "English". The implication is clear to bacon eaters (the English) and Muslims alike. The words of the tweet in brackets ironically discourage retweeting but of course, does the reverse. It also caricatures Muslims in terms of one feature, their refusal to eat pork and therefore the rejection of "English" values. The author openly mocks Muslims by using a highly

emotionally charged issue, forbidden food, in an indirect and apparently safe manner. The mention of pork is humorous for like-minded users as the author attempts to create a connection between the consumption of bacon and Englishness and at the same time establishes that Muslim values are radically incompatible with English values. This tweet relies on the MF of Loyalty: the author, an influencer, aims to create a schism and a conflict between English people and Muslim people who are a minority in the UK by humorously using a poll about the Full English Breakfast.

4. Radical right tweets on June 3rd, 4th and 5th 2017

The third day of June was the powder keg for the numerous hate crimes that were committed throughout the month. The terrorist attack that occurred on that day on London Bridge was a traumatic occurrence for the country as three attackers drove a van into pedestrians after which they tried to kill more civilians in Borough Market. Eight people died and 48 were injured. This had an explosive effect, especially in the light of the fact that it followed the Manchester Arena attack of the 22 May, that had already ignited the radical right and the populace alike in an anti-Muslim wave of hate and attacks. There was an immediate reaction against minorities, as had occurred in Manchester:

Hate crimes against British Muslims in the week after the terrorist attack in Manchester went up by five times, figures reveal. In total, 139 cases of "anti-Muslim hate" were reported in seven days — compared to 25 in the previous week. (Kerbaj, 2017)

The London Bridge attack provoked a spike in tweeting and the radicalization of the right wing that led to a week-long flow of tweets. The three most frequent content words that emerged from tweets posted on the days of and immediately around both attacks were 'Muslim', 'migrant' and 'terrorist', therefore highlighting the link between Islam, terrorism and migrants and those opposing the ideology of the radical right, i.e., the British left.

The majority of tweets posted around the time of the attacks were characterized by irony and ridicule, designed to spread an ideological narrative and score political points. Virtue signalling by posters was rife, with much manifestation of the moral foundation of Sanctity. Several tweets mention Muslim faith as being equivalent to psychiatric illness, i.e., its practitioners were 'nutters'. Words evoking disgust and ridicule, such as "sicko" and "nutter", were widely used by these tweeters, for example, to enhance the texts of tweets for greater impact, e.g., "muslim sickos, living around the corner from the local fish and chips." Impaired mental health was used as a marker of other adversarial groups, such as leftwing users, as in the tweet "i have an idea, why dont you invite a few more muslim nutters for tea". This form of ridicule makes its appearance on the 4th of June and then persists until the end of the month. These tweets evoke the MF of Sanctity as the person posting, an influencer, is clearly disgusted by Muslims, but they also target the left who are known to uphold the MF of Care and inclusiveness. Significant too is the inclusion of national food and drinks, fish and chips and tea, which do not go together with Muslim eating habits. The ambiguity of the nature of these tweets, making it unclear whether they are intentionally humorous or not, is a major feature of several of the tweets collected. This ambiguity is a good indication of how radical right users posted controversial content throughout June 2017 while being shielded by non-seriousness. This "I was only joking" strategy provides an easy answer to attacks and accusations from other users. Furthermore, some tweeters insistently tweeted about violence, which they attributed to Muslims as their natural trait. This narrative was part of a process of on-going radicalization by

right wingers, also influenced by events throughout the month, that were becoming more aggressive, and hateful after the terrorist attacks by radical Muslims.

On June 3rd an influencer posts of a map of the world with an ironic verbal comment below it:



Tweet 4. "THIS is an Empire"

My dear muslim fellow, the Caliphate is not an empire......THIS is an empire!

A simple two-dimensional map attached to an ironic verbal text depicts the British Empire at the peak of its expansion, juxtaposing the vivid red of its territories with the rest of the world coloured in white. This picture evokes the historical grandeur of the British Empire and could be intended to rally a sense of loyalty and pride in the reader. The text addresses a Muslim user with highlighted and quite possibly patronising politeness, since it is clear that the targeted reader is not at all "dear" to the poster, to demonstrate the spread and dimensions of the British Empire in comparison to the Caliphate, a holy empire built over centuries by Muslims. The verbal text of the tweet draws on the information conveyed by the picture, although there is no corresponding map of the Caliphate, to create a comparison between the two Empires and the poster mockingly uses excessive good manners towards the targeted other, i.e., the Muslim user. The author of the tweet does not specify whether they are referring to the current Islamic Caliphate created by ISIS or its historic predecessors. This lack of precision contributes to the ambiguity of the entire tweet. The verbal text that contextualizes the image establishes a humorous tone so that a user is likely to interpret the red of the territories of the British Empire as not being serious information, but as a way of mocking Muslims and their Caliphate. The structure, "THIS is an Empire!" echoes the famous line from Crocodile Dundee, "THIS is a knife!", used to put down the other element in a comparison. The final exclamation mark and the use of uppercase letters underlines to other users the importance of British identity and encourages other upholders of British patriotism, and identity. It also draws a clear division between those who are of a like mind to the author and those who are different and therefore do not belong to the poster's tribe. The moral foundation of Authority frames this tweet, as the author's goal is to boast about the supremacy of the British Empire and its legacy and to construct a difference based on identity and belonging too. The author also avoids discussing the fact that the glory days of the British Empire are long gone and remains locked in a mythical portrayal of the past. Finally, the closing phrase THIS is an empire acts like the punchline of a joke adding impact to the entire tweet. This punchline effect is a common feature of the tweets examined.

Last but not least, it is likely that this tweet was posted prior to the London Bridge attack because there is no mention or even a hint of urban warfare, something which will be evident in other posts that followed. Soon tweets will mention scenes of urban guerilla warfare on the streets. and are mostly purely verbal, such as the ironic:

Tweet 5

Constant terror attacks, **migrants** fighting each other in the streets, women being harassed. Leftist paradise.

The language, as in Tweet 5, is hyperbolic with a single, albeit tragic attack, i.e., the London Bridge incident, turning into "constant" attacks. There is nothing humorous there but like other tweets posted on the 3rd June it focuses on the link between Islam, terrorism and migrants and those opposing the ideology of the radical right, namely the British left seen as supporting the attack. This tweeter starts off seriously, although somewhat over dramatically, but closes their shout by mockingly labeling today's Great Britain as a "Leftist paradise". Many other tweets that day mention scenes of urban guerilla warfare on the streets but the reaction to the attack by this radical right influencer includes the mocking label of today's Great Britain as a "Leftist paradise", and like the *THIS is an Empire!* it closes on a highly ironic note. This final remark, placed as a sort of punchline or jab (Attardo, 2001) at the end of a scaremongering remark, will increasingly become a common way to finish a tweet. Ironic punchlines were frequent closures to tweets (Lobanov, 2021). In terms of MF, this tweet pivots on Sanctity underscored by the users' righteousness.

On the same day another influencer of a similar ilk tweets:

Tweet 6

You must know, any facts which are inconvenient to the open borders, mass immigration, hug a *terrorist*, we hate Britain narrative are racist.

This poster light heartedly argues for the opposite of the so-called 'PC' narrative that is defined as an anti-British "hate Britain" narrative. The collective reaction of the radical right accounts during the next few days will be characterized by tropes, such as open borders, mass immigration but the ironic "hug a terrorist" slogan ridicules the moral foundation of Care, which is an attribute of more liberal narratives (notably, the popular phrase "hug a tree" mocks left wing attitudes towards environmental sustainability). Furthermore, this is an attempt to scare other users by evoking the vision of suspension of free speech in the UK. This tweet is an example of the build-up of radicalization as when the perceived actions of targeted minorities are used as an argument to respond to in kind.

Tweets 7, 8 & 9 (June 5th) * Wall Street Journal

Tweet 7 Ah, the jihadi tea lady

Tweet 8 WSJ*, You know nothing. It certainly was not any radical **muslim** but an oppressed brown skinned man wearing a dress

Tweet 9 Immediately deport this dress wearing jihadi

On June 3rd, there was actually a slump in right wing posts, but on the following two days there was a new surge in tweets, and content was much more intense than what had appeared the previous day. There was a clear backlash against the Muslim minority after the attack, shown in tweets mocking Islam and Muslims. The tweets, when considered collectively, pushed for radicalization and captured a blend of humour and morality talk. Humour was channelled online by Conservatives and the radical right alike to propagate their outrage and proliferate views that were acted upon offline by like-minded activists.

Tweets posted on the 5th of June focused on framing the Muslim community as terrorists. Tweeters underlined the warning that those whom they called terrorists were everywhere: next door, near schools or even in the person of an old tea lady in the office (Tweet 7: "Ah, the jihadi

tea lady"). These tweeters offered ridicule as a response by British society to this danger as well as a call for toughness by authorities, suggesting the deportation of Muslims. The radicalization of these narratives increased day by day as tweets, which were still humorous, became increasingly aggressive. Tweet 9: "Immediately deport this dress wearing jihadi" shows the persistence of calls for deportation, using ridicule by labelling Muslim men as "dress wearing jihadi" (Tweet 8). British society is framed as being fragile and its failure to deport Muslims was used as implicit encouragement for right-wing radicals to take matters into their own hands. Both these tweets reflect the MF of Sanctity.

The London Bridge terrorist attack remained in the digital flow of the radical right posting for days after the attack. One serious message "Would you adam and eve it? #londonbridge faking a protest by muslims" was encased in Cockney rhyming slang which immediately created a humorous undertone: "Would you Adam and Eve it" is slang in London for "Would you believe it? Here the MF is clearly Loyalty.

Meanwhile, in the physical world, the fallout on the 4th of June was enormous. Two cases stand out. James Palmer, a man with a serious alcohol problem, after watching the news coverage of the London Bridge attack, left a blue plastic bag outside of a mosque claiming it was a bomb. The fake bomb inside the bag carried a note: "Youse are next, defo" (Atta et al 2017, p. 50). Paul Hepplestall uploaded a video on Facebook in which he made racist comments, threatened to blow up mosques and brandished a machete while laughing and smiling. His goal in the video was to "kill and maim followers of Islam" (Parry, 2017). Interestingly, after the counter outrage and the threat of prosecution by police he later apologized by saying it was a joke. Other incidents reported by Tell MAMA include a teacher who made several Islamophobic comments that referenced the terrorist attack addressed to the Muslim student in the room, and a rant at a post office that was focused on the fact that "All Muslims in this country are terrorists" (Atta et al 2017, pp. 49-50).

On June 7th, Craig Burgin, armed with a large knife, uploaded a video threatening Muslims. Atta et al report that, after referring to his knife as his "bad boy", Burgin told the camera: "I'm ready for you, scum b****** muzzy c****." Again, "muzzy" is derogatory phraseology that we often find among far-right networks online. (Atta et al 2017, pp. 97-98). He mentioned Theresa May and threatened a war in the UK, evidently a "race war". Moreover, Hope not Hate underlined how Burgin bragged about abusing drugs while writing "hahahaha" (Archibald, 2017). At this point a carnivalesque threat of violence was looming and could seemingly erupt at any point. There was a mutual radicalization effect, because that same day, three girls attacked and stabbed a nursery worker while shouting about Allah, punching and kicking her (Gillet, 2017). Disgust towards Muslims is evident, accompanied by the carnivalesque sense of lawlessness in both groups: radical right radicals and Muslim radicals. These two movements compete with each other and ride these waves of increasing radicalization.

The British radical right tried to mobilize its own support by organizing a "UK against Hate" march in Manchester led by the well-known radical right figure, Tommy Robinson. The goal of the march was to promote anti-Muslim sentiment, as recounted by Hope not Hate (Mulhall, 2017), but the march was clothed in a sense of righteousness. The declared goal of the march was to protect minorities from Muslims. The protest assumed a carnivalesque character as the marchers exposed a pig's head and took bites out of it. Clashes between police, counter-protestors, and some members of the marching crowd followed, and there were 8 arrests.

5. Tweets posted on June 19th 2017

The London Bridge terrorist attack was narrated as being carried out by proponents of radical Islam, while the Finsbury Park Mosque attack, that took place only two weeks later, by a far

right terrorist, was mostly ignored and when alluded to, in a sense, silently justified. In fact, the reaction of right-wing tweeters in the case of the second attack was to shift the blame onto migrants and the Muslim minority. Darren Osborne, the attacker of the Finsbury Park Mosque incident, had come to see himself as a radical right soldier that had been radicalized by preceding terrorist attacks, the online content produced by the radical right, and the series such as *Three Girls*. A copy-cat process was evident as he used the van which was similar to the one used by the London Bridge attackers. Osborne's psyche was deeply affected by what Dawkins (1976, p. 330) labelled an "ideological mind virus" as he was shouting "I want to kill more Muslims" while trying to escape (1976, p. 330).

Abdulrahman, a witness on the scene, claimed the attacker said, "kill me", as he was held on the ground. He added: "I said, 'tell me why did you try driving to kill innocent people?' When he went into the [police]van he made gestures, he was laughing." (Horton and Allen, 2017)

This incident caused huge resonance online. Atta et al (2017, p. 98) activity by the radical right was virulent with hashtags such as #Revenge, invitations to continue the "extermination" with extremely violent carnivalesque wordplay such as, "Is this the month of Ramadan or Ramavan". This was the crescendo of the process that had started with the London Bridge terrorist attack, exhibiting a clear connection between Islamophobia happening in the non-virtual world and what was happening online, with humour as a prime accelerator. The tweets extracted for the duration of June 19th were, as for June 3rd, characterized by Muslim and terrorist themes and, above all, by irony:

Tweet 10

"Gotta love muslims, so peaceful".

This tweet is doubly ironic because Darren Osborne was not a Muslim.

In fact, the collective narrative included in several of these tweets shifted the blame for the actions of the far- right terrorist onto Muslims, framing the incident as an unavoidable consequence of the rise of radical Islam in the UK, justifying what they considered to be the reasons behind the attack on Imam Abu Hamza al-Masri who preached at the mosque. The Imam was framed as a Muslim radical, a danger interpreted through MF of Sanctity and Authority, whose preaching attracted both left- and right-wing radical attention towards his mosque. Tweets display ridicule of uninformed users, the silent majority of UK citizens, who had chosen to ignore the threat of radicalization represented by this Imam or who were unaware of a supposedly widely known fact that the mosque was to be a safe harbour for Muslim radicals.

Tweets 11

This mosque was where Abu Hamza preached hatred towards us. Young men radicalised. Were you upset by that? #utterlypredictable

Tweet 12

"The mosque rose to notoriety after Abu Hamza al-Masri became Imam of the Mosque" - what is WRONG with you!? It is common knowledge ffs!!!

The MF of Sanctity is upheld in these tweets in which rhetorical questions, the use of screaming cap locks and an overdose of exclamation marks shift them into the realm of quasi non-seriousness. The authors of the tweets paint the Finsbury Park Mosque as a place of radicalization, implicitly justifying the attack by right wing activists. This is shown by the fact that they use hashtags such as #utterlypredictable. The many reasons that inspired the attack

were reduced to a cipher, rendering the outcome as an attack on one person, the Imam - a symbol of the entire community whose preaching that radicalized others was the culprit behind the attack for some of these tweeters. Just like the previous ironic closure of "Leftist Paradise", #utterlypredictable and "It is common knowledge ffs!!!" are also ironic and in final position within the tweets. They act as punchlines.

Tweets are also characterized once more by the dredging up of selective history, recalling the Crusades, claiming that Islam has not changed since the Middle Ages and ridiculing it as a "backward medieval desert" religion (Tweet 13).

Tweet 13

In 400 years your backwards medieval desert religion has been locked in civil wars & invading non muslim lands. I KNOW your history, Saracen.

The author's point of view can be recognized by the fact that they taunt a Muslim user by calling him "Saracen", a term used during the Middle Ages that is currently weaponized in radical right and far right circles. It is impossible to determine if this author is serious or just trolling their audience with this hyperbolic language; nevertheless, as this tweet is posted after a major terrorist attack, their intentions are clearly sympathetic towards radicalism on the right. In fact, this tweet implies that the historical struggle between Christianity and Islam will never stop. Significantly the tweeter adopts screaming upper case to say that he is aware of some kind of truth .

The accounts also describe left wingers as losers and traitors and Muslims as Saracens, reinforcing the idea that these two groups are in an alliance to damage the UK, a drum beaten by these tweeters throughout the month.

Tweet 14

There will soon be more Brits in prison for criticising Islam, than there will be muslim terrorist suspects. Thanks Theresa & the UK Left.

Tweet 15

Oh look! Left wing Jihad supporter who wants muslims to blow up Catholic & Protestant churches. How progressive & tolerant. Dirty wee cunt.

These tweets contribute to the narrative that left wing movements and Muslims are allied in a common struggle to take over theUK also implicitly justifying the Finsbury Park Mosque attack, and augmenting their rhetoric with an expression of disgust, the use of swear words and insults, e.g., a left wing user seen as supporting Muslims is called a "dirty wee cunt" and mocked for being progressive (Tweet 15). A victimhood narrative that portrays British men as unjustly imprisoned for criticizing Islam and suggesting that there are more British people in prison in the UK, than there are Muslims is also embraced, for which they ironically thank Theresa May and the left, thereby actually blaming them. It is interesting that this tweeter feels that May, a Conservative prime minister, is more allied with the left (and Muslims) than with the majority of British people (Tweet 14). Apart from the ironic content like "How progressive, how tolerant" [to blow up Christian churches], the tone of these tweets is light hearted, with expressions like "Thanks Theresa" and "Oh look!" that eschew power barriers between themselves and the establishment. Notably, tweeters have total disrespect for Muslims – the proper noun is consistently referred to with an initial lower case.

In the physical world, on June 22nd, Nigel Pelham, a man who published inflammatory online material between February 24 and November 16, 2015 to stir up religious hatred against

Muslims, was sentenced to 20 months in jail (Garcia, 2017). His sentence is relevant because of a claim by the radical right that hate speech is free speech and a right.

June 23rd saw the initial march of 7000 London football "lads" that started to emerge as the Football Lads Alliance, a significant street movement (Lowes & Levene, 2018, p. 23). While claiming to be a simple working class movement, they held banners calling for the banning of mosques, halal, sharia and Islam in the UK, sparking clashes in several cities (O'Brien, 2017). Online, the Lone Crusader Meme appeared in the morning, depicting Norman Osborne, responsible for the Finsbury Park Mosque attack, driving his van festooned with Crusader iconography (Atta et al., 2017, p. 98). Mutual online-non-virtual world interaction is evident.

6. Conclusions

This paper has provided some examples, retrieved from a robust database of tweets posted by users with right-wing leanings that show how they reacted to the terrorist attacks that took place in London in June 2017. These tweets were couched in humorous tones and although they rarely contained clearcut wordplay they frequently adopted subtle (and not so subtle) irony and were delivered in a tongue-in-cheek manner. The overall result of these tweets is a mix of seriousness and non-seriousness that introduces an element of uncertainty in the posters' intentions. Were they being serious or trying to be funny? This ambiguity provides an escape route for harsh remarks hidden behind the veil of jest. "Gotta love muslims, so peaceful" – is only humorous if intoned in a certain manner. Otherwise, the opposite is implied. The point is we cannot be one hundred percent certain of the posters' intentions. In reference to the killing of a disliked minority, the phrase rings ironic.

Furthermore, tweets light-heartedly signalled the virtues of the British/English through the othering of Muslims, migrants, and of course, terrorists by upholding the moral foundations of Authority, Loyalty and Sanctity. Ultimately, June 2017 saw a heightened level of activity by the radical right, both online and offline. Some of the hate crimes during this period were mirrored in the tweets posted throughout the month, as the disgust and ridicule shown towards migrants and Muslims on Twitter was embodied by attackers on the ground. We may quite safely say that there was, at least, a connection between online activity and some of the hate crimes committed. In sum, this convergence of data and real-life events constitutes a viable collection of content that can help us to perceive online humour in terms of complex radical narratives that are all too often compressed into single tweets.

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