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Cloaked Facebook Pages: Exploring fake Islamist propaganda in social media

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Abstract

This research analyses cloaked Facebook pages that are created to spread political propaganda by cloaking a user profile and imitating the identity of a political opponent in order to spark hateful and aggressive reactions. This inquiry is pursued through a multi-sited ethnographic case study of Danish Facebook pages disguised as radical Islamist pages, which provoked racist and anti-Muslim reactions as well as negative sentiments toward refugees, and immigrants in Denmark in general. Drawing on Jessie Daniels' critical insights into cloaked websites, this research furthermore analyses the epistemological, methodological, and conceptual challenges of online propaganda. It enhances our understanding of disinformation and propaganda in an increasingly interactive social media environment and contributes to a critical inquiry into social media and subversive politics.

Keywords: Disinformation, propaganda, cloaked, Facebook, social network sites, social media, racism, hate speech, Islamophobia, Denmark.

Introduction

Alhamdulillah. We take over Denmark and you kuffars [infidels] can't even stop us. We transform shitty Denmark into an Islamic state and this will happen before your eyes, and you can't do a thing about it. Your churches will be turned into mosques, your whore women will be fucked and used by us Muslims to make our babies, we take your money that you work 7 to 5 to earn while we Muslims live in luxury, your food will become halal and your laws will be sharia and what are you going to do about it? NOTHING!

(Islam: The Religion of Peace, Facebook post, 21 April 2015)

This is a quote from one of eleven Danish Islamist Facebook pages published between March and September 2015. The aggressive and hostile language directed against the Danes and Denmark spurred shares and comments expressing anti-Muslim sentiments as well as hostility toward immigrants and the Muslim community in Denmark. These reactions fostered the dissemination and propagation of the Islamist Facebook pages, which reached a peak when a member of Danish parliament from the conservative-liberal Liberal Party (*Venstre*) shared a post on his own Facebook profile, stating: 'Why don't you just leave Denmark if everything's so terrible!' (Facebook post, 22 April 2015). The Islamist Facebook pages were not, however, created by radical Islamists. They were fake, as the Danish public service broadcaster and other Danish news media reported shortly after the pages received public attention (Nielsen, 2015; Skovhus, 2015). A group of counter-activists started a Facebook group entitled Stop Fake Hate Profiles on Facebook (*STOP falske HAD-PROFILER på FACEBOOK*) to locate, identify, and report the Facebook pages disguised as Islamist pages. While Facebook

shuts down fake Islamist pages after a few weeks or days due to their breaches of the company's terms of use, new pages are created under new names, propagated, and cause further uproar, aggression, and hostility toward Muslim immigrants as well as immigrants and refugees in general. The fake Islamist Facebook pages tapped into a media discourse that has constructed a dichotomy between ethnic Danes and Muslims (see Andreassen, 2007; Hervik, 2011).

This is just one example of false information from a disguised source circulating in digital media. False information in digital media has been problematised in terms of the reliability of journalists' social media practices (a prominent example being the Boston Marathon bombing, see Mortensen, 2015), reliability of health information (see Adams, 2010; Mager, 2009), spread of conspiracy theories (for example following 9/11, see Stempel et al., 2007), propaganda of authoritarian regimes (see Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2011), disguised social media accounts in cyberterrorism and war (see Warf and Fekete, 2015), and the use of rumours to spread counter-information and speculative politics (see Rojecki and Meraz, 2016; Shin et al., 2016). However, there have been few inquiries into the strategic use of cloaking techniques to produce racism on the web. One reason for this scarcity of research might be the methodological challenges posed by the ephemerality of the data (as indicated by the short lifespans of the disguised Facebook pages). There are also epistemological challenges caused by lack of knowledge concerning the identities of the authors of cloaked social media content, which creates uncertainty about the actual originators (Schou and Farkas, 2016). Jessie Daniels' work addresses some of these challenges by introducing the concept of 'cloaked websites', designating online propaganda tactics by websites that deliberately conceal authorship to disguise a political agenda (Daniels, 2009a: 661).

The disguised Facebook pages considered here represent a form of cloaked website inasmuch as cloaking is a necessary first step in the imitation process. The process of cloaking has evolved over time and adapted to today's social media environment, characterised by less static and more user-driven content production, networked architecture, and social media logic(s) in which content is embedded. These changes pose new challenges when studying cloaked social media content with a hidden political agenda.

Based on the results of a case study of fake Islamist Facebook pages that produced anti-immigrant and particularly anti-Muslim speech in Denmark and building upon Jessie Daniels' work on cloaked websites, this article addresses the conceptual, methodological, and epistemological challenges emerging at the intersection of cloaked authorship and social media. The article concludes by introducing cloaked Facebook pages as an empirical observation and expanding upon critical and conceptual questions we must ask concerning the dissemination of online propaganda in social media.

Denmark, social media, and anti-Muslim speech

With fewer than 6 million inhabitants, Denmark is a world leader in internet penetration, with 97% of its citizens online (Newman et al., 2015). The ubiquity of internet access in Denmark has in recent years led to a continuous increase in social media users, especially on Facebook. In 2015 72.4% of all Danes have a Facebook account and 58% use Facebook daily (Rossi et al., 2016). Facebook's popularity has given the platform a central position in the Danish media landscape (Schwartz, 2015). Political issues can spread rapidly on Facebook, as occurred with some of the fake Islamist pages explored in the present study. The most influential of these pages received thousands of

Facebook comments and shares and reached traditional media outlets in a matter of days (Nielsen, 2015; Skovhus, 2015). Although all news media questioned the authorship of the Facebook pages, most Facebook users who shared or commented on those pages' posts assumed the originators were radical Islamists.

The hateful posts contributed to an already complex and tense political context. As in the rest of Europe (Druxes, 2015; Yilmaz, 2012), Danish parliamentary politics have moved towards a more nationalist discourse over the past two decades (Mouritsen and Olsen, 2013; Askanius and Mylonos, 2015). This development is closely linked to 'neoracism' – the portrayal of culturally different minorities as incompatible with Danish society and connected to terrorism (Hervik, 2011). Refugees and immigrants have frequently been presented as harmful to the economy, a threat to the country's cultural values, and jeopardising the security of the Danish people in general (Lentin and Titley, 2011; Uldam, 2015). Mainstream media reporting supported this narrative by consistently linking Muslims to terrorism (Nielsen AS, 2015). Danish politicians, particularly from the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), have been critical of Islam, with the religion even being designated "The biggest threat to our civilization" (Espersen, 2013). 33% of Danes think Denmark is at war with Islam as a religion, not just with specific Muslim-majority countries or terrorist groups (Andersen, 2016). The 2005 publication of the Muhammad cartoons by a Danish newspaper prompted an increase in negative articulations of Muslim immigrants and contributed to the construction of an artificial dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', between ethnic Danes and Muslims (Hervik, 2011; Yilmaz, 2011; Andreassen, 2007). The Muhammad cartoon controversy sparked protests and uproar in the Arab world, resulting in the burning of the Danish embassies in Syria and Lebanon (Lindekilde et

al., 2009; Linde-Laursen, 2007). Images of Syrians burning the Danish flag have recently reappeared on Facebook, spurring negative sentiments towards refugees. This can be contrasted with grassroots initiatives to support refugees, such as the Facebook group Friendly Neighbours (*Venligboerne*). By presenting themselves as representative of the Muslim community in Denmark, the fake Islamist Facebook pages engaged in political controversy, tapped into an enduring national political debate, and corresponded with the ongoing mass-mediated construction of Danes as opposed to Muslims (Andreassen, 2007). With general elections being held in June 2015, the pages entered an already heated political climate.

Online propaganda

Digital media technologies have been tactically employed in numerous ways to promote hate speech and fascist worldviews (Caiani and Borri, 2014; Chao, 2015; Daniels, 2013, 2009a, 2009b; Foxman and Wolf, 2013). White nationalists have utilised digital technologies to create new channels of alternative media (Arnstad, 2015; Askanius and Mylonas, 2015; Atton, 2006; Neumayer, 2016) and strategically appropriate existing platforms (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Daniels, 2013; Foxman and Wolf, 2013). This includes white supremacist groups encouraging their members to edit Wikipedia pages (Daniels, 2013) and fascist organisations and activists distributing propaganda videos through YouTube (Citron and Norton, 2011; Mazurski, 2015). Although historical revisionism and propaganda videos have long been part of political propaganda, digital media technology has increased the potential virality and accessibility of such tactics. The rapid dissemination of messages, videos, websites, and social media pages makes traceability and control of online propaganda increasingly challenging (Foxman and Wolf, 2013). While this has been heralded as

advantageous for progressive movements, it has rendered the conceptual and empirical study of racist propaganda increasingly difficult.

Moreover, the popularity of social network sites (SNSs) has obstructed efforts by social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter to moderate hateful content. Rules against internet hate speech are only enforceable through active user participation (Foxman and Wolf, 2013: 54). On Facebook, the 'report' button on profiles and pages enables users to inform Facebook about violations of the company's policies, including violence, nudity, and hate speech (Facebook, 2017). User participation to moderate hate speech is crucial for social media corporations as the company moderators only review content reported by users. Identification of hate speech on Facebook is particularly challenging for moderators, who must evaluate content (such as full-length videos) to determine user intent and act on it through censorship (Roberts, 2016). There are epistemological challenges to identifying content as (visible) hate speech, resulting in increasingly sophisticated tactics to disguise hateful content and thereby further its dissemination on social media.

A key strategy for disseminating hate speech online is to hide or disguise the underlying intentions – both to avoid deletion and appeal to a large audience (Foxman and Wolf, 2013; Daniels, 2009b). Pseudo-scientific websites, forums, and online journals may host some of these online tactics without directly taking advantage of the active role of users on social networking sites. Notable examples include the website *The Institute of Historical Review* (Daniels, 2009a; Foxman and Wolf, 2013), the online forum *Lifegen.de* (Druxes, 2015), and the pseudo-scientific online journal *The Occidental Quarterly* (Mihailovic, 2015). Daniels (2014, 2009a, 2009b) uses the term *cloaked*

websites to describe such online propaganda tactics, defining cloaked websites as “those published by individuals or groups that conceal authorship or feign legitimacy in order to deliberately disguise a hidden political agenda” (Daniels, 2009a: 661). Daniels (2008, 2009a, 2009b) argues that this type of propaganda has strong ties to hate speech and white supremacy but could potentially be used to achieve any political goal. The research highlights the risk of online propaganda being accepted as valid information and affecting user perceptions of racial issues. This raises questions concerning epistemology: How do we know what is true and false information online? How can we identify and counter subversive political propaganda? These questions, which have so far received limited attention (see Daniels, 2013), are central to this article, which builds upon Daniels’ (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2014) work by investigating cloaking tactics as a means of disguising and disseminating subversive ethno-racial propaganda on Facebook.

Cloaked identities on social network sites

Cloaked websites (after Daniels) follow a certain logic and utilise the relatively static architecture of websites. Cloaking on SNSs requires different mechanisms. On cloaked websites, the main aim is to present the content as serious and trustworthy while concealing the website’s authorship. On SNSs (such as Facebook), personal profiles and the display of a personal network are central to the reliability and trust created, including posts by the originator of a page or profile and comments by friends or user profiles who like a page, constantly reshaping and reconfirming the page’s identity. A popular definition of SNSs argues that their key characteristics are the ability to create a public or semi-public profile, make connections known, and view and navigate these connections (boyd and Ellison, 2007). These authors later revised the connectivity

function by including production of and interaction with streams of user-generated content (Ellison and boyd, 2013). The profile itself can in today's SNSs be defined as "a portrait of an individual as an expression of action, a node in a series of groups, and a repository of self- and other-provided data" (Ellison and boyd, 2013: 154). Similarly, conceptualising social media more generally as "personal media assemblage and archives" (Good, 2013: 560) allows us to consider that the identity created through an SNS may be central to analysing cloaking processes on the Facebook.

We must consequently understand cloaking processes on the Facebook SNS as: based on a (cloaked) identity created through the page; a stream of content or "evolving connectivity" (Papacharissi, 2009: 216); and a profile that is created and negotiated in interaction between posts and comments. Moreover, unlike the permanence created in personal media archives such as Facebook profiles, these pages are not permanent but exist in an interactive process of creation, deletion (due to violation of Facebook's terms of use), and recreation. Empirical inquiries thus far have focused on SNSs' potential for rallying both social movements with honourable intentions (see Castells, 2012; Coretti and Pica, 2015) and racist hate groups (Citron and Norton, 2011; Foxman and Wolf, 2013). This research enhances our understanding of the use of SNSs to produce hate, racism, and antagonistic discourses. In particular, it investigates the production of hate and antagonism towards Muslims through Facebook pages with disguised authorship.

Methodology

Research data was collected through a multi-sited online ethnographic study (Marcus, 1995) from April 2015 to September 2015. Our role as researchers has not solely been

passive observation but has involved a degree of participation and engagement in the process of studying the people, objects, controversies, conflicts, and negotiations related to the cloaked Facebook pages (see Galis and Hansson, 2012). This approach has allowed us to study the pages with attention to their complexities and contradictions.

The primary research sites have been: 11 cloaked Facebook pages, all of which claimed to be administered by radical Islamists living in Denmark; the closed Facebook group named Stop Fake Hate-Profiles on Facebook (informed consent was secured by a post within the group providing information about the research), which was formed to contest the authorship of the cloaked pages and get Facebook to delete them; and provisional and ephemeral sites, such as the commentary sections of Danish news outlets on Facebook, where the originators of the cloaked Facebook pages participated in discussions. The research process connected the sites by observing and following emergent links (mentions, shares, etc.) made between them. Continuously connecting the sites allowed us to produce an in-depth and nuanced picture of the cloaked Facebook pages, their dissemination, and their impact (see Hine, 2015). To secure access to the pages, we collected posts, comments, and shares using Netvizz as well as screenshots. The authors translated page names, comments and posts into English from their Danish originals. To protect original authors on the cloaked Facebook pages, we do not provide further details on user accounts, and the act of translation renders the texts themselves untraceable.

Methodological challenges

This research confronted two main methodological challenges: First, due to the ephemerality of cloaked Facebook pages, it was necessary to find and observe pages

before they disappeared. Second, although we are able to conclude that the Facebook pages were cloaked, we are only able to make assumptions about the pages' originators (despite media reports by Nielsen, 2015; Skovhus, 2015). The first challenge was addressed by finding pages quickly since the pages' lifespans ranged from a few weeks to just a few days before Facebook closed them down. Despite the usually presumed persistence of social media content, clandestine and radical social media content is prone to ephemerality, creating challenges for research (see Bruns, 2013; Shein, 2013). A multi-sited ethnographic research approach meets these challenges by acknowledging the short lifespans of the Facebook pages and grasping their interconnectedness, creation, and reproduction as a continuous process.

Second, there remains uncertainty about the identity of the originators behind the cloaked Facebook pages. Unlike the cloaked websites studied by Daniel (2009a, 2009b, 2014), cloaked Facebook pages allow page administrators to remain completely anonymous. This research meets the second challenge by analysing multiple pages over time in order to draw conclusions on the basis of the observed identity cloak. The most notable indications of a cloaked identity were: proclaimed affiliation with existing organisations, which had no connection to the pages; systematic deletion of user comments expressing scepticism towards the authorship; use of neoracist rhetoric; unsearchable page names; and use of page names, aesthetics, and posts identical or very similar to pages previously identified as cloaked. We excluded pages from the study if they did not demonstrate similar presumed cloaking techniques. Our analysis focuses on the identities created by the cloaked Facebook pages, i.e. the identities of the radical Islamists living in Denmark, which were created through the Facebook pages. As Facebook does not provide users with information about the actual page owners, we

are unable to draw firm conclusions about the originators' underlying motivations, which could be political and ideological (as in Daniels' cloaked websites 2009a, 2009b) as well as online trolling (Phillips, 2013).

Iterations of cloaking

The cloaked Islamist Facebook pages existed for very short periods of time throughout 2015 (see Table 1), ranging from six weeks (Islam: The Religion of Peace) to just a single day (Zahra Al-Sayed). This succession of emerging and vanishing pages resulted in an iterative process that, at a very basic level, consisted of five chronological but overlapping steps across all 11 pages: First, the Facebook pages were created in a manner that disguised them as representing radical Islamist identities through symbolism, text, and imagery. Second, the pages were disseminated through hateful and aggressive posts antagonistically directed at the Danish people and state. Third, users reacted to the posts with comments and shares without questioning the pages' authorship. Fourth, the Facebook group Stop Fake Hate-Profiles on Facebook acted by contesting the pages' authorship and reporting them to Facebook. Fifth, Facebook deleted the pages due to violations of their content policies.

<Insert Table 1: Overview of Facebook pages and durations of their existence.>

Taken as a whole, the pages formed a web of SNS propaganda that produced anti-Muslim discourse through reactions in form of comments. This discourse supports the constructed dichotomy between Muslims and ethnic Danes directly and indirectly presented in the mainstream media (Hervik, 2011; Andreassen 2007). Due to the asynchronicity of the different pages, this underlying logic connected the subversive

pages as nodes in the network across the individual pages' temporal existences. The reoccurring patterns were only observable at the level of the pages' combined lifespans.

We identified the following similarities within these nodes: All pages used one of two types of names, either a name that referred to unspecified groups of Muslims (such as Sharia in Denmark) or a page name that referred to fictitious individuals (such as Fatima El-Mohammed). Most pages using the names of specific individuals had either 'El-' or 'Al-' in the middle of these (such as Ali El-Yussuf and Zahra Al-Sayed). Some of the pages carry identical names due to copies of pages created after Facebook deleted a page. The identified patterns occurring across the various pages over a number of months suggest that the disguised pages were connected and created by the same individual or group hiding beneath the cloak.

<Insert Table 2: Number of comments, shares, and likes of posts per page.>

Despite their short lifespans, some of the pages received considerable response and visibility through comments, shares, and likes (see Table 2). Following our observations, the four pages that received the most attention were: Islam: The Religion of Peace, which received 780 comments, was shared by a member of parliament, and attained national media coverage (Moestrup, 2015; Nielsen, 2015). Although the media coverage identified the Facebook pages as cloaked and producing racism, their reporting increased the pages' visibility. Ali El-Yussuf [1] and Mohammed El-Sayed both received more than 3000 comments. The most visible page seems to have been Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1], which received 10426 comments and attained national media coverage (Skovhus, 2015). Despite being the page that sparked the most

interaction, Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1] was also one of the pages that existed for the shortest period of time. The page was deleted less than 72 hours after its creation but within that short timespan received a remarkably high number of comments, likes, and shares.

Designing the cloak

The cloaking tactics used to construct the identity of the radical Islamist Facebook pages are based on sophisticated use of Facebook's page architecture, which supports a distinct hierarchy with respect to page administrators and visiting users (Champoux et al., 2012). The pages' architecture allows administrators to remain completely anonymous and enables them to delete any comment on the page without notifying the author. Page administrators can also block users to avoid any comments that do not support the pages' perspectives or, in this case, that might create awareness about the cloaked identity. This hierarchical structure has proven beneficial for commercial companies using Facebook pages as it allows them to appear participatory and democratic while at the same time maintaining control over their pages' contents (Champoux et al., 2012). For the cloaked Facebook pages in this study, the technology-supported hierarchy allowed the administrators to hide behind the cloaks they designed. Using new hateful comments and new pages, they could constantly reproduce, deceive, and manipulate users through the tactical use of pictures and graphics, names and terms, hyperlinks to existing organisations, and moderation of comments expressing scepticism about the validity of the source.

To design the radical Islamist disguise, all of the pages used similar types of pictures and graphics. The imagery shows aggression by Muslims (including Danish Muslims

in a constructed binary) toward the Danish people and state. Examples of such imagery include pictures of the Danish flag being burned during demonstrations against the Muhammad cartoons in 2005; the so-called Black Standard (of Jihad), which has been used by Al Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist organisations (Matusitz and Olufowote, 2016); the flag of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant); and photos of banners with statements such as ‘Islam is coming to Denmark’ and ‘Islam will dominate the world. Freedom can go to Hell.’ This directly supports the ongoing negative portrayal of Muslims as the antithesis of Danes (see Andreassen, 2007). Profile pictures were used to further support the idea that the Facebook pages were run by radical Islamists. All pages carrying fake individual names (such as Mehmet Dawah Aydemir) used stolen pictures of real individuals. The deceptive use of stolen profile pictures was created with great care so that none of the pictures could be traced to their origins through a reverse image search on Google. A search for the various individual names used by the pages did not provide any search engine results.

Across the pages, posts included Arabic terms and words supporting the creation of the cloaked identity. These included words such as ‘kuffars’ [infidels] and ‘jizyah’ [religious tax required by non-Muslims in Islamic states] as well as short phrases such as ‘Alhamdulillah’ [praise be to God] and ‘Allahu Akbar’ [God is great]. Moreover, hyperlinks were used to simulate connections to Islamist organisations. In Facebook’s design, all page administrators can add a hyperlink to a website in the prominently displayed ‘About’ section, which should tell visitors that a given website is connected to a particular organisation, company, or person. In their ‘About’ sections, the cloaked Facebook pages included links to the website of the Danish branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir (<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.dk/>), an international Sunni Islamic political organisation

known in Denmark for its controversial views on democracy and freedom of speech. The organisation, however, had no connection to these Facebook pages or knowledge of their administrators. Furthermore, the organisation sought to convince Facebook to have the pages removed (Nielsen, 2015). The hyperlinks added an additional layer to the narrative that radical Islamists ran the pages and a unity of all Muslims seeking to conquer ethnic Danes.

Our ethnography indicated that administrators of all of the pages used moderation to maintain the disguise. The administrators monitored the pages' commentary sections and removed comments that expressed scepticism concerning the pages' claimed authorship. Furthermore, users posting such content – disputing a page's legitimacy – were permanently blocked from making any additional comments. The moderation of comments was not directed at users expressing aggression or hate towards the cloaked pages or at Muslims in general but was performed to maintain the narrative that radical Islamists ran the pages and to prevent the cloak from being lifted to reveal the actual identity of the page administrators. What remained visible were comments – sometimes thousands of them (see Table 2) – that did not dispute the source but instead engaged in aggression, racism, and antagonism toward Denmark's Muslim community. In combination, these cloaking tactics enabled the administrators to design a cloak to disguise their identities and maintain the cloak throughout the pages' existences.

Reactions on the cloaked pages

The posts created across the 11 different pages show similarities in content and rhetorical style. An illustrative example is the Mohammed El-Sayed page, on which the following post received 3739 comments and 1490 shares:

We Muslims have come here to stay. We have not come here for peace but to take over your shitty infidel country. But of course we can't take over the country right away so we wait. While we Muslims wait, we take your money, houses, we fuck your cheap women and exploit them to make our babies, exploit your educational system so we Muslims can use it against you infidel pigs. These things happen before your very eyes and you infidel pigs can't do a thing about it ☺. You infidel pigs are afraid of us Muslims because Allah (swt) has given us the strength for it. Just you wait until we Muslims have you infidel pigs removed under sharia law. Takbir! Allahu Akbar! P.S my imam is an ethnic Dane. (Mohammed El-Sayed, Facebook post, 30 June 2015)

This post claims to speak for a Muslim community, which seeks to represent the perspective of a larger group of Muslims living in Denmark. The post expresses a revolutionary agenda of overthrowing Danish society and turning it into an Islamic state. To reach this aim, the post claims, Muslims will persistently subvert and weaken Danish society from within by undermining its welfare system as well as by strategically exploiting Danish women to produce a larger Muslim community and weaken the ethnic purity of the Danish people. This rhetoric directly relates to the fear of the Islamisation of Europe through immigrant rape discourse as well as the victimisation of white European women alongside the 'evil feminists' and their (particularly in Scandinavia) gender equality rights (Horsti, 2016). Danes are referred to as 'infidel pigs', a group constructed as weak and incapable of interfering in this process, which directly corresponds to existing neoracist discourses in Denmark and

across Europe, in which Muslims are portrayed as an alien force plotting to take over the country and abolish Danish culture (Hervik, 2011).

The post articulates a clear binary division between a Muslim and a Danish imaginary. Through clear us/them constructions, the page consistently articulates Danes and Muslims (including Danish Muslims) as directly opposed and internally homogenous groups, building upon a discourse directly and indirectly constructed by media portrayals (see Andreassen, 2007). The production of an antagonistic discourse seeks to reinforce dichotomisation, hate, and aggression toward Muslim communities. A core element in the production of antagonistic discourse is the alleged Muslim conspiracy to transform Danish society. The rhetoric across the pages was not merely similar; in some cases, identical posts were used. The aforementioned post by Mohammed El-Sayed also appeared on the Fatima El-Mohammed and Zahra Al-Sayed pages. These reoccurring patterns strongly suggest that the pages are indeed connected and indicate their administration by the same individual or group, hiding behind a radical Islamist cloak.

The pages resonated with Danish users, whose comments, shares, and likes helped disseminate hateful pages and posts. The comments indicate that users regarded the cloaked Facebook pages and their aggressive posts as originating from actual radical Islamists. For these users, the cloaked Facebook pages were a source of information concerning Denmark's Muslim community and supported the construction of antagonistic imagery and neoracist imaginaries (see Hervik, 2011, Yilmaz 2011). The comments displayed hostility, anger, and racist sentiments towards the radical Islamists constructed via the cloaked Facebook pages, such as:

Fucking idiot. You'll learn better. (Comment, Islam: The Religion of Peace, 1 May 2015)

Psychopath!!!! Go home to your country !!! (User share of post, Ali El-Yussuf [1], 7 June 2015)

Hang yourself, you fucking *perker* [Danish derogatory slang for Muslim immigrant or descendent of Muslim immigrants]. (Comment, Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1], 12 September 2015)

These comments directly address the personified cloak of the radical Islamist created through the Facebook page, but a number of users also reacted to the antagonistic discourse reproduced by the cloaked Facebook pages as indicative of all Muslims in Denmark. These comments express hostility toward Muslims as well as immigrants and refugees in Denmark, often signified by the use of 'they' or 'you':

You guys have to fuck our women in order to get normal children. Just see all the fucking inbreeding there is!!! A bunch of sick, twisted, handicapped kids that believes in a god, which they call Allah [...] (Comment, Mohammed El-Sayed, 1 July 2015)

Think about if you immigrants could behave in OUR country and respect Denmark, then there wouldn't be so many who vote for DF [Danish People's Party] – but right now, as it is, DF is the only goddamned right thing to vote for. (Comment, Mohammed El-Sayed, 1 July 2015)

It's always those fucking refugees. They fuck our women and take our money.

And what can we do? Should we just sit on our arses and say: hey we need help?

(Comment, Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1], 11 September 2015)

The comments range from expressing extreme hostility to anti-immigration and pro-nationalistic sentiments by attacking the Muslim community and refugees in general to showing support for the right-wing populist Danish People's Party. The cloaked Facebook pages became sites of aggressive posting and reaction through comments, producing a spectacle of hostility. The page administrators created this hostility through new aggressive posts, and users maintained and reproduced this hostility through their reactions. The user-generated stream of information (Ellison and boyd, 2013) was based on aggressive and violent disinformation through the cloaked Facebook pages and fuelled antagonistic reactions, contributing to neoracism in Denmark and across Europe. By confirming existing fear, hatred, and neoracism toward Muslims and immigrants in Denmark and by tactically appropriating Facebook, the administrators reached and deceived thousands of Danish Facebook users. They reinforced the binary portrayal of Muslims in an oppositional, foreign, and terrifying narrative, reconfirming (ethnic) Danish identity (see Andreassen, 2007). The pages reproduce the Islamophobia framed by the news media in the Western world (see Ali et al., 2011 for similar developments in the US). Through their comments (critical toward the Facebook pages and Muslims in general), users supported a dominant racist and anti-Muslim narrative.

Peeking beneath the cloak

Although most of the user comments reproduced the discourse of hatred and aggression, we could also observe attempts to negotiate or contest the authorship of the pages. This

kind of meta-communication – which responded not to the content but instead to the validity of the cloaked Facebook pages – often included explicit comments about users reporting the page, links to news stories about cloaked pages, and speculation as to the identity of the actual administrators. Rather than engaging in the spectacle of hostility discussed above, these users sought to destabilise and dismantle the cloaked pages from within. These attempts were immediately disrupted by the page administrators, who consistently removed such content.

In June 2015, a number of Facebook users responded by forming the group Stop Fake Hate-Profiles on Facebook, dedicated to finding and closing down cloaked Facebook pages that support racist, exclusive, and anti-democratic values. By September 2015, the group had over 2000 members, circulated news about cloaked pages, reported them to Facebook, and intervened on the pages themselves:

Hi all! We have just received a tip about a fake profile [page] spreading hate. Is there anyone who knows this person and can confirm whether he exists for real?
UPDATE: Now it's settled that the profile is fake. We encourage all members of the group to report it. (Post by administrator, Stop Fake Hate Profiles on Facebook, 30 June 2015)

To counteract the cloaked Facebook pages, the group made mass use of the anonymous 'report' function on Facebook pages, which led Facebook to take down the pages. A complex web of actors – comprised of pages being created and deleted, mass media reports, user comments and shares, and the emergent group formed to stop these pages – became involved in the actions against cloaked Facebook pages. Moreover, the

Facebook group collected evidence to prove that the radical Islamist pages were fake and to peek beneath the cloak to better understand the cloaked Facebook pages' strategies and tactics.

In light of their overarching aim to remove the cloaked Facebook pages, the actions of the counter group have proven largely successful, as the six pages that existed before the group was founded had an average lifespan of 19 days, while the pages that were founded afterwards only existed for an average of 2.4 days (Table 1). The collective effort to report the pages to Facebook significantly shortened their lifespans. Nevertheless, Mehmet Dawah Aydemir [1], a cloaked Facebook page created after the counter group was formed and with a lifespan of four days, received by far the most comments and shares (Table 2) and reached a relatively wide audience. The counter group's success is thus debatable, as the producers of the disguised propaganda remained anonymous without facing any consequences besides the continuous removal of their pages. The publicity the group created (through reports in mainstream media and through dissemination on Facebook) may also have increased the visibility of the fake Islamist pages. Critical reporting by mainstream media might have supported the development of an anti-Muslim counter-narrative to elite media through the disinformation provided by the cloaked Facebook pages (a process discussed by Andrejevic, 2013 as a 'post-deferential era').

Cloaked Facebook pages: Challenges ahead

The characteristics and challenges that Daniels (2009a, 2009b) identifies in her research on cloaked websites – deceptive use of new media, disguised authorship, and attempted legitimization of racist politics – are also evident on the cloaked anti-Muslim Facebook pages. We also, however, face new challenges when dealing with social media. These

new challenges can be addressed from a propaganda studies perspective and a social media perspective. In propaganda studies, the terms white, grey, and black propaganda have been used to distinguish between different forms of overt and covert manipulation (Becker, 1949; Daniels, 2009a, 2009b). In this terminology, *white propaganda* refers to propaganda of which the source is clearly identifiable; *grey propaganda* refers to propaganda of which the source is either unidentifiable or difficult to identify; and *black propaganda* refers to propaganda that has a disguised source. Although we share Daniels' (2009b) criticism concerning the problematic racial connotations of these categories, distinguishing between different types of propaganda helps us explore the critical differences between cloaked Facebook pages and cloaked websites. Cloaked white supremacist websites (Daniels, 2009a, 2009b, 2008) are primarily examples of grey propaganda due to the difficulty in identifying the source and underlying political agendas of the content they display. The cloaked Islamist Facebook pages studied in this paper seek to spread anti-Muslim sentiment in the Danish population and can be identified as black propaganda (or to suggest a less problematic term, 'impersonated propaganda'), "which is presented by the propagandizer as coming from a source inside the propagandized" (Becker, 1949: 221). With the production of an identity through a Facebook profile or page, this form of propaganda requires new tactics of concealing identity and designing a disguise. The disguise in the form of a racist portrayal of a stereotypical Muslim living in Denmark is maintained in interaction between posts and comments supporting the **neoracist narratives**. The cloaked Facebook pages can thus misrepresent the enemy by providing 'proof' of a racist right-wing populist perception of Muslims. Immediate reaction through commenting both maintains and proves the credibility of the cloak used to spread propaganda.

The profiles created on Facebook, carefully disguised as radical Islamists, make it difficult to ‘uncloak’ the Facebook pages simply by viewing them. The connections displayed through linking to Muslim websites support the construction of the Islamist profiles. Most striking, however, is the tactical utilisation of the SNS network structure. Through interaction with and reactions from users who are unable to see behind the Facebook pages’ cloaks, the content and radical Islamist identity are disseminated and further circulated in public discourse via comments and shares. In this research, we followed “an initial, baseline conceptual identity” (Marcus, 1995: 106) across multiple sites and actors participating in the continuous production, dissemination, negotiation, contestation, and deletion of disguised propaganda. The ephemeral nature of the pages increased the challenges of fieldwork in a fluid online environment, which this research encountered in seeking to become active in discovering, identifying, and following cloaked Facebook pages. This revealed new epistemological challenges: How can we verify a credible profile page and source on SNSs? How does a page’s credibility increase through its being shared and commented on within social networks? How can users become more critical of information produced through aggressive and hateful posts? Given Facebook’s design (which provides almost unlimited anonymity and security to page owners), the most encouraging action seems to be the formation of a group actively fighting propaganda. Promising as this initiative may be, the counter-actions might have helped create visibility for the cloaked Facebook pages. The cloaked Facebook pages’ disguising techniques – fuelled by users’ racist and anti-Muslim responses, which multiplied the narratives created by the pages – are part of a shift in which the debunking of news might reinforce, rather than threaten, power and control (Andrejevic, 2013). Counter-actions will need to go beyond merely shutting down the pages to resist these forms of propaganda in social media. **Instead of leaving**

responsibility with its users, Facebook might algorithmically prevent these pages and consider revealing page administrators. Research must actively intervene in these controversies to call attention to these forms of propaganda as well as to reflect upon and provide conceptual frameworks for understanding the intricacies involved in contemporary forms of mediated propaganda. Allowing researchers access to Facebook's data would make it possible to investigate the consequences of such content for political discussion and internet culture in general.

Cloaked Facebook pages build upon the interactive character of social media and through their networked character may enter a much larger ecology of pre-existing pages displaying (for the most part) legitimate information. The fundamental epistemological, methodological, and political questions posed by cloaked websites and cloaked Facebook pages remain similar. We must thus build upon Jessie Daniels' work by further analysing how new technological developments can provide new potential for subversive propaganda (e.g. through direct comparison with actual radical Islamist pages) and to show how technological changes shape racism. Further empirical and conceptual enquiry can help unpack how disinformation in social media might reinforce neoracism, influence public opinion, support racist anti-Muslim narratives, and affect policy regarding immigration and minority rights. Understanding the wider consequences of cloaked Facebook pages might help identify the new literacy that people require to peek beneath the cloak and avoid sources of disinformation on social media, but the responsibility should not remain with users alone. Facebook needs to take social responsibility in order to aid citizens in the fight against faceless racism.

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