Terrorism, hate speech and ‘cumulative extremism’ on Facebook

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Terrorism, hate speech and ‘cumulative extremism’ on Facebook

A case study

Mark Littler and Kathy Kondor

Introduction

The growth of online communication over the last two decades represents arguably the biggest shift in human interactions since the introduction of the printing press (Delamothe 1995). The ‘digital revolution’ has created unprecedented opportunities for collaboration, cooperation, and commerce, opening new markets and allowing groups and organisations to flourish in a way that was impossible in the geographically and socially bounded spaces found offline (Wellman et al. 2003). The many and varied pro-social benefits of these changes have been subject to sustained research interest over the last two decades, with a substantial body of scholarship affirming the internet’s role in delivering benefits as varied as increased political participation (Ferdinand 2013) and social activism (Earl and Kimport 2011), expedited international trade (Keeney 1999), and quicker communications (Mann and Stewart 2000).

While the ability to join individuals in defiance of social and physical geography has certainly created new opportunities – many of which have been beneficial – it is important to remember that communication technologies are, as Perros and Antoniou (2016) note, ethically neutral, with their moral value reliant on the intent of the user. In the era of cyberwarfare and ‘fake news’ (Amarasingam 2011) such insights barely need reiterating, and against this backdrop, the growing academic focus on negative and anti-social applications of digital technologies including for financial crime (Philippsohn 2001), copyright fraud (Baker 1999) and the distribution of prohibited content (Beech et al. 2008) is to be welcomed as a counterbalance to the ‘techno-utopianism’ (Christensen 2011) of early internet scholarship. However, the extent to which research has moved beyond narrow considerations of content to explore questions of behavioural causation, distribution and marketing remains limited.

In the context of hate crime and Islamophobia, while a significant volume of scholarship has sought to map and typologise hate-speech on social media (Awan 2016; Littler and Feldman 2015; Awan and Zempi 2017), the research evidence remains largely silent in respect of usage strategies, marketing, and the impact of content on behavioural change. Indeed, little academic attention has sought to explore the complex causal pathways that lead to violence, and in which
the internet plays a key role, and as a result, lazy assumptions as to the nature of its function in shaping the commission of hate crime persist in academic and policy discussion.

Debates around the concept of ‘cumulative extremism’ (Eatwell 2006) offers an exemplar of this phenomenon, with academic and policy discussions embracing the idea as a way of explaining much of the recent Islamophobic violence that has occurred across the west. However, as Busher and Macklin (2015) note, the bounds of the phenomenon remain somewhat vague, and there is little empirical evidence that illuminates the behavioural processes underlying its operation. Particularly in respect of the internet, and the role of social media in mediating and moderating cumulative extremism, the research evidence remains largely silent. This chapter represents a first attempt to address this deficiency, providing the results of a study exploring the use of Facebook – as perhaps the most significant and widely employed social media conduit – by far-right groups in the promotion of Islamophobic hate crime in the aftermath of the 2015 Bataclan spree shootings.

Understanding ‘cumulative extremism’

As Busher and Macklin (2015) note, the concept of cumulative extremism has been adopted by many academic and policy commentators as a way of explaining increasing rates of Islamophobic violence. Initially coined by Eatwell to explain ‘the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms [of extremism]’ (Eatwell 2006, p. 205), the term has increasingly become synonymous with a narrower meaning in British debate (Bartlett and Birdwell 2013), frequently operating as a synonym for the ‘spirals of violence’ that are argued to characterise interactions between extreme Islamist and extreme right-wing groups (Busher and Macklin 2015). Under this understanding, an act of violence by one group – for example, a terrorist attack or a violent street demonstration – is seen to trigger a revenge attack by an opposing faction claiming to represent the interests of the broader community against which the first attack was directed. This revenge attack in turn targets a broader community that the original attacking group claims to represent, leading to a further revenge attack in an ‘enduring cycle of violent [and] terrorist action’ (Goodwin 2013).

As Bartlett and Birdwell (2013, p. 4) note, there is a ‘strong intuitive case’ for this argument, and indeed, there is some – albeit limited – corroboratory evidence in both official statistics showing a rise in anti-Muslim hate crime following some acts of Islamist terrorism (O’Neill 2017) and in academic research looking at the reporting of anti-Muslim hate crime (Littler and Feldman 2015; Feldman and Littler 2014; Copsey, Dack, Littler and Feldman 2013). However, despite this there remain, as Busher and Macklin (2015) note, a number of important limitations including in respect of the empirical evidence base. Few studies have attempted to explore the mechanisms of influence that shape the relationship, especially in respect of the function of action by the media, state, and general public. The role of social media in particular is an important gap in the extant scholarship, with Fielitz et al (2018) noting both its intuitive centrality to ‘spirals of polarization’ and the lack of empirical evidence exploring its operation.

As Walters, Brown and Wieditzka (2016) concede, the absence of this empirical evidence – particularly in respect of causation – is a significant deficiency of work in this area. This echoes Bartlett and Birdwell’s (2013) early observation that standard accounts of cumulative extremism have been silent on questions of causation, and while scholars such as Hall (2013), Chakraborti and Garland (2015), and Roberts et al. (2013) have done much to advance theoretical understandings of the Islamophobic hate, in an increasingly digital age research unpacking the role of online materials in influencing such behaviours is clearly important to developing more robust and effective policy responses.
Marketing extremism: the role of social media

Despite contemporary concern around Islamophobia and hate crime, Huysmans and Buonfino (2008) note that mainstream British politicians have historically been reluctant to engage in debates around the issues that are key to the appeal of far-right political actors: migration, terrorism, and threats to national identity. Moreover, the mainstream media’s reluctance to provide coverage to extremist viewpoints has historically been seen to have placed a cordon sanitaire around non-mainstream views (Littler and Feldman 2017), depriving extreme voices of a media platform from which to recruit. Writing in 2010, Ellinas notes that this failure to connect with the media has, to some extent, stifled the development of extreme movements, perhaps contributing to the hostility of supporters towards the mainstream media (Bartlett et al. 2011). However, with the rapid growth of technology, savvy actors have been able to subvert these restrictions and build communities of support via the internet (Berlet et al. 2015). In an increasingly digital age, such actors can come to occupy privileged positions as ‘unofficial custodians’ of extremist discourse (Lee 2015), curating media content to reinforce a world view among members which is supportive of the groups stated aims, and which increasingly comes to shape mainstream media coverage.

Writing in 2006, Conway noted that digital communications were employed by extreme groups in pursuit of five core goals – information provision, recruitment, financing, networking, and information gathering. While successful organisations are likely to make use of a varied range of digital communication channels in pursuit of these objectives, their selection of medium is likely (at least in part) to be determined by the intended goal of the content they wish to share. Widely accessible and public facing sites – such as Facebook and Twitter – are likely to be employed to share content with different goals to private forums or the anonymised sites on the so-called ‘Dark Web’ (Jardine 2018). The intended audience is also likely to play a central role in the selection of medium, with potential, new, or less involved members and supporters likely to be engaged via more easily accessible and visible public forums.

Fry (2016) highlights that the far right often exploit real or imagined acts of Islamist violence as a tool to recruit and incentivise violent action, consistent with the first two of Conway’s (2006) five goals. Given the need for this information to be publicly available, and evidence on the role of online far-right communities in sharing news content (Littler and Feldman 2017), the hostility of their members to the mainstream media (Bartlett et al. 2011), and the alleged centrality of far-right groups in the commission of hate crime (Copsey et al. 2013), it would seem reasonable to assert that the media activity of far-right groups on Facebook should, if these arguments are accepted, show appropriate ‘framing’ of news coverage following acts of Islamist violence. Indeed, Littler and Feldman (2015, p. 17) expressly note that such a process would seem a ‘vital pre-requisite for cumulative extremism’, suggesting that acts of Islamist violence should be followed both by Islamophobic hate speech and direct calls to action, pursuant to the ideological goals and modus operandi of the group. In this, the existing research would argue for a view of group content dissemination consistent with the assumptions two-step flow (Katz 1957) models of media influence, as a result of which we hypothesise that acts of Islamist violence will be followed by an increase in both curated coverage of the attacks, and calls to action by official Facebook channels of far-right groups.

Method

Our analysis employed data drawn from the official Facebook outputs of two prominent UK-based far-right groups – Britain First and the English Defence League (or EDL) – collected
in the aftermath of the 2015 Bataclan attacks. Content posted by the groups to their official Facebook pages during the five days immediately prior and following the Bataclan attacks was collected and thematically coded by a research assistant starting on the evening of the attacks. Collection continued for 5 days, with all posts screenshotted and saved for analysis. On completion of the data collection, all posts were coded using themes identified on the basis of an initial review of the data, allowing for a reflexive coding process akin to that employed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The final coding structure included eight distinct themes (Islamophobia, immigration, terrorism, news, calls to action, merchandising, solidarity, and other), with a maximum of three codes applied to any one post. All coding was undertaken by a research assistant, and reviewed and verified by the lead author prior to analysis.

Non-public content was excluded from the data, as was content posted by unofficial or individual accounts in order to allow for a tight focus on official group messaging. Similarly, comments on posts were also excluded, despite their potential importance in understanding the framing of posts, as an ethical measure intended to preserve the privacy of individual users. This is consistent with current UK Government Social Media Research Group guidance (2016). The final data set encompassed 388 discrete posts, of which 258 were published by Britain First, and 130 by the English Defence League (EDL). Of these, 156 were posted before the attacks (46 for the EDL, 111 for Britain First), and 231 after the attacks (147 for Britain First, 84 for the EDL). Analysis involved a direct pre and post-event comparison of post-frequency, with qualitative analysis of post content used to support interpretation of post meanings.

Results

A comparison of the frequency of six of the themes in pre- and post-attack content is presented in Table 30.1. Despite the direction of the hypothesis, and in contrast to expectations grounded in the extant literature, our data offer little support for theories of cumulative extremism that would afford official group Facebook posts a significant influence on the commission of hate crime and violence. Despite work by Copsey et al. (2013) asserting the centrality of groups in inspiring members to engage in violence, our data evidenced no significant change in the number of calls to action following the Bataclan attacks, with the EDL publishing only three posts in this category, and Britain First issuing fewer calls following the attacks than in the five days immediately preceding them. Moreover, the content of these posts was often framed using ambiguous language – for example, with Britain First inviting members to ‘Take the fight to [their] enemies’ – that avoided giving direct prescriptions for action. This was in direct contrast to the overt calls anticipated by the research hypothesis.

Differences were most evident between the pre and post-attack data in the publication of news led content. Results for both the EDL and Britain First showed a major increase in the distribution of news posts, with an increase of 48 and 53 stories evident for each group respectively. This is consistent with research explanations of media influence and cumulative extremism.

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<td>EDL (pre-attack)</td>
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<td>Britain First (pre-attack)</td>
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<td>EDL (post-attack)</td>
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<td>Britain First (post-attack)</td>
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that stress the function of formal groups as conduits for trusted news information. Given evidence on the significant levels of mainstream media distrust among members of far-right groups such as the EDL (Bartlett and Littler 2011; Bartlett et al. 2011), this is perhaps unsurprising. Interestingly, however, the framing of these stories was often Islamophobic, speculative, and guilty of scaremongering, though consistently bereft of express prescriptions for action save the common encouragement for members to ‘pray for Paris’.

Data from posts coded for Islamophobia offered support for this picture, with few significant differences evident between the two groups in terms of their post focus. While there was some evidence of difference between the EDL and Britain first, both saw a significant increase in the total number of Islamophobic posts following the Bataclan attacks. This is consistent with the assumptions inherent in the existing literature, and in particular the idea that an act of Islamist violence may be followed by an Islamophobic ‘backlash’ (Maira 2011) that can – even bereft of express calls to action – lead to an uptick in hate crime and Islamophobic violence. There are a number of potential explanations capable of framing this result, which are discussed at length in the following section.

Discussion

The results of this analysis raise a number of interesting questions in respect of the use of Facebook by far-right groups, perhaps the most obvious of which relates to the failure of the data to show a meaningful increase in calls to action following the 2015 Bataclan attacks. Despite the existence of evidence suggesting a significant increase in the reporting of anti-Muslim hate crime in the aftermath of the Bataclan attacks (Tell MAMA 2016, p. 19), our data evidenced no significant change in the publication of calls to action on the part of either the EDL or Britain First. This suggests that, far from the official outputs of extreme groups serving an important function in mandating member action, the commission of online and offline acts of retribution against British Muslims may be largely unrelated to the content of group messages published online.

While it remains possible that unobserved calls to action via private forums may be behind the increase in Islamophobic hate crime evidenced by the Tell MAMA data (Tell MAMA 2016), or that other groups may be behind its commission, the pre-eminence of the EDL and Britain First among UK far-right groups, and the significance of the increase in reported attacks (over 300%), implies that such explanations would lack prima facie credibility. A more convincing argument may suggest that the publication of calls to action may have been rendered less likely as a result of changes in the legal framework. While the crime of Encouragement of Terrorism under part 1 of the Terrorism Act (2006) has been in force for some time, a number of high-profile prosecutions in the immediate period before the Bataclan attacks saw individuals imprisoned for sharing content glorifying violence over social media (Elgot 2015; De Peyer 2015). The development of case law around the offence and its expansion to cover online communications may, alongside the deployment of harsh statutory penalties, be seen as having created an environment in which overt calls to violence are less likely to be made, a point lent credibility both by the speed and severity of prosecutions undertaken in the aftermath of the 2015 attacks, and by academic evidence on the centrality of such factors in determining encouragement of terrorism trial outcomes (Amirault and Bouchard 2017).

While such an argument possesses obvious merits, the comparative lack of media coverage in respect of these trials, and the absence of direct prosecutions for far-right activists in the period prior to the Bataclan attacks suggests that the threat of punishment may not have directly influenced either Britain First or the EDL. A more plausible explanation may simply be that
the data represent a significant challenge to common understandings of cumulative extremism, and in particular to accounts that seek to afford formal groups and pro-violent messaging a significant role in shaping member behaviours. As media effects scholarship has consistently shown, short-term exposure to pro-violent content is unlikely to result in a significant shift in behaviours among content consumers (Bushman and Huesmann 2006; Anderson et al. 2003). While the increase in the publication of Islamophobic content may, to some extent be seen as a counterbalance to this view, encouraging negative views of Muslims and creating a culture that facilitates the commission of violence and hate crime, there is little consensus in the literature as to how – if at all – such a relationship would operate in practice. Against this backdrop, the failure of our data to show a significant increase in calls to action – despite the rise in prevalence of anti-Muslim hate crime following the Bataclan attacks – would imply a picture which, while not capable of reliably disproving a link between group publications on Facebook and Islamophobic hate crime, is at least consistent with the findings of mainstream media effects research in Criminology.

Despite this finding, our data highlights the important role organised groups play in disseminating news information. As Neiwert (2017) notes in respect of the US alt-right, far-right activists have exceptionally low levels of trust in the mainstream media, as a result of which they are less likely to believe the content of mainstream news. Indeed, research on opinion leadership and the so-called ‘two-step flow’ (Katz 1957) models has consistently identified the importance of opinion leadership, with work by Lee (2015) highlighting the way in which far-right groups engage in a process of curation and ‘cherry picking’ aimed at creating a media narrative consistent with their worldview. The rapid increase in the sharing of Islamophobic news content in the aftermath of the Bataclan attacks suggests that both the EDL and Britain First engage in this process, mirroring research on political marketing (Henneberg 2006) by suggesting an opportunistic use of events to promote a particular ideological outlook.

Interestingly, in addition to an increase in the sharing of Islamophobic content, the Bataclan attacks were also followed by an increase in the publication of migrant-hostile content by both the EDL and Britain First. This is particularly significant given the initial failure of the press to identify the perpetrators as migrants, and suggests a willingness on the part of both the EDL and Britain First to engage in speculation in advance of the available facts. In an era of ‘fake news’, such a finding should come as no surprise, however its consistent with work on political marketing, and in particular with accounts that highlights the process by which political groups attempt to ‘spin’ events in service of their political objectives (McNair 2017).

When considering such marketing and ‘spin’, it is important to note that our results also showed that the groups under investigation were largely not creating new content, but sharing a curated selection of content created by mainstream news outlets. As Ellinas (2010) rightly identifies, mainstream political actors have not been immune from engaging in Islamophobic messaging in recent decades, with both Alexander (2004) and Frost (2008) identifying that the mainstream media has encouraged and supported the growth of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 era. The extent to which these changes led or followed the collapse of the cordon sanitaire and the growth of the far-right and alternative media online remains to be seen, however the potential for far-right groups to share mainstream media content, negating the need to create outputs of their own, may have significant implications for scholarship in this area. In particular, by sharing publications from supposedly ‘hostile’ press outlets, far-right groups may potentially be able to lend credibility to their worldview by leveraging the prestige of mainstream media outlets, arguing that even their opponents accept the premise of their views. A review of media coverage after the Bataclan attacks lends tacit support to this view, with Draga Alexandru expressly identified mainstream coverage as fuelling prejudice contributing towards an ‘atmosphere of
disapproval [towards] people originating from Muslim countries’ (2017, p. 131). In such a climate of hostility, it is unsurprising that violence may result.

Given the prevalence of anti-Muslim media content in the mainstream press, it is also possible that any increase in anti-Muslim hate crime following the Bataclan attacks may not be a product of organised far-right group action, but of increasingly hostile mainstream media coverage on an increasingly receptive public. The implications of such an explanation would be significant given the extensiveness of scholarship that asserts the centrality of organised far-right networks in the commission of Islamophobic hate crime (Copsey et al. 2013; Poynting 2006; Renton 2003). Rather than ideologically committed members of far-right groups being ‘activated’ by group publications, such a view would seem to suggest that much Islamophobic hate crime may be the result of action by unaligned — though perhaps sympathetic — members of the general public, whose knowledge of — and attitudes to — Islamist violence is shaped by the mainstream media. Such an argument would again align with the work of Busher and Macklin (2015), and their exhortation to place cumulative extremism in a broader social and political context. Rather than focussing on the formal movement-counter-movement dynamics envisaged by Eatwell’s (2006) initial proposal, our results would suggest the need to take a broader and more diffuse view of the social movements involved. Instead of formal membership organisations composed of ideologically committed activists, this outlook may be seen to argue the need for understanding cumulative extremism through 1 the lens of opposing social groups broadly defined.

Policy implications

On a policy level, our results argue the possibility for several key changes in the nature of state responses to the commission of Islamophobic hate crime and the regulation of extremist speech on social media. Firstly, our results may be taken to challenge the assumption common in policy circles that extremist organisations actively use social media to promote violent action. Despite academic evidence that suggests the involvement of organised far-right groups in orchestrating some Islamophobic revenge attacks (Copsey et al. 2013; Poynting 2006; Renton 2003), the data suggest that the factors contributing to the post-attack spike in reported hate crime may be attributed to other factors, including the mainstream media environment.

Such a finding is not to delegitimise the – very reasonable – concerns that exist around the rhetoric and outputs of extreme-right organisations: certainly, these groups may play an important role in both fostering an environment of intolerance, and also in terms of facilitating radicalisation in certain cases. Indeed, anecdotal evidence affords both Britain First and the EDL a significant role in the radicalisation of both Thomas Mair and Darren Osborne. Rather, our results argue for a broader response aimed at fighting the climate of intolerance present in mainstream media narratives, rather than an exclusive focus on outputs of formal groups. In this, we are consistent with Allen in identifying the media as perhaps ‘one of the most prevalent, virulent and socially significant sources of Islamophobia’ (Allen 2001, p. 2), and Littler and Feldman (2015) in arguing for a more responsible approach to the reporting of terrorist attacks by the mainstream press. Avoiding lazy journalism that links Islam and terrorism as a ‘threat’ in news reportage (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Baker et al. 2013) may be a good first step to addressing this issue.

While such a shift could be incentivised by strengthening and placing on a statutory footing the relevant sections of the IPSO editors code of practice on Discrimination (specifically section ii provisions on the reporting of religion), change may also be advanced by refocussing media coverage to highlight the many pro-social stories involving Muslims. As experimental research
by Saleem and Ramasubramanian (in press) highlights, exposure to positive media representations of Muslims decreases support for anti-Muslim measures, implying the possibility that increasing the number of positive representations may also reduce rates of Islamophobic hate crime. Responsible commissioning of news stories, as well as the promotion of positive Muslim characters in entertainment media, may go some way to addressing this.

Moreover, by highlighting the importance of content curation, and the sharing of mainstream media sources by far-right groups, our results may also be taken to argue against the current focus on regulating content on social media. Significant volumes of political and media commentary have focused on the need to regulate social media and Facebook content as a way of reducing the risk of both hate-speech online, and extremist radicalisation. By highlighting that the majority of the content shared by the EDL and Britain First came from mainstream media sources, our research questions the efficacy of direct digital regulation approaches, instead arguing the need for policymakers to engage in either a broader process of press regulation and responsibilisation, a process of user education and content consumption discretion building, or both. By focusing on simply extreme and illegal content sharing, significant opportunities to respond to Islamophobia and radicalisation are likely to be missed.

Less formally, research by Teitelbaum (2017) highlights the role that advocacy organisations can play in targeting the advertising revenues of media sources consistently publishing anti-Muslim content. In this, civil society organisations could move to support the work of the Stop Funding Hate campaign targeting advertisers working with commercial news sources that have a history of promoting anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic content, while also lobbying to apply social and political pressure to publishers. Anecdotal sources suggest such pressure can also be effectively applied by lobbying corporate shareholders in companies such as News Corp, the publisher of The Sun, and by applying social pressure to individuals associated with the owners of private publications regularly publishing anti-Muslim content (such as the The Daily Mail or The Daily Express – see Waterson 2018).

Alongside this, civil society organisations may also wish to proactively employ targeted advertising to promote pro-Muslim news stories, both in general, and in particular in the aftermath of terror attacks. By doing so, they could counterbalance the negative content curation and publication work undertaken by far-right groups, employing the Facebook advertising tool to micro-target group followers as well as those at risk of joining far-right groups. Given the small overall number of EDL and Britain First supporters active on Facebook, and the low cost of publishing targeted content, such an approach may prove to be both financially and practically effective.

Conclusions

While we feel it is important to be circumspect when interpreting and explaining the results of a single study, our results nevertheless raise a number of important points in respect of orthodox understandings of cumulative extremism, hate crime, and the role of Facebook in facilitating violence in the aftermath of acts of Islamist terrorism. By highlighting the absence of calls to action and the prevalence of both Islamophobic and anti-migrant content in the posts of both Britain First and the EDL, our findings challenge both widely held assumptions as to the nature of the cumulative extremism process, and the efficacy of interventions designed to target far-right groups and their role in the commission of Islamophobic hate crime.

We highlight the potential implications of these challenges for both existing scholarship and policy response to far-right groups online, and identify a range of potential alternative approaches that policy makers may wish to consider, in particular highlighting the importance
of addressing mainstream media reportage and the absence of positive media representations of Islam and Muslims. We also highlight the role that can be played by civil society organisations, in particular identifying the potential for social and economic pressure to be exerted against mainstream media forums promoting islamophobia, and for micro-targeting to be employed on social media to reach and challenge those who are most at risk of engaging in Islamophobic hate crime.

Future research may wish to focus on the role played by alternative social media forums including Twitter and YouTube, as well as new entrants such as Gab and established – but under-explored forums including 4chan and reddit. Attention may also wish to focus on Instagram given evidence on the increasing influence of image-led social media platforms (Alshawaf 2015). Moreover, more detailed analysis of the extent of user interaction with group posts, including comment analysis, and research on the role of Facebook content management algorithms in promoting content, may help to address some of the methodological limitations of this work. Alongside research employing larger samples, longer time-frames, and alternative groups, future researchers may also wish to employ experimental designs as a way of ascertaining the impact of social media posts on user views, employing randomisation to establish causal linkages and facilitating the development of a more in-depth understanding of the processes at play.

Note

1 A final, interesting, point can be made in respect of the fact that the data for both groups evidenced a significant increase in the number of merchandising posts following the Bataclan attacks. While not directly related to the hypothesis under investigation in this paper, such a finding is interesting as it supports Conway’s (2006) theory on the financial aspect of extremist groups online positioning. Moreover, the increased prevalence of merchandising calls suggests that group moderators and administrators are alive to the potential for capitalising on acts of Islamist violence, albeit in pursuit of more mundane and mercantile aims than incitement to violence.

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