

## Islamophobic and counter-Islamophobic YouTube representations of the British Muslim Communities

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### Abstract

Based on David Gauntlett's Web 2.0 approach of media audiences, this article argues that while Islamophobic discourses may be hegemonic in the British media in general, and the online media in particular, counter-Islamophobic ones have real potentials to subvert the anti-Muslims hegemony in contemporary Britain. Online media users, both as producers and consumers of mass-mediated representations, are empowered to blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual spaces in the construction of different conceptions of their own identities as well as of those of the others. To this end, comparatively, the comments of the users of two YouTube videos are analyzed and critically appraised to identify how they presumed the different representations of Muslim communities of/in Britain. It is suggested that YouTube users contribute, from their respective subject positions, to the construction of diverse conceptualizations of their own identities and those of others as well. Their presumed representations both entrench and defy a hierarchy of Islamophobic and Islamophobic images of Islam and Muslims in contemporary multicultural Britain.

### Keywords

Discourse; Islamophobia; "Prosumers"; Representation; Web 2.0.

*Wherever it is that we may have found ourselves  
camping out in the battlefields of Theory, we will  
doubtless have encountered, whether as friend or foe,  
the concept of representation. (Prendergast, 2000, 1)*

### 1. Introduction

Approaching media audiences from a Reception Theory perspective, Stuart Hall affirmed that the encoding and decoding process is far more complex than the simple sending and receiving of a message. He postulated different hypothetical positions that media audiences may take while consuming media messages. Those reading positions emanate from the active character of audiences and also from the audiences' own socio-cultural and political backgrounds and experiences. Generally speaking, critical and interpretive audience studies epitomized a crucial moment in the development of

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media and communication studies. There was a paradigmatic shift from text-based audience studies to reader-based audience studies. In media and communication jargon, the shift was from the production phase to the consumption phase. So, there was a steady de-centering of the mass-mediated text in favor of an increasing interest in audiences and their processing of media representations. The significance of this development can be traced to the fact that a balance was created between media effects studies and active audience studies. Audiences turned out to be irreversibly active and unpredictable in their use and consumption of media. Audiences use a variety of symbolic resources to make sense of what they receive from the media. Moreover, the inclusion of ethnographic explorations and cultural factors in understanding the dynamism of reception ushered into new questions of identity, relations of power, politics of insistence, and politics of resistance. This put real-life experiences of audiences—with their multitude of dimensions—under scrutiny. Emergent fields of research, such as media studies and notably cultural studies managed to decipher the mechanisms of power distribution and the configurations of political ideologies out of the ways audiences decoded and re-encoded media representations. Chris Barker (2008) outlined the major metamorphoses that took place in media audience studies. He wrote that

the active audience paradigm represented a shift of interest:  
-from numbers to meanings;  
-from textual meaning to textual meanings;  
-from the general audience to the particular audience. (327).

Never was it possible for media critics to wink at the insights of the critical paradigm explained above. It has become the wisdom of the field that the audiences are knowledgeable producers of meaning and that such a process of production and reproduction has to be understood as context-governed in which culture and cultural backgrounds of audiences loom large. As elaborated previously, Hall's encoding and decoding model invoked and expounded the possible options and strategies available to media audiences in their media experiences. Those options evinced, once for all, I believe, that audiences are active and can even become producers of media representations, not just passive consumers.

## **2. Web 2.0 Studies Participatory Audiences**

Web 2.0 is not an absolute replacement of the conventional character of the web, but it is about using existing systems in a 'new' way: to bring people together creatively. The coiner of the term "Web 2.0" Tim O'Reilly has described it as 'harnessing collective intelligence' (2009, 12). The development of Web 2.0 technologies has revolutionized the world of communication and hence of media studies in general. The increased

development and wide use of Wi-Fi networks have created a society where online communication has become an easy routine activity on a global scale. The world has truly become a global village. Consequently, Web 2.0 technologies and participatory culture became a main area of prosumption. That is the merging of consumers and producers within the same conceptual category. There emerged numerous websites that allowed higher degrees of flexibility and participation for web users. The consumption of Web 2.0 technologies differs considerably and depends categorically on the nature of content that is generated on the targeted site.

There are different degrees of prosumption. They range from a simple “like” or “comment” to elaborate texts generated and published on the web. Prosumers enjoy sharing their e-productions with their peers or other prosumers of that site. These websites develop into communities because every user, who is a part of the process of production and consumption of the content, can communicate through the comment section of the social media. Prosumers develop collaboration which is essential to personal as well as collective belonging. Gauntlett stated in his influential book *Making is Connecting* (2011) that collaboration and connection generate creativity which is crucial for the survival and sustainability of the whole human culture and civilization. Thus, participatory and collaborative social media is enormously important as it saves humanities from what can be termed the ‘sit-back-and-listen’ behavior characteristic of classical media (notably TV). The possibilities offered by Web 2.0 media-enabled users to be active in and co-constructors of the plural new media scope. Equally, Web 2.0 users can perform different and numerous roles of identification. They can present alternative social and cultural representations of their personal and collective identities. They can resist and amend stereotypes by generating counter stereotypes. This web-based function is crucial to Muslim communities in Britain. I will explain this in further detail in the following section.

The difference in prosumption online, compared to previous types of media audiences, is that prosumers will consume content that is similar to that of what they have already created within the same online community. Hence, prosumption is a collaborative shared effort. Moreover, users will create a small part of the content and then be able to consume the content in its entirety when gradually co-constructed by other peers. Participatory and shared processes of production and consumption are underway within the theory of Web 2.0 studies. In general, David Gauntlett conceived Web 2.0 as a viable alternative to traditional media studies. He stated the major features of this new media studies domain. On his website ([davidgauntlett.com](http://davidgauntlett.com)), Gauntlett commented that in Web 2.0-based media

→ Conventional research methods are replaced – or at least supplemented – by new methods which recognise and make use of people’s own creativity, and brush aside the outmoded notions of ‘receiver’ audiences and elite ‘producers’;

→ Conventional concerns with power and politics are reworked in recognition of these points, so that the notion of super-powerful media industries invading the minds of a relatively passive population is compelled to recognise and address the context of more widespread creation and participation. (Gauntlett, 2016)

As explained in the above-stated quotation, Web 2.0 Studies, or more technically Media Studies 2.0, constituted a major rupture, or to be more realistic a crucial transformation, within Media Studies both in epistemology and methodology. There has been a steady move from the rigidity and the narrowness of classical media studies approaches to more flexible and open Web 2.0 studies where the values of collaboration and participation are given due priority. Within audience studies, there was a strong paradigmatic shift from a passive audience to an active audience and ultimately to a participatory audience.

As I explained previously in this article, media audiences may be approached from many different vantage points. The most relevant approach exposed in this article is called the Web 2.0 Participatory Audience approach or prosumer audiences approach. This approach was developed by David Gauntlett, among others. For Gauntlett Web 2.0 participatory audiences’ model, online communication can contribute to socio-cultural and political change. Audiences, or more accurately, users are active and collaborative in the simultaneous processes of producing and consuming media inputs/ outputs. Arguably, within the theoretical contours of Gauntlett’s theory, traditional media used to ‘represent’ people in one way or another, and now people are expected and even required, to represent themselves instead. Web 2.0 media studies seem, then, to offer a more progressive and democratic model of representation. People, citizens, groups, and even peoples can represent themselves with the minimum intervention or distortion of the medium used. They can do that more immediately, directly, and authentically. Here, I refer to the old dream of the French political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau of the need to avoid representation to secure more democratic practices. Web 2.0 media seems to invigorate such a utopia with an aura of credibility. Even though we may not be there yet, but the potential is still there thanks to the new potentialities offered by web-based media.

Gauntlett Web 2.0 studies projected audiences as both producers and consumers of media representations. In this perspective, audiences are more than active. They are engaged in a participatory media culture. The digitalization of media offered new experiences to the audience. Audiences are now called users since it is their use of the web-based media that made the difference. I opt for David Gauntlett Web 2.0 studies

model which focused on the ways digitalization metamorphosed media character and profile drastically. Gauntlett's research concerns people's use of web-based media in their everyday lives, with a special focus on the various and different creative uses of digital media. Hence, Gauntlett suggested that digital mass-mediated identities and representations are systems in flux as they blur the strict conventional divide between media texts' producers and consumers. Following Gauntlett's model of new media, participatory reception, this section argues that media audiences are simultaneously consumers and producers of such e-texts. Hence, British Muslim communities cannot be simply passive consumers of media messages; they do shape and negotiate those images and messages according to their own cultural and ideological repertoires. They can produce counter-images and counter-structure of feelings that are likely to reverse the already hegemonic anti-Muslims stereotypes. They are to follow Gauntlett's model prosumers, who create a universe of independent media producers where they consume what they produce and produce what they consume. So, web-based media, or what came to be generally called Media Studies 2 offers audiences empowering tools to be both consumers and producers of media messages.

Historically speaking, the terms prosumer and prosumption were coined by the American scholar Alvin Toffler in his book *The Third Wave* (1980) in which he argued that post-industrial society witnessed the emergence of the third wave of capitalist development in which rigid distinctions between the concept of the consumer and that of the producer were no longer as rigid as they were in previous eras (for instance, mass production capitalist society). Those distinctions were considerably blurred by new systems and mechanisms of production and consumption. What emerged was a hybrid composite of the two; a post-industrial society based on prosumers and prosumption. That is social agents became at the same time producers and consumers of the goods and services. They produce what they consume and consume what they produce. Toffler defines prosumers as individuals or groups of individuals who produce some of the goods and services that they consume (1980). They considerably rely on the do-it-yourself approach in their process of production and consumption. Hence, they do not pay others to get services; they do generate those services by themselves for themselves. All of these services could take part in the economic circle and be purchased in the marketplace. This is what it means to be a consumer. Yet, being a prosumer implies a preference for producing one's goods and services. Here an important distinction has to be made between production for use and production for exchange. When people produce for use, production and consumption are united in the same person. That is what is termed prosumption. However, if production and

consumption are separated, this is called production for exchange (conventional system of production).

This economic aspect of the concept of prosumers was present in the version of Web 2.0 theory developed by Gauntlett. Nevertheless, such an economic aspect of the concept was not all the story. So, internet users use social media platforms and software not just for economic goals but also for socio-cultural and political ones. Some of those goals are related to identity assertion and questions of belonging. Using interactive social media by British Muslim communities entails an attempt to reverse the negative messages and images circulated and consumed by mainstream white society. They tend to be creative of new spaces of identification and articulation; a third space and a third way. Effectively, the concept of creativity was paramount in Web 2.0 studies and notably in Gauntlett's conception of media participatory audiences or prosumers. Gauntlett even suggested the replacement of the term audience by users or better prosumers. To the success of the concept of prosumers, the concept of creativity was vital. Creativity, according to Gauntlett, was what made prosumers blur the border between consumption of media representations, and engage in a process, not just about reproduction, but even in one of production. This production is original; actionary not reactionary. The concept of creativity, as conceived by Gauntlett, is a dispersed concept that can be found everywhere in the everyday experiences of people. The universality of creativity is what makes Web 2.0 audiences able of producing while consuming. Creativity is about changing and transforming social and cultural reality. It is "a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, 8). Mass media is thus the most appropriate site for such a symbolic struggle for changing and transforming meanings. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi added that

creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognise and validate the innovation. (6)

Accordingly, creativity is a dialectical and dialogical process, engaged in endless discursive and aesthetic formations. This how creativity is created and maintained in Web 2.0 audiences. The interaction between cultural symbolic rules and socio-cultural agents generates new potentialities for social and cultural changes. However, Gauntlett did not suggest that Web 2.0 platforms were the exclusive source of audience creativity. He explained that what web-based spaces did was to provide novel ways of connecting and expressing such creativity.

Web 2.0 is a source of empowerment as it offered powerful platforms to online media users. The everyday creativity of web users disrupts the traditional professional

mass media ecosystem since web-based creative productions by amateur users have considerably been boosted on a significant scale. The notion of media gatekeepers loses its conventional power in web-based virtual spaces. This is because every internet user can create his/her personalized space which can be shared and commented upon by other users. For instance, web spaces and applications like Blogs, Facebook, Flickers, WordPress, and YouTube can be empowering and sources of social and political changes. Those Web 2.0 spaces are replete with materials generated by non-professional users (Oreskovic, 2012). The resulting “do-it-for yourself” (DIY) culture gives users a sense of empowerment. They can participate fully and actively in the process of issuing free flow mass-mediated representations. That is the essence of participatory culture in Web 2.0 use.

The web-based participatory culture refers to any form of social and cultural practice that is open to a large number of actions of participants. Those e-participants would have considerable access to the means of cultural production and circulation. Online participatory culture means that people, unlike the classical theories and paradigms that perceived them as passive consumers of media, can now be much more active and engaged, producing and distributing their creative materials, enjoying professional and amateur works from around the world. They became prosumers par excellence. This novel reality fundamentally altered the scopes and foci of Media Studies in general and Audience Studies in particular. This ‘participatoriness’ generates creativity which is in turn empowering. They equally constitute a slow but steady move from traditional patterns and theories of audience studies. In this context, David Gauntlett wrote:

The rise of an alternative set of internet-based media which *potentially* enable any of us to *potentially* reach hundreds or thousands of our peers makes a huge difference to these perceptions, lifting the ‘masses’ out of their passive hole and undermining the superior self-perception of media professionals. This is the nature of the disruption, I think, even when it is the case that not everyone takes advantage of this opportunity to make and share media, and even if their audiences are relatively low. It shifts how all the players see the game, and so changes reality. Everyday users are elevated, and professional media are brought down a few pegs, in a way which is healthy for creativity and self-esteem in the general population. (4, italics in the original)

Consequently, according to Gauntlett’s perspective, media audiences/users are greatly in control of their online productions. They have a greater room for socio-cultural and political maneuver. Hence, within the capacities of online media, representations can be subverted and counter-representations produced in an endless chain of signification. Personalized and personal self-created e-productions are indeed most likely to have a small audience, if any, however, they are numerous and readily

accessible to anyone else online. These grassroots e-productions have gradually increased visibility on a global scale which bestows them with additional weight and impact on the general mass-mediated online landscape.

### **3. Islamophobia-Related Web 2.0 Representations: “Prosumptive” Endeavors**

The article analyzes the various strategies and techniques used by active, participatory audiences in decoding mass-mediated online representations about the issue of Islamophobia in contemporary Britain. Methodologically speaking, randomly selected websites and web-based platforms are selected as samples for this analysis. The qualitative critical methodology is employed to churn out the meanings of those Islamophobic images and the ideologies that underpinned them. Also, a particular interest is given to the readings offered by participatory audiences of those representations. In general, some Web 2.0 platforms such as YouTube were analyzed and constituted the corpus upon which this analysis is based. The major criteria for selection were: focus on the theme of Islamophobia in the British context and the existence of either “likes”, “shares” or “comments” done by the receiving audiences. The interpretive and critical methodology enabled me to churn out the different patterns and nuances in the comments produced by participatory audiences. A multi-methods eclectic approach, combining textual analysis and in-depth qualitative critical discourse analysis is used in the analysis and interpretation of participatory audiences’ readings. Fundamentally, I engage in critical discourse analysis of some randomly selected samples of users’ comments on some Islamophobia-related media representations.

This section critically analyses two different YouTube videos that deal with the issue of Islamophobia in contemporary Britain. The first is entitled “Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK”, produced by a mainstream news agency in Britain: the BBC. The second is produced by Press TV, a foreign (Iranian) news agency. Its title is “The Debate - Islamophobia in the UK”. Regardless of the details and the hidden or apparent ideological and political agendas of those videos, I am particularly interested in their audiences or users. The question is not how those videos were encoded and in which contexts such encodings took place, but rather how readers decoded them and what uses were gratified during such readings.

“Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK” a YouTube video posted by an internet user named ‘MuslimMom’. The video was posted in May 2015. It was produced by the BBC News agency in the popular program “Inside Out West”. The video uncovers and exposes what was reported as widespread discrimination against Muslims in the workplace and rent accommodation in the British city of Bristol. The

video is seen by more than 200.000 users just three months after its initial release. More than two thousand users liked it and about 500 users disliked it. Moreover, more than 2000 users commented upon its content. Those figures are, of course, dynamic and are likely to increase in the future career of the video. However, they suggest that users, within this Web 2.0 YouTube platform, are active and can give, at least, an approximate idea about the contexts of reception and decoding of the text in question. We can deduce that the majority of receivers agree that Muslims suffer from discrimination in contemporary Britain. Though YouTube does not offer the possibility of knowing the number of those users that shared the video, we can hypothesize that the number of “likes” can be equated with those of “shares”. It is said that “sharing is caring” and in this context sharing is a desire to influence other peers and users regarding the salience and relevance of Islamophobic behavior in Britain.

Thematically speaking, the text constructs a discursive formation that highlights one experience of British Muslim communities that is anti-Muslim prejudices and discrimination. The text suggests that such Islamophobic sentiments are subtle and pervasive. However, importantly, they are relegated to and confined in private contexts more than public ones. This is well-understood since British law outlaws many forms of racial discrimination, whether they were cultural or racial. Since 1945, several anti-discrimination acts have been enacted to fight racism and discrimination in public spaces and facilities. For instance, the popular Race Relations Act 1976, which was amended by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2003, prohibits discrimination on race, colour, nationality, ethnic and national origin in virtually all socio-economic and political contexts such of employment, education, and provision of goods and services (Mason, 2000; Modood et al, 1997; Fella &Bozzini, 2013). Hence, the prohibition of racism in law may finish public, overt racism, but not a private hidden one. ‘Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK’ video is one instance, among many, that confirms the persistence of racial discrimination in British society. According to the discourses of the video, Muslims suffer from implicit discrimination both in work and housing services. As Gauntlett suggested, YouTube videos are fertile spaces for creative explorations. This creativity is generated by the contributions of readers and audiences in the reconstructions and reconfigurations of cultural and ideological orientations of the visual representation. The contributions take the form of “likes”, “dislikes” and importantly “comments”.

The readings produced by users differed considerably. They aptly complied with Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model of media reception (Hall, 1973 &1980). The selected sample corresponds to the triple readings suggested by Hall. Yet, noticeably,

the majority of readers decoded the video within the dominant framework of reference. They understood the message perfectly and they shared the discursive formations of the video. I state some randomly selected comments which confirmed the encoded message of the video. Hence, they fall within the parameters of the 'preferred reading'. I start with user 'Love Rose', a female Muslim. She reported her experience of discrimination because of her apparent religious clothes 'hijab' (headscarf). Here, it should be noted that the issue of 'hijab' has not been extremely problematic as it was in other European countries like France. In Britain, within the officially adopted politics of multiculturalism, cultural and religious particularities of British ethnic populations are respected and at worst tolerated.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite the legal absence of sanctions on wearing religious clothes, notably 'hijab', there has been a widespread suspicion of such Islamic clothes. This is the case since such 'hijab' is read as a marker and maker of cultural and religious differences between Islam and British mainstream religion (Christianity) and culture. Moreover, given the increasing Islamophobic discourses and anti-Muslim stereotypes, British Muslim communities became easy targets of racial discrimination and cultural marginalization.

Following, Hall's Reception Theory, the user 'Love Rose' confirmed the encoded message transmitted from the YouTube video. She was also a victim of job discrimination. 'Love Rose', just like many Muslim women wearing 'hijab', was marginalized and deprived of her social and economic rights. 'Love Rose' wrote

Yup I'm a Muslim, I wear a hijab and I've been discriminated against too... I went to apply for work experience at Holiday Inn in Sheffield.. this woman called Anna Parsons asked me a few questions then asked me if I was going to keep my hijab on while I was going to work at this hotel.. she referred to my hijab as 'that thing' and pointed at it too.. I was like of course I am then straight after she was like ok I'll give you a call to let you know when you can start.. she never called me back! I only applied for a 2 weeks work placement and not even a proper job! I then emailed her after a week searching for answers and asked her if she had a problem with my hijab.. she never replied back! Lol some people are fucked! I'm not even brown my skin colour is light.. I look white but the only difference is I wear a hijab to cover my beautiful hair 😊 and no one can stop me! (User 'Love Rose')

The comment of 'Love Rose' received more than 110 likes which proved that the experiences of discrimination against British Muslim communities in the different walks of life are shared. There seems to be an agreement on the prevalence of religious discrimination in Britain. Importantly, 'Love Rose' confirmed in her comment that she "looked white" and the only difference was "a hijab to cover" her "beautiful hair."

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<sup>1</sup>See Andrew Favell crucial comparative book *Philosophies of Integration: Immigration and the Idea of Citizenship in France and Britain* (2001) for a comprehensive account of the differences between British and French philosophies and politics of integration.

Thus, this was a case of Islamophobic behavior on the part of the white employer, not a racist one. 'Love Rose' experience was concerned with economic marginalization. Other Islamophobic instances tackled different issues such as religious identity. So being a Muslim or associated with Muslims has become an open accusation. This claim can be deduced from the comment of user 'Albie Zidan'. 'Albie Zidan' affirmed that he was discriminated against and marginalized simply because his name sounded the name of a Muslim. He was even obliged to escape his country (Britain) and live abroad because of such racial harassment and hatred. So, Islamophobic sentiments are generally defined as unjustified fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims. Marcel Maussen (2006) explains that "'Islamophobia' groups together all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech and acts, by suggesting that they all emanate from an identical ideological core, which is a 'fear' or a 'phobia' of Islam" (Maussen, 2006, 100). This anti-Muslims ideological core is what made the user 'Albie Zidan' suffer from Islamophobic attacks, though he did not show any Islamic behavior except his Muslim name. 'Albie Zidan' states in the comment

I'm a British guy with a Muslim name and I can definitely agree that discrimination is very widespread in England especially towards people with a Muslim name like me I'm not a Muslim but I have had so much discrimination growing up in England that I live in Brazil now and I have had zero incidents of discrimination here and the people are just more friendly it's a sad shame that I feel like my own country rejected me because of my background yet a foreign country in South America accepts me. (user 'Albie Zidan')

The user seems to suffer from prolonged stress because of the racial discrimination that he suffered from in his original country Britain. 'Albie Zidan' seems to have depression, anxiety, and reduced quality of emotional attachments to Britain. His reading of the video expounded a deep paradox in the situation of British ethnic minorities in general and the Muslim minorities in particular. While the British ethnic minorities feel they constitute an integral part of the mainstream society, they are generally refused and marginalized by such society. This is what the user called "a sad shame."

Another preferred reading is offered by user 'Sammy Rich'. The comment is of special importance since it received a large number of "likes" (more than 300 likes) which expressed the fact that many Muslim and ethnic fellowmen experienced or witnessed the same situation. 'Sammy Rich', also, invokes the discrimination that ethnics and Muslims are likely to face when they are pupils or students; that is discrimination in education. Unlike white students, students of color have been more likely to suffer from educational underachievement and if they achieve a considerable educational level, they are faced with discrimination in employment. The abnormal

educational situation was classically expounded by the popular Swann Report of 1985. The report was also entitled *Education for All: Final Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups*. Without exposing the details of the report, it concluded that ethnic pupils have been the target of various forms of discrimination during their educational experiences. The report also suggested some solutions and remedies for such educational anomalies. Yet, it seems that nothing has changed since, as the user explains in the below-stated comment, there has been a cycle and a vicious circle of discrimination which can be considered as an endless endgame. Thus, for ethnic and Muslim learners, education is not a guarantee of social mobility in mainstream British society.

According to official statistics, British Muslim communities continue to suffer from economic disadvantages more than mainstream whites or even their black counterparts. Noticeably, it is found that Muslim communities suffered more from what can be called 'ethnic penalty' than other minority groups. This was affirmed in the report produced by the National Equality Panel, which found that "*Muslims are paid 13-21% less than their White Christian counterparts of equal qualification*". It further noted that while "*all minority groups suffer some form of 'penalty'...Muslim ethnic groups suffer the largest 'ethnic penalty'*" (Ismail, 2015, bold in the original). This general tendency is expounded by the user 'Sammy Rich'. He wrote

I'm black and Muslim. My high school teacher who was a white man warned me to stop messing about like my white friends because i will find it 10 times harder to find work. I didn't believe him at the time but he was right. I remember looking for an apprenticeship when I left school, applied for 100's but couldn't get 1. My white friends found work easier even though I had better GCSE's. I remembered my teacher's words so clearly then. Thankfully I was young enough to go college and onto univ. Those days it was about skin colour, today it's more the religion thing. (user 'Sammy Rich')

What is noticeable about Rich's comment is that it is expressed by a British citizen who is simultaneously black and Muslim. So, he is likely to suffer from double discrimination. He suffered from two types of discrimination: racial (being black) and religio-cultural (being a Muslim). Moreover, the case of this user sheds light on the multiple nature of discrimination in Britain. It is educational, economic, ethnic, and religious discrimination. "Sammy Rich" traced the crucial chronological development of British discriminatory practices from the old racial racism to the current religious racism or what is generally referred to as Islamophobia or the modern-day racism. He wrote, "Those days it was about skin colour, today it's more the religion thing". This attitude is shared and proved by many British academics such as Bikhu Parekh (2006) and Elisabeth Poole (2000) showed how British discriminatory behaviors shifted from the focus on the issue of racial difference to that of cultural and religious difference.

Paradoxically, even though blacks and Muslims are better in educational achievement, they will be marginalized in the mainstream labour market. This vicious circle seems to hunt a considerable majority of British ethnic and Muslim populations. Almost the same experience is reported by another Muslim British: user 'Salam Miah'. 'Salam Miah' confirmed the discourses of racial discrimination in the British labour market. Accordingly, he was an excellent graduate from a reputed British university (the University of London). His specialty is considerably needed in the labour market, yet he was not offered a permanent job. He was deprived of a permanent job, not because of the lack of competence or lacunas in experiences, but simply because of his religious beliefs. Again, this user reproduces the same arguments and discourses of the video. He decodes the received message in dominant terms of reference. I quote the comment of user 'Salam Miah' below

I am a Muslim with a 1st class degree in accounting and finance from London University. Since I graduated, I have never been offered a permanent job but have been offered temp role even though I have the experience and are very good at what I do. It's sad that we face discrimination because of our religion. (user 'Salam Miah')

Expectedly, the comment of user 'Salam Miah' generated some oppositional readings which were openly racist. For instance, user "Jake Goldsmith" expressed racist and Islamophobic discourses. He declared: "We don't want muslims here, about as opposite to being English as you can get." (User 'Jake Goldsmith', uncapitalisation of Muslims is in the original). This type of discourse invokes nationalistic and jingoistic sentiments that believe in the superiority and the British "race" vis-à-vis different and inferior others. Though it is quite possible to make mistakes of all types in web-based chats, given the informal colloquial nature of the space, it is suggestive to claim that the uncapitalisation of the term "Muslim" reveals a hidden hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims. After all, Islam and Muslims are, for Britons like 'Goldsmith', unfit to be capitalized on. They are marginalized, excluded, and undesirable. The racist creed expressed in this oppositional reading stands against the dominant message of the YouTube video. It sought to subvert the dominant reading by confirming Islamophobic behaviors which the video intended to fight and end by disclosing it and making it publically visible. Racist ideology is built on four major aspects. It starts by identifying groups by their biological markers, then essentialising differences between them. Third, negative characteristics are associated with different others and finally creating boundaries between them (Pilkington, 2003). Relations of power are mobilized to create and strengthen such race-based boundaries. Because of such boundaries, others become alien and hence undesirable as they are thought to disturb the social and cultural fabric of the host community. They are even regarded

as an economic threat to the established white working class because they represent cheap competitive labor.

Interestingly, the comment of user 'Salam Miah' is that it received considerable feedback as both "likes" and "comments" which expressed attitudes in a negotiational tone as well. I selected a comment, which I believe, was the most telling one since it attempted to reach a consensus between two different stands: those who accept the story of user 'Salam Miah' and those who refuse it. The comment is written by the user with a pseudo name 'mywifesqueeze'. The user started his comment with the greeting 'Salam Miah' which indicated his friendly mood towards the other, the ethnic and the Muslim. The comment goes as follows

Salam Miah Hey Mia, Hope you managed to find a job by now. Ignore all the hateful comments, these people are losers in real life. I do want to mention that so many Muslims I know are working in the fields of engineering finance and academia. I myself have a good job too. There are many Nonmuslims who also have a 1st class degree and struggle to get a job. If you are discriminated then what are they? On the other hand, I know someone who has started as an accountant at graduate level and is now working at director level in one of the largest financial organisations worldwide. This is to show you that there are chances but you need to work your ass off to get it. It took me many months to get a job but I never gave up and worked hard. You got to work harder on your CV on your strategies and on yourself. Don't blame others. (user 'mywifesqueeze', bolding is mine)

Though the identity of user 'mywifesqueeze' cannot be easily verified (as the case with virtually all web-based identities), I tend to consider him as a white Briton. He seems to be not Muslim, yet he had first-hand experiences with Muslim fellowmen. His experience seems positive and he is likely to sympathize with their cause. I believe that he did. But such sympathy is clothed with a negotiational tone. He noticed that unemployment is a shared experience in contemporary Britain since "There are many Nonmuslims who also have a 1st class degree and struggle to get a job" (quoted from the above-stated comment of user 'mywifesqueeze'). Hence, this user attempts to create a balance between the two ends of the representation. So, discrimination and Islamophobia can-and do- cause unemployment, but that is not all the story. Even white and mainstream Britons suffer from unemployment despite their distinguished academic and professional qualifications. This balanced view stands in partial opposition to the message represented in "Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK".

Another crucial point is raised in this comment. It is the real or perceived widespread culture of "self-victimization" or more technically, the "victim mentality" that seems to dominate in wide sections of the British Muslim communities. The user referred to this issue when he urged 'Salam Miah' (the co-user) not to "blame others"

and to work harder to get better chances. Generally speaking, victim mentality is not something innate. It is rather an acquired (learned) personality trait in which a person, or a group of people, tends to regard him or herself as the ultimate victim of the negative behaviors of others. What is important is that the “self-victimized” behaves like it was the case even in the absence of clear evidence of such hostile activities. To have such a victim mentality, there is the need to perceive the harm as undeserved, unjust, and immoral. Moreover, such imposed harm has to be deemed as an act that could not be prevented by the victim. The discourses of victim mentality have interestingly been confirmed by some Muslim academics and politicians. Referring to Muslim culture and behavior, Sadiq Khan, the Muslim Labour MP declared to *The Guardian* that «We need to take responsibility for our own lives. We need to take more responsibility for our own families, ignore those who propagate conspiracy theories, and above all we need to leave behind our victim mentality,» (*The Guardian*, 2008). So, it seems that Muslim communities are vulnerable to a deep-seated mentality of victimization in which various conspiracy theories are indulged. Maybe, this is what the user ‘mywifesqueeze’ meant when he encouraged ‘Salam Miah’ to be aware of the fact that many white British citizens suffer from unemployment, which partially invalidates the absolute claims that discrimination is responsible for the unemployment of Muslim communities. There are British Muslims who succeeded; simultaneously there are British whites who could not do it.

Another example of the negotiational reading is introduced by a British Christian citizen ‘Nathanael Thomas-Bates’. This user reminds other prosumers of the YouTube video that Britain is a truly multicultural community that embraces different cultures, religions, and ethnic groups. The user urges Muslim “brothers” to be active in the British mainstream society and not to exaggerate the racist nature of some sections of mainstream society.

I’m a white British Christian and I’ve been brought up to love everybody. Peace and love to everybody regardless of their race or religion. To my Muslim brothers, don’t listen to the narrow-minded racists on this post, our country is diverse and everybody is welcome apart from the ones that do not respect our laws etc but the majority of Muslims are respectful, nice, peaceful people (most are more respectful and better people than most white Brits). Treat others the way you expect to be treated.... \*The golden rule.  
(UserNathanael Thomas-Bates)

This reading is, in fact, reminiscent of the politics of multiculturalism in contemporary Britain. User “Nathanael Thomas-Bates” contends that despite some anti-Muslims and anti-ethnics sentiments, Britain is mostly respecting cultural and religious differences within a dominant paradigm of multiculturalism. Contemporary Britain is often referred to as a multicultural and multi-faith society. Technically speaking,

multicultural Britain consists of two or several national or ethnic cultures. Hence, Britain has been a multicultural and multi-ethnic community par excellence. Multicultural Britain is irrevocably tied to immigration and the presence of ethnic communities, mostly from the former British Empire.

The British experience of multiculturalism has been mostly evaluated from many perspectives, the most crucial of which is to investigate to what extent a multicultural and pluralistic society is a threat to the national identity of Britishness and how it related to issues of social cohesion. Those concerns are still pertinent and paramount in Britain. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a significant shift of focus, within multicultural debates, from the discourses of race relations to those of interfaith or religion-related ones (Parekh, 2000, 2006). The preeminence of the religious, virtually the Muslim question became clear, even spectacular, after the events of September 2001 and those of July 2005 in Britain. 9/11 and 7/7 attacks impacted many Britons' perceptions of ethnic minorities that resulted in feelings of xenophobia, and then Islamophobia. Thus, cultural and religious differences have been presented as a top security issue. As far as Muslims and Islam are concerned, controversial debates revolved around Islam and its alleged extreme fundamentalist forms. User "Nathanael Thomas-Bates" referred to such emerging hostilities, but evoking his Christian religious creeds, he argued that peaceful social and cultural relations are possible in Britain if people correctly practice their religious teachings. The reading of "Nathanael Thomas-Bates" can be understood as an appeal to respect cultural and religious differences within a common framework of intercultural communication and understanding. Hence, ethnic minorities, and Muslims in particular, are accepted and respected as long as they respect and abide by British norms and laws. User "Nathanael Thomas-Bates" states that "everybody is welcome apart from the ones that do not respect our laws". Here, the user seems to invoke the hegemonic discourses of British national identity or Britishness. So, immigrants, ethnic minorities, or Muslim communities need to integrate into the mainstream British liberal culture and accept British values and "norms of acceptability" to fit into the dominant socio-cultural and political paradigm.

Such discourses were publically indulged by the ex-British Home Secretary David Blunkett. Blunkett claimed that

We need to say we will not tolerate what we would not accept ourselves under the guise of accepting a different cultural difference. We have norms of acceptability and those who come into our home - for that is what it is - should accept those norms just as we would have to do if we went elsewhere. (Blunkett, 2001).

It is vital to show that David Blunkett's discourses were considerably ethnocentric in that they defined a core value system that was based on British conceptions and world views; what is acceptable by the British mainstream white majority is to be acceptable by others. This cultural uniformity and conformity are constitutive to the criteria of belonging to Britain. True that Blunkett's formula was context-governed, since David Blunkett and all the then British authorities needed to say something and do anything in response to two crucial events, one national (2001 race riots in some British cities) and the other international (September 2001 attack), however, the assimilationist overtones were clear. It is the same assimilationist ideology that was adopted during the second half of the 20th century, but with new cultural and political jargon; nationalism became community cohesion and assimilationism became cultural diversity.

The user 'Nathanael Thomas-Bates' negotiates the "true meaning" of British culture. For him, it is a culture of peace, tolerance, and mutual acceptance. This implies, I think, that both ethnic minorities and the British dominant white ethnic majority need to understand and appreciate each other's differences. In this light, the multicultural ideology necessitates an equal co-existence and co-living of different cultural systems. In the middle of the heydays of multiculturalism (the 1980s), the British-Pakistani author Hanif Kureishi, in *The Rainbow Sign* (1986), suggested a new perspective on how to become British, not for the newcomers, the "New British" but for the established native population. For him, (as perhaps for user "Thomas-Bates") white Britons had to learn a new way in which to be British, or more accurately multicultural British. To reach such a new awareness, Britishness, as a national identity, has to be constantly reassessed and adapted to the changing multinational and multicultural circumstances.

Despite the claims of peaceful British multiculturalism that user "Thomas-Bates" expressed in his comment, the racist and Islamophobic messages of the YouTube video "Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK" seem to have broached a sensitive topic that could be discerned even in official political discourses and ideologies. It is interesting that ex-Prime Minister David Cameron, in a speech delivered in Munich in 2011, declared that "British state multiculturalism had failed". This could be read as an official auxiliary to the opposite politics of "mono-culturalism" in which British hegemonic readings and world views are paramount. Despite the controversial nature of such speech, its potential dangers emanate, I believe, from the backlash effect it is likely to produce. Arguably, Cameron's speech would end up generating the opposite effects of what he may have intended. It would result in an

increase in the polarisation rather than creating core value systems underpinning a common national British identity.

According to Hall's Encoding/Decoding model of media reception (1997), oppositional stances can be taken by media audiences when decoding mass-mediated representations. YouTube video "Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK" was also read oppositionally. I selected two comments that reflect two different oppositional readings. The first was advanced by user 'Steve Ashworth', allegedly a White British citizen, who referred to the opposite direction of discrimination. That is the issue of Muslim discrimination against non-Muslims. His reading seems to challenge the BBC, the producer of the "Secret Filming Exposes Prejudice Against Muslims UK" YouTube video. He invited the agency to produce a counter-video that tackles the possibility of anti-whites or anti-non-Muslims discrimination issued by Muslims. 'Steve Ashworth' wrote

So now can the BBC do the reverse social experiment where they send the same 2 for jobs at Muslim owned businesses and see the result to show the prejudice of Muslims to non Muslims? (user 'Steve Ashworth')

'Steve Ashworth' received more than 30 "likes" which may prove that his comment voiced the concerns of many British users. What the user wanted to suggest is that the practice of racism is a shared experience among all the constitutive ethnicities of British society whether they were whites or non-whites. User 'Steve Ashworth' broaches a crucial issue here. It is what can be called Westophobia among Muslim communities in Britain.

Generally, Westophobia is defined as the unjustified fear of the West and Westerns. Westerns are typically defined as populations that inhabit Europe and North America who are white and Christian. Galina Yemelianova delineates the West as the collectivity of

countries of Western Europe and North America, the societies that function on the principles of bourgeois liberal democracies and the market economies, historically generated in Europe. Therefore, it does not include Japan and the newly industrialised economies of South East Asia which, although they share with Western Europe and North America similarly high technological and living standards, arguably belong to different political and cultural traditions (193).

Historically speaking, Westophobia emerged recently during the 19th century and 20th century with the widespread of western (notably British and French) imperialism and colonization. The Muslim nations that were subordinate to this western colonialism, with its various types of oppression, contributed to the development of anti-western feelings. Before western colonization, there were no noticeable traces of

Westophobia or even Europhobia or hatred of Europe. This absence of Westophobia is explained by scholar Bernard Lewis. He argues that

Muslim civilization, proud and confident of its superiority, could afford to despise the barbarous infidel in the cold and miserable lands of the north, and for the medieval Muslim in the Mediterranean lands, the Europeans, at least to the north and west, was a remoter and more mysterious figure than the Indian, the Chinese, or even the inhabitant of tropical Africa. Even in the Ottoman world the remoter lands of Europe were seen offering neither gain nor risk and therefore unworthy of closer attention. (qtd. in Ali 2016, 11).

However, as shown in the above-stated quote, Westophobia is closely related to Islamophobia since they both rely on each other for their survival. Hence, Islamophobia and Westophobia seem to be two sides of the same coin. They cannot survive without each other. Increased Westophobia can only further empower the forces of Islamophobia and the opposite is true.

I move now to analyze the second oppositional reading offered by user 'VIVA BELLA VIVA HERMANO' that received about 50 "likes". This user is a male black African. He lives in Britain or he holds British citizenship. He opposes the YouTube video and affirms that he was himself a victim of Islamophobia. He wrote "As a black African guy, I have received a lot of racism from Pakistanis" (User 'VIVA BELLA VIVA HERMANO'). This intervention is crucial since it deals with a less visible issue of inter-ethnic racism and discrimination within British race relations.

The second YouTube video that I analyze is entitled "The Debate - Islamophobia in the UK" posted by the news agency Press TV. The video traces the various debates regarding Islamophobia in Britain with a special focus on what came to be called "Punish a Muslim day » letters. Those letters were a sign of anti-Muslim sentiments and they urged Britons to hurt and protest against their Muslim fellowmen. The video discusses various aspects of Islamophobia and its impact on British Muslim communities. The video was released in March 2016 and was created by the Iranian news agency Press TV. The news agency framed the video by stating the various political changes in contemporary Britain that contributed to the rise of Islamophobic sentiments. Those political changes included an anti-immigrant Brexit vote campaign and increasingly anti-Islam policies of the British governments. Without delving into the various details of the video, it suffices to indicate that the ideology that filters it, argues that Muslims are being victimized in increasingly hostile British mainstream society. The video generated more than 1000 (just 3 months after its release) comments which indicated the sensitivity of the topic being discussed. What is crucial in this video, being a mass-mediated representation of an issue that concerns British Muslims, is that it is produced by a non-British encoder: An Iranian news agency. This may

generate useful insight on how British Muslims are represented by an outsider vantage point. Yet, my analysis of a selected sample of the users/audiences, reveals that the prosumers of the video are multifarious and have different perspectives, concerns, and origins.

The user 'Al Demir' reads the video in an oppositional way. The user asks a rhetorical question about what westerners might face in a Muslim country if they do what Muslims do in western countries. So, the concern of 'Al Demir' is not the content and message of the sent code, but rather he decodes the message in a very different manner in which a new discursive reality is created, a reality that has ultimately no relation to the intended meaning. The Press TV wanted to highlight the plights of Muslims in the UK, yet the reading of 'Al Demir' was comparative. It postulated that Muslims despite the Islamophobic sentiments they meet in the UK, their situation is much better than the situation of non-Muslims in a Muslim country. 'Al Demir' wrote

If you ask me, if the western people go overboard and do what Muslim people doing in the western countries and probably, they all would be jailed or hanged therefore do you blame the Westerns what they are doing? (User 'Al Demir')

'Al Demir', then, seems to suppose that Islamophobia is normal and even natural. For him, the cultural and religious differences cannot be tolerated by all the citizens of Britain. Yet, I think that wrong deeds cannot be justified by more mistaken deeds. Whether it is Islamophobia or Westphobia, xenophobic attitudes remain unjustified and harmful to genuine cultural and human communication.

Another reading of the video is offered by user 'Syed Ali'. The user seems of Iranian origin. He read the video with a preferred position. So, 'Syed Ali' understood the code of the video as crafted by its encoders. Also, he seems to agree with and share the same ideological orientations of the video in question. For him, as for the editorials of Press TV, Muslims suffer from Islamophobia not only in the UK but all over the western countries. However, what is interesting about Syed Ali's reading is that it includes an Iranian perspective in understanding and explaining the causes of Islamophobia internationally rather than within the British context. 'Syed Ali' invokes the conspiracy theory model in explaining the plight of Muslims all over the globe. The ideology of Zionism and the politics of the State of Israel are, then, exclusively responsible for global Islamophobia. User 'Syed Ali' commented that

These Zionists are huge hypocrites, they do not want any Muslims in "western nations" but are OK with Zionists stealing Native Palestinian lands, they are OK with Military bases in Muslim nations, they are OK with bombing Muslim nations. These Zionists also support the many monarchies in the Muslim world against democracy. (User 'Syed Ali')

Importantly, the user 'Syed Ali' seems to equate all those who refuse Islam and Muslims with Zionism. Arguably, he meant by Zionists all western powers, notably the United States, which engage in military and diplomatic alliances with the State of Israel. The reading of 'Syed Ali' invokes regional (Middle Eastern) concerns in his decoding process. The Iranian-Israeli conflict seems to colour his reading. He uses the classical language of conspiracy and Zionism in his comment. He voices global Muslim concerns rather than British local ones.

There seems to be a process of recontextualisation in the reading of the YouTube video "The Debate-Islamophobia in the UK". The video is deracinated from its original context of reference and situated in a more complex and global novel context. Particularly, recontextualisation works on a process of appropriating local discourses into global discourses. The British linguist Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003) defined the concept of recontextualisation as the diffusion of discourses across structural boundaries. Thus, recontextualisation invokes different strategic relations between the global dimension and the national/local one. Recontextualisation is a particular type of dialectic that appropriates and harmonizes discursive elements from different spaces and times (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). Hence, a new hybrid discourse emerges that potentially transforms the relationships with existing original discourses in the recontextualising context. User 'Syed Ali', through the technique of recontextualisation, was a true prosumer and participated in creating a new story that has little relation to the original story of the encoded video. Yet, he still worked within the ideological parameters of the video and reproduced, in a way or another, the video's very ideological message.

Here, there is a crucial remark that needs to be made. It seems almost impossible for individuals to compete with established media providers in the battle for drawing people's attention online. Popular new agencies, like BBC, CNN, or, in this case, Press TV, dominate the scene of world views' creation and dissemination. They have the upper hand in the signification process. As a result, audiences and users, whatever was their scale of participation or activeness, are caught in the web of the meaningful explanatory contexts already set by those hegemonic encoders. Hence, the audiences/users' creative work is ultimately framed by and conditioned under the influence of established powerful media agencies. Arguably, it seems that user 'Syed Ali' was still under the hegemony of the encoded message, just like every reading whatever was its stance.

The other selected comment was made by user ‘Sagareswar Gummeneni’ who seems to be an Indian. He offered an oppositional reading of the video. His comment was an outright criticism of Muslims and their behaviors. I quote his comment below

Everyone knows what Muslims are doing in any country they live in. First they enter by begging for visas through refugee tags and later they show finger to those countries on the name of secular or democracy but they never use those words in their native countries. If really Iran or Saudi concern about muslims in any country. whether Iran allow Hindus Or Buddhists or Jains or Sikhs are eligible to study in their country? Even for education also they r not eligible.. how come such country talk on other countries? First you shld be eligible to talk on one topic..! Before showing a finger to opp people you must know 4 fingers r pointing back to you. (User ‘Sagareswar Gummeneni’)

User ‘Sagareswar Gummeneni’, just as user ‘Syed Ali’, speaks from his vintage perspective. The language used to create discursive formations regarding his native, rather than British, concerns and worries. He seems to be hostile to Muslims, which tempts us to think about the impact of Indian-Pakistani historical conflicts over Kashmir on his interpretation of the video in question. He refers to various Indian religious communities and how they are likely to be discriminated against by Muslims not only in Britain but also in Muslim nations or Islamdom. Again, the user does not decode passively, but rather he builds a relevant story that corresponds to his immediate cultural, political, and ideological contexts. It is not possible to know the nationality of user ‘Sagareswar Gummeneni’, but if we suppose that he is a British citizen of Indian origins, we can then diagnose the extent of inter-ethnic tensions that exist in contemporary multicultural Britain.

Equally, issues of Diaspora and identity loom large in this case.<sup>1</sup> The dialogic relationship between different users of the web in Web 2.0 studies is fundamental to understanding the participatory nature of web-based platforms like YouTube (Gauntlett, 2007, 2011, and 2013). The oppositional comment of user ‘Sagareswar Gummeneni’ generated several responses from other users. The majority seems to share his point of view and they produced oppositional readings of the video as well. I selected an oppositional reading, not of the video, but user Sagareswar Gummeneni’s oppositional comment. The oppositional response was created by user “Syed Ali” who refused Sagareswar Gummeneni’s comment. In response to user ‘Sagareswar Gummeneni’, ‘Syed Ali’ commented that

Iran does allow foreigners to visit the country, But tell me many Indians hate all Muslim nations so do not take oil from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim nations? (User ‘Syed Ali’)

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<sup>1</sup> See Steven Vertovec (1999) for more details about this issue.

Then, the user 'Sagareswar Gummeneni' replied to the reply of user 'Syed Ali'. He replied back

Syed ali ha ha ha.. you have no choice my dear Iranian.. only India buys from you otherwise your people will be on roads.. We r taking very less from Saudi just coz they r crying bcoz we r buying maximum from Iran. How many Indians r living in Iran? Just check..! (User 'Sagareswar Gummeneni')

Without delving into the detailed analysis of the themes and issues exposed in both comments, what matters most is the spaces that web-based platforms offered to audiences to participate in the creation of media messages. Both users despite their ideological, religious, and cultural differences managed to be producers of mass-mediated messages and at the same time consumers of such messages. This web-based dialogue validates the theoretical insights of Web 2.0 academics like David Gauntlett. They equally give credentials to the claims of the democratising power of the internet in general and that of Web2.0 platforms in particular. Other straightforward oppositional readings were offered by different users who are not even British. They used this video to gratify their ideological and cultural needs. Many users seized this video to confirm the opposite of its message. They attacked Islam and Muslims and then they produced the opposite effects to those intended by the encoders of the video. I state below some of those oppositional readings.

**Comment1:**

"Islam and democracy is like oil and water. They will never mix" (user 'TheEndTimes')

**Comment2:**

"Secularism and Liberalism are integral parts of democracy and Democracy is not compatible with Islam whatsoever". (User 'Mr. Safi')

**Comment3:**

"Yes Islam has a problem with democracy and freedom overall. That's why the growing islamization of the West must be stopped. People need to stop living in denial and realize that the ideology of Islam is intolerant and dangerous. We can't tolerate intolerance ». (User 'Hungarian Fascist').

**Comment4:**

"The fact is Islam is a theocratic totalitarian ideology. It is therefore completely incompatible with democracy...That is established fact.. Nothing else to say" (user 'Ultimagtr650').

As I explained above, those randomly selected comments are oppositional to the original message of the video. They share in common a belief that Islam, and hence Muslims, cannot cope with the secular and democratic values of the West in general and Britain in particular. They seem to be apologetic in that they justify Islamophobic sentiments and behaviors of anti-Muslims Britons. Those comments suppose that the problem is not with the British host society, but rather with Muslims and their religious

creeds. Therefore, Muslims and their religion are represented as incompatible with the universal values of liberty, tolerance, and democracy. The same Islamophobic discourses are being reproduced according to each user's background and value system.

Ultimately, the overall analysis of the selected comments on the YouTube video "The Debate - Islamophobia in the UK" reveals that large sections of audiences of this video did not read the message of the video but rather the ideological configurations that shaped such a representation. This gives credibility, I believe, to the attitudes of both Stuart Hall and David Gauntlett. Hence, audiences are both active and participatory in the decoding of mass-mediated representations, and they even create their versions of reality and hence they turn out to be not just consumers of media messages, but equally producers or to use the more technical term prosumers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Of particular importance to the thesis of this work is the belief that representations are fundamentally socio-culturally constructed. The case studies, analyzed in this article, revealed that Web 2.0 users of the two YouTube videos employed different theoretical trajectories in their consumption and reproduction of the hegemonic mass-mediated representations of Islam and Muslims. Hence, web-based dialogues between users validate the theoretical insights of Web 2.0 academics like David Gauntlett. They equally give credentials to the claims of the democratizing power of the internet in general and that of Web2.0 platforms in particular. The free access, openness, and participatoriness of Web2.0 platforms are sources of empowerment and democratization. As deduced from the case studies, different users produced different representations according to their different backgrounds and needs. Noticeably, many users crafted preferred decodings while others negotiated mass-mediated codes and constructed, modified, and even personalized versions of the original codes. However, other oppositional readings were offered by different users who are not even British or Muslims. They used those videos to gratify their ideological and cultural needs. So, those videos represented a virtual occasion for many users to confirm the opposite message of the mediated codes. Crucially, oppositional users attacked Islam and Muslims, and then they produced the opposite effects to those intended by the encoders of the videos. They Do-It-Themselves to highlight the representation of the "THEM" vis-à-vis the hegemonic representations of the "US". Arguably, Web 2.0 platforms turn out to be fertile tools of resistance against the traditional media insistence.

However, the analysis of the comments proved that Web 2.0 users still worked within the hegemonic ideological parameters of the videos. Users tended to reproduce, differentially, the very ideological messages of the senders. Popular news agencies of the BBC and the Press TV set the agenda and the theoretical configurations in which users decoded and re-encoded their messages. Web 2.0 users, I believe, were active, participatory, and diverse, but within the confines of the ideological explanatory contexts already set by the creators and senders of the representation. I agree with Hall (1990 and 1997) that the dominant ideology is hegemonic when it permeates the very unconsciousness of media audiences. Accordingly, whether they are audiences or users, passive or active, the consumers of media messages cannot process the sent codes outside the prison house of ideology. Dominant media considerably control the venues of the creation and the dissemination of the representational stuff. They have the upper hand in the signification process. As a result, audiences and users, whatever was their scale of participation or activeness, are caught in the web of the meaningful explanatory frames of reference already set by those hegemonic encoders. Thus, representations or counter-representations of Islamophobia, despite their complexities and diversities, seem to be informed and organized by the more abstract and entrenched hegemonic discursive formations. Though Web 2.0 virtual spaces offered a greater array of freedom and openness to their users, it is still valid to claim that those users are cultural bearers who cannot exceed themselves and their cultural essences while grappling with the new virtual possibilities.

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