

Counter Islamophobia: An Analysis of the Discourse of Belgium's Non-Government Organisation in the Media

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Abstract: The paper aims to describe and analyse the pattern of discourse presented by two non-government organisations to counter Islamophobia on Facebook: UNI-A (*Centre Interfederal Institution for Combating Discrimination*) and CCIB (*Collective contre Islamophobie en Belgique*). Despite the independence of the UNI-A, they have a direct mandate from the government and consist of diverse Belgian religious adherents, atheists, and political preferences, while the CCIB consists of Belgian Muslim activists. The data are gathered from the organisation's postings on Facebook between 2016 and 2018. The ethnomethodology and dialogical network are applied to analyse the structure immediately held by the organisation in order to generate a history of their media activities. I argue that the role of these organisations is vast in counteracting and counterbalancing the issue of Islamophobia, which causes many acts of violence. Through their discourse in countering Islamophobia, we can discover the different patterns of these two organisations in terms of posting messages on Facebook.

Keywords: Islamophobia and media, UNI-A, CCIB, dialogical network, ethnomethodology, counterbalancing Islamophobia, counteracting Islamophobia

Introduction

Islamophobia is an emerging phenomenon that is influenced by social media's accessibility. The annual report published by The International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH) classified it as the third most frequent case of cyber hate after racism and anti-Semitism in Europe. In addition, it has also been identified that half of all cyber hate acts happen on the internet and a third of all complaints

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occur via the web 2.0 platform i.e. Facebook (Deinat and Berez, 2018). The research conducted by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) on racism and cultural diversity media coverage demonstrates that, between 1995 and 2000, the term 'Islamophobia' was not considered part of the media's coverage of minority issues. Furthermore, Islam, as a minority religion in Belgium during this time, was not depicted as a problem in the media. This research relied on data from web1.0 media platforms, newspapers, and television (ter Wal, 2002).

It appears clear that social media's accessibility has played a significant role in facilitating the rise and development of minority issues (Meer and Modood, 2009: p. 344), possibly due to the fact that, in the public space, the media play a role as 'an arena' where the reputation and dimensions of a subject are evaluated and developed (Dupret, Klaus and Ferrié, 2009: p. 161), social problems are framed and constructed (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988: p. 58) and the selection and nominalisation of diverse public events related to Islam/Muslims are facilitated (Calabrese, 2015: p. 93).

At a wider consequence, according to Wilson II and Gutiérrez (1985), the representation of a despicable minority group in the media might become a tunnel that could accelerate a bigger mass movement for countering the existence of a minority group in society. This argument is supported by research conducted by Shaver, Sibley, Osborne & Bulbulia (2017), which proved that a significant relationship exists between negative information coverage in the media about Islam and Muslim to the level of dislike and amicability toward Muslim. Currently, this phenomenon is called Islamophobia.

Moreover Wolfreys (2018) insisted that the existence of an institution that can work effectively in the anti-racism and counter the Islamophobic discourse in the media is fundamental. It plays a huge role in providing and transmitting relevant and valuable information that can lead to a change, from a grammar game of Islamophobia to moral respect awareness (p. 44). From the same point of view, research conducted by the European Research Centre for Migration and Ethnic Relations on behalf of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in 2002 found that the NGOs and migrant associations are at the forefront of the struggle against racism (ter Wal, 2002).

However, research about the NGOs' role in the counter-discourse on Islamophobia in the media is relatively rare. This paper attempts to fill this gap by analysing the role of non-government organisations in Belgium in combating the Islamophobic discourse in the media. Two Belgian NGOs are used as an object analysis of research, namely UNI-A and CCIB based on their Facebook messages from 2016 to 2018. In this article, I discuss the main argument that deals with the pattern of the

NGOs in portraying the counterbalance and counteraction of the Islamophobic discourse. The article is structured firstly by providing an overview of the scope of the methodology, then providing a review of the UNI-A and CCIB. Next, the general news-making and media practice of these organisations will be analysed. Finally, the implications derived from the theory and dynamics of the publications and their impact will be discussed.

Ethnomethodology and Dialogical Network in Media Publication Analysis

Ethnomethodology is an approach created by Garfinkel that is used to collect and analyse '*in situ*' information actualised by 'a practical historian' while he/she tries to reformulate a current event in the media (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011). A practical historian is someone who is responsible for reconstructing and re-enacting a related event by means of an investigation activity. It could be used to explain ongoing events and present them on social media, that could influence the audiences' recent activity (p. 69). Schudson (1995) used the term 'gatekeeper' to refer to an individual who is responsible for setting out and sharing information on the media in order to create and develop a *history-contingent meaning* in each shared publication (Leudar & Nekvapil, 2011, p. 68). As Schudson (1995) explains, the intensification of the issue by the media could authenticate all of the issues (p. 20). In other words, a gatekeeper is a user and producer of histories as she/he brings the past into some current activities by creating 'a setting' that merges with history. These activities are called 'local historicity' (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011, p. 68). Therefore, according to Garfinkel, ethnomethodology is important in understanding 'a setting' because it can lead to the comprehension of personal behaviour. It has a consequential historical function of the retrospective and prospective local activity structure (p. 67).

Accordingly, Islamophobia is a concept which is created in an *in-situ setting* that has been developed by a gatekeeper in order to introduce a logical explanation of some vague information in the past related to Islam/Muslims in Europe. The gatekeeper tries to use and produce the history of Islam/Muslim by formulating conflict called Islamophobia in the media. In other words, Islamophobia is a result of what is called the *structured immediacy* process of historicity, where the context of Islam and Muslim is removed from the here-and-now context through the historical particulars setting (Leudar, Sharrock, Hayes, and Trucle, (2008), Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011). This is why Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil & Baker (2008)

explained that history is one of the most valuable resources of information. In other words, Islamophobia is established by introducing historical particulars through the setting of contemporary activities that could upgrade or downgrade the subject, i.e. Islam as a religion and Muslims as a population (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2011).

Next, the analysis will focus on the dialogical network that is developed by a gatekeeper in publicising information as part of the counter-attack and counterbalance to the Islamophobic discourse on Facebook. The dialogical network is not a formulation of the analysts but they are forms of communication held by the participants in the media (Jiří and Leuder, 2006, p. 30). This concept was introduced by Leudar and Nekvapil in 1998, who stated that the media are dialogically connected interactively, thematically and argumentatively (Leudar, Marsland, and Nekvapil, 2004; Jiří and Leuder, 2006). It could be used to investigate the emerging network within one nation's boundaries and to capture some existing aspects of the worldwide communication on Islamophobia (Leudar et al., 2004: p. 245)

The dialogical network assumes that a dialogue is characterised by the public participant and public debate as part of the political culture within a social network. The element and connections between them in such networks are always concrete and considered as social happenings (Leudar et al., 2004) In creating dialogical networks, a gatekeeper will produce a 'dialogical event' in his/her information as well as develop coherent information between the event and its presentation in the media in order to amplify their reach and effect (Jiří and Leuder, 2006: p. 31). There are different types of media for presenting information; for example, YouTube and websites. Despite the differences, a gatekeeper will create a network together with the audience by duplicating, re-using and pairing some information in order to develop a sequential structure for a coherent argumentation (pp. 32–33). According to Jiří and Leuder (2006), there are several techniques that could be utilised as a network structure in a dialogical network which have different purposes; for example, claim denouncement or dismay, summons (for support) – response, appeal – response or no response, and repair, that are employed in this research for analysing the discourse held by the NGOs in their general news-making and media practice routines for presenting the counter discourse on Islamophobia on Facebook (pp. 33–40).

Two Belgian NGOs: UNIA and CCIB

UNIA is an independent public institution that is recognised by the Global Alliance of the National Human Rights Institution at the international level as the centre for equal opportunities and opposition to racism. Established in February 1993, UNIA also receives its mission from parliament but UNIA handles this mission independently. Furthermore, the federal government, the regions, and communities signed an official partnership agreement to create the first centre of inter-federal institutions for combating discrimination in Belgium on June 12 2013. This organisation was divided into two purposes of work: first, the inter-federal migration centre, which was renamed Myria in 2015, which has responsibility for overseeing migration issues and, second, the inter-federal centre for equal opportunities, which was renamed UNI-A in 2016. It seeks to combat discrimination and promote equal opportunities.

This institution has 19 kinds of discrimination, and five of these criteria relate to race i.e., race, skin, nationality, ancestry and ethnic origin. The other criteria for discrimination are related to disability, philosophy or religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, wealth, civil status, political beliefs, trade union membership, state of health, physical or genetic characteristics, birth, social background, gender, and language. UNI-A has a mission to encompass three majors proposes, that are: promoting equal opportunities and participation in all areas of society; cooperating with the major actors in society; and promoting knowledge and respect for constitutional rights, particularly regarding anti-discrimination law, to ensure that these rights are respected and applied in Belgium.

CCIB, meanwhile, is a non-profit organisation that was established in 2014 by anti-racist, experienced activists (militants). According to CCIB it would be more accurate to use the term 'activists' since this organisation predominantly consists of women who are the victims of Islamophobia and the other kinds of discrimination. CCIB is an anti-racist organisation which has several specific characteristics, such as a pluralist, non-denominational, non-communitarian, and nonpartisan. CCIB operates in three regions in Belgium i.e. Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels (the capital). In actualising their programme, the organisation has a willingness to be active in organising some training, conferences, symposia, campaigns, manifestations, and other events that are dedicated to raising awareness among Belgian people about the need to combat anti-Muslim racism.

Although, in general, UNI-A and CCIB have a similar mission, they also have some fundamental differences. The organisation's members are one of the

differences, as UNI-A consists of Belgian people with different cultural backgrounds, while the primary members of CCIB are Belgian Muslims. The organisational framework is also the other different dimension. Despite the independent position of UNI-A in managing the organisation, UNI-A has a direct mandate from the government, whereas CCIB does not have a direct mandate from the Belgian government but it develops cooperation with UNI-A.

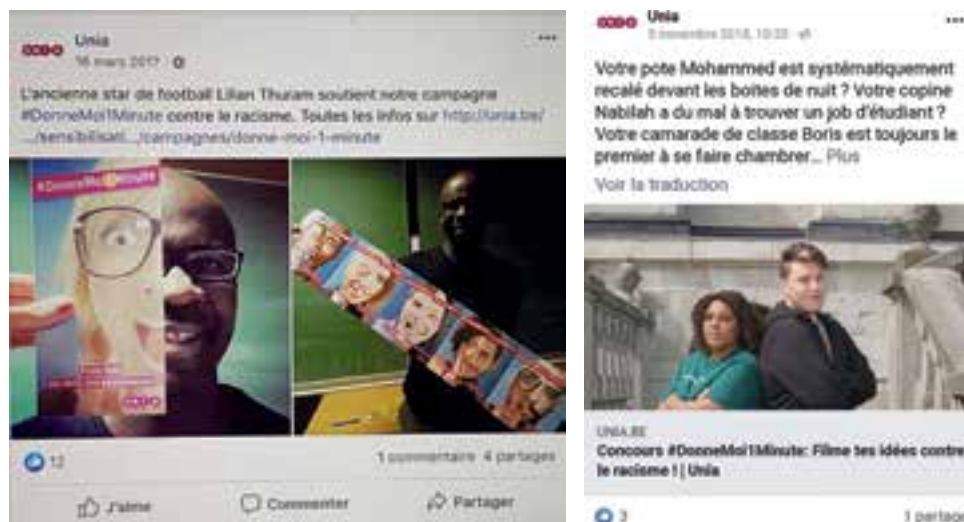
General News-making and Media Practice Routine

On account of the ethnomethodology reasoning above, in this research, it appears that UNI-A and CCIB have attempted to create a counter discourse to Islamophobia by formulating conflict in the different way against the essentialised, radicalised, and marginalised discourse of Islam that existed before. The gatekeepers of these two organisations were formulating a 'setting' by sequencing a structure of some relevant history in their local media activity. For example, at UNI-A, there is a routine program called 'donne-moi une minute'. Although UNI-A does not mention clearly their aim to actualise their concern about directly combatting racism against Islam/Muslims, they have tried to downgrade slightly the right-wing values by presenting a neutral figure in their publication in order to avoid controversy (see figure.1).

Figure 1. Illustration of the Sequence Structure of UNI-A's Routine Programme²



² <https://www.facebook.com/unia/>



Source: UNI-A.

They use 19 categories of avatars that represent different kinds of discrimination, which is the main purpose of the UNI-A program (see figure.2). In the history-contingency meaning, these neutral avatars could be considered a setting that is created due to some discriminatory conduct and racial conflict that happened in the past. It seems clear that UNI-A wants to be depicted, in the pluralistic Belgian society, as a neutral organisation. In spite of the fact that UNI-A does not have a specific avatar for Islamophobia, they include it in one of the discrimination categories; namely, discrimination against religious and philosophical belief.

Figure 2. Illustration of the Neutral Avatar of the Various Types of Discrimination at UNI-A³



³ <https://www.facebook.com/unia/>



Source: UNI-A.

In contrast, CCIB publishes their routine publication in a different way. There is clearly displayed some categories of Islamic identity. We can find this in their routine programme called #OpenSchool4Woman, where Muslim women are presented as the primary element in their publication (see figure 3). This setting has been actualised due to the historical background of the invention of this organisation since Muslim women are the most frequent victims of Islamophobic attacks in Belgium (CCIB, 2018). In addition, the element of educational issues is also applied in order to counter the discourse which marginalises Muslim women and their identity in the education environment and considers them as second class with regard to education issues. Therefore, in a sense of historical contingencies, CCIB tries to actualise the important role played by women in combating anti-Islam/Muslim racism through their education programmes.

In presenting their routine publication, CCIB also uses the sequential structure technique. This technique is actualised by pairing the 'happenings' event with an action that is depicted by an 'ordinary verb' and a picture in order to build a coherent argument. For example, the #OpenSchool4Woman pairing could be found at the publication in a different country at different events and by different women for each country. According to Jiří and Leuder (2006), this pairing dialogical technique conveys two important points. Firstly, the effect of the information could be broader and stronger and, secondly, the gatekeeper could underline the relationship between the event that is happening and other information in a coherent way.

Next, in presenting a closely-related issue to Islam/Muslims, UNI-A also utilises a neutral symbol. For example, in responding to the terrorist attack that occurred in Belgium on March 23 2016, UNI-A did not use the word 'Islam' or 'Muslim' as the main terms in their publication (see figure 4). They obviously used the 'formulating historicity' argumentation technique in this publication.

Figure 3. Illustration of the Sequence Structure of CCIB's Routine Programme⁴

Source: CCIB.

According to Leudar and Nekvapil (2011), this kind of historicity is brought into play when interest shifts. Under this term, the satisfaction of adherents of all religions and identities in society is a prime goal of the publication, rather than to attack them. In doing so, they used a black heart logo with the phrase 'no hate' at its centre, together with a leading comment which, instead of focusing on the conflict caused by the terrorist act, was centered instead on other important

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/islamophobia.ccib.be/>

aspects, such as respect for the victim, solidarity, unity, non-bigotry, and no hate values. This publication network is dedicated not only to the people of Belgium but also to all people across Europe. This neutrality makes it possible for other actors to republish it; for example, CCIB replicated it in their publication as well.

Figure 4. An Illustration of UNI-A's Formulation of the Historicity of the Terrorist Attack⁵



Source: UNI-A, CCIB.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/unia>, <https://www.facebook.com/islamophobia.ccib.be/>

CCIB, meanwhile, generally use a sequence structure in their publication. This is done by developing the pairing of certain adjacent elements related to the issue. The connection of the information is actualised by a network of claims – denouncement and dismay. This kind of structure network is used to create a coherent publication by citing the other publication which has similar elements as the main theme (Jiří and Leuder, 2006). For example, the publication of the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre on October 27 in 2018 was created by pairing it with the other publication which has a similar concern i.e. *resistance.be*'s publication on Facebook (see figure 5). This website is concerned with right-wing extremist activity in Belgium. In doing so, CCIB shows their support for the denouncement actualised by the organisation, who criticises the sadism of the right-wing extremists' ideology. Furthermore, CCIB established a coherent publication on the following day by 'pairing' this 'ongoing event' with other, similar events that happened in the past with regard to a Muslim family living in Belgium. This could lead to a dismay of the other attack in the future. Subsequently, this publication was distributed and duplicated the day afterwards in order to promote their ultimate goal. This expansion of the publication used 'the appeal – response' technique of sequence structure. CCIB is trying to appeal to the people of Belgium to become involved with the government's program called the 'no hate movement'.

While publishing on a national issue such as Muslim discrimination, there is a significant difference between UNI-A and CCIB. As this is a sensitive subject, UNI-A tends to focus the publication on the legal terms in explaining an issue on Facebook. Along with the publication, UNI-A provides an explanation of legal cases and their role as well as their contribution toward finding solutions (see figure 6). They usually cite their website, where the entire objective and accurate information concerning the subject can be found. In doing so, UNI-A considerably develops cohesiveness in their publication by using an 'argumentative resource' pairing technique (Leudar et al., 2004). Therefore, obviously, the adequacy of the information on the website is crucial; for example, the UNI-A's publication on the conflict between an enterprise and an employer who has received an inappropriate response when he asked for a fixed term employment contract, 'after Ramadhan!' UNI-A characterised this as a sign of racism and Islamophobia because this employee does not understand what Ramadhan is, since he was born in Belgium and is not a Muslim (UNI-A, 2017).

Figure 5. An Illustration of the Sequence of Time Structure of Claim-Denouncement and Dismay & Appeal – the Response of CCIB⁶



Source: CCIB.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/islamophobia.ccib.be/>

Figure 6. An Illustration of the Argumentative Resource Pairing Technique of UNI-A's Publication⁷



Source: UNI-A.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/unia/>, <https://www.unia.be/fr/jurisprudence-alternatives/>

The CCIB, meanwhile, substantially tends to focus on the categorization of the characteristics of the political parties and politicians. This categorization is established through a network between the category/criteria related to the activity. These category-bound activities can slightly justify the past event that could be used as a ground for preparing for the future event. It consists of a moral set of obligations and rights, that are situated by a gatekeeper in their publication concerning certain issues (Leudar et al., 2004). Obviously, CCIB tend to use a 'sequential structure' and 'lexical means' when presenting certain national issues (Leudar et al., 2004). The publication is circulated from time to time, presenting the same characteristics in their comment on a politician who usually holds the opposite point of view to the Muslim community. According to Leuder & Nekvapil (2004), this kind of circulated presentation could be considered a rejection to some extent; for example, the CCIB's publication on the polemics of the conspiracy argumentation of Eric Zemmour *contra* Islam/Muslim (see figure 7). This could lead the audience to differentiate between politicians and political parties that are *pro* and *contra* Muslim/Islam related issues, which could be a doubly contractive identity between the two sides of different argumentations.

Figure 7. An Illustration of the Sequential in the Time Structure, Lexical and Images Publication of CCIB⁸



⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/islamophobia.ccib.be/>



Source: CCIB.

Discussion and Conclusion

The pattern of the dialogical network of UNI-A and CCIB on Facebook is influenced by the type of organizational framework, which could pose different risks. The biggest risk for UNI-A is related to the direct mandate from the Belgian government, whereas CCIB takes a risk in presenting Islamic symbols, which have been interpreted negatively in the society, especially due to the terrorist attacks. Their assistance in the media could be considered a tunnel that could accelerate a bigger mass movement, which is why they obviously have a different strategy for countering the racist tendency in the media. The difference can be found in at least two aspects of the publication: firstly, the technique of developing a cohesive publication and, secondly, the influence of the visual image and media choices in their publication.

According to Leudar et al (2004), there are three factors that can influence the cohesiveness of a dialogical network; namely, the sequential structure, the argumentative resources, and the lexical means. The argumentative resources seem to be utilized regularly by UNI-A in presenting a discrimination issue. Instead of presenting a polemical issue, they tend to publish a straight, clear problem together with the solution, paired with their website publication. The most interesting facet is the utilization of a neutral avatar or neutral image in their short publication.

Although it might have not a lexical means directly, as it uses an image rather than a long explicatory sentence, it has strong power in presenting their stand on many sensitive issues. It could reformulate the image of the issue and give a new, positive perspective that could be welcome to people.

On the other side, as the word 'Islam' has been attached to CCIB, the Islamic symbol is crucial for their publication. The effort to fight for their rights is motivated by their identity as Belgian Muslim population. In presenting issues related to Islam, CCIB makes a pair with the other actor, especially those from minority groups and human rights activists, whose publications bear a similar message. The claim-denouncement and dismay or appeal – response technique – is actualized particularly in presenting an event related to human rights. This could lead to emotional engagement and a psychological state among the audience. It is also interesting to observe the presentation of an image in CCIB's publication. The categorization is fairly well-presented by CCIB. The differentiation in the opposite category does not concern Islam and non-Islam, but those who fight 'for' the diversity and those who do not, as discrimination is not the only phenomenon present in Muslim society. It appears, in general, that CCIB is reformulating the image of Islam as part of Belgian society and somehow as a victim of discrimination as well as the other minority groups in society, that require serious concern and consideration. Although the general difference in the patterns of the UNI-A and CCIB publications and its impact is relatively clearly explained through the dialogical network, it would be useful to analyze this lexical pattern as future research.

In conclusion, in terms of the spiral 'grammar game' of Islamophobia, the perpetrator denounces a discourse in the media about Islam and Muslims with regard to which they are essentialized, radicalized, and marginalized (Wolfreys, 2018). This means that the degradation ceremonies relate to the moral indignation that can bring about the ritual destruction of a person/population that is being denounced literally. On the other side, it may reinforce the group solidarity (Garfinkel, 1956: p. 421). This group solidarity, according to Hilgartner & Bosk (1988), could be happening as a result of a competition and a drama concerning the social problem that is regularly publicised in the media rhetoric. It could lead to the confrontation of different points of view between majority and minority groups until this social problem attracts social attention in the public arena. Subsequently, those who confront, especially the majority group, will fight in order to generate the social problem as a wider public agenda. From this stance, obviously, UNI-A and CCIB have been trying to present the other perspective and provide the information to the public to help them to understand the emerging phenomenon that is called Islamophobia in the media.

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