Illuminating Voices in the Dark:
The utilisation of communication technology within online Arab
atheist communities.

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Abstract

The presence of atheists within the Muslim world has begun to receive global attention after a number of cases in which atheist bloggers and writers in majority Muslim countries were killed for criticising Islam. The rise in number of Arab atheist Facebook groups has sparked conversation about the rise in number of atheists across the Arab world, and to what extent the use of social media platforms has facilitated this. This study examines 2 such Facebook groups and aims to explore the way in which social media platforms can be used to bring a geographically diverse group of people together to form a collective group identity, and to provoke societal change. The research was conducted using quantitative data, gathered using open ended interview and survey questions, alongside quantitative data which was gathered from closed survey questions and raw survey data in an attempt to understand how communication technology is used by these groups to form a collective identity among their members and to achieve shared objectives. The study lies within the frame of new social movement theory, with particular focus on the ever evolving role which online communications can play in developing aspects of a given society.

The results showed that social media had given members from both groups the ability to share experiences, develop a collective identity, and utilise their new found visibility to provide the voices of atheists in the Arab world with an authority which they had been lacking. The study found that the freedom for atheists to unite online in large number was exposing closeted atheists as well as practising Muslims to opinions which would not have been as vocalised in the real world. The freedom for both parties to involve themselves in the group has reflected some of the difficulties faced in the real world, but has importantly opened up a dialogue and is working toward the acceptance of atheism within majority Muslim societies.
Acknowledgments

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1. Introduction

1.1 Relevance of topic.

Across the world there are individuals who are living under the constant threat of physical violence and ostracisation from their families and communities. The common factor in the case of each of these individuals is their denial of, or deviation from, the doctrines of Islam. An atheist, living in a truly secular democracy, stands to lose very little should they chose to openly criticise the doctrines of Islam or the Islamic prophet. However these actions can come with a heavy price when committed by an individual who was raised within the Muslim faith and/or who resides in an Islamic country; either judicially and/or culturally. There are 13 countries (all practising Islam as the state/majority religion) in which apostasy and blasphemy are legally punishable by death; Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The individuals within these countries who either abandon the teachings of Islam or criticise the faith have traditionally been required to hide their true beliefs and outwardly present themselves as practising Muslims, for fear of violence, prosecution, or death.

The contemporary surge in support for pre-modern blasphemy and apostasy laws/punishments (Saeed and Saeed, 2004) is causing increased animosity towards individuals who abandon or mock the Islamic faith, particularly those who reside in Islamic cultures. This is an ever-evolving and contentious issue, and one which can bring with it dire consequences for atheists and apostates.

The topic falls under the comdev umbrella in that it deals with the link between new media and social movement organisations. The communication processes of social movement organisations has been extensively researched prior to the creation of contemporary social media platforms, and that which has been carried out amidst the social media age have not extensively examined the relationship between social media communication trends and minority social movement organisations in the context of religious cultural hegemony.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The topic of this study is one that has not received a great deal of academic attention. The link between ex-Muslims, Muslims questioning their faith, and social media has been examined by
researchers such as Noman (2011, 2015), Schafer (2016) and Whitaker (2014), however there appears to be a lack of attention placed on the online habits and practices of the ever-increasing atheist population in countries and societies which are intolerant of non-believers and apostates. The role which social media played in the Arab Spring has been well documented and examined by researchers in various fields including communication studies and I believe that, despite the far more ‘low key’ nature of my research topic, it is an example of new media communication platforms being used to create a groundswell in much the same way as they did during the Arab Spring but on a smaller scale and with a focus on the lives of individuals belonging to an oppressed minority, rather than the mass mobilisation of a country’s general population.

The degree project will examine how ex-Muslims and atheists utilise specific social media platforms to communicate with one another in hostile offline environments. The study is seeking to outline the importance of new media to an oppressed minority within given societies. I will use the thoughts and opinions of individuals who belong to this minority in order to provide the study with a grounding in reality, and to present the views of the individuals on the issue, as opposed to simply interpreting their input for the purpose of the study.

1.3 Research Questions

This study will examine the way in which online Arab atheist groups exist as ‘new social movements’ in regard to their utilisation of new media i.e. social media platforms. The key research questions are:

- How are these online platforms utilised by the groups?
- Is a collective identity formed online among the groups’ members and, if so, how?
- What are the motivations for the groups’ existence and activities?

2. Background Information

2.1 Apostasy

This study could have focussed on ex-Christians and culturally Christian atheists, or ex-Mormon and culturally Mormon atheists (as Noman (2011, 2015) points out, the relationship between atheists and the internet is not confined to atheists in the Arab world, but rather a trend which has been recognised in other parts of the world), however, studies have shown the
widespread hostility towards atheists and non-believers within Islam (and the widespread acceptance of that hostility) is currently unsurpassed by any other faith. One key reason for this is the pre-modern Islamic law against ‘apostasy’, the act of leaving one’s faith for another, or none. Saeed and Saeed discuss the way in which this pre-modern law has been dragged into contemporary Islam;

“One of the important aspects of the debate is the punishment for apostasy, that is, death for those who turn away from Islam. This punishment, specified in pre-modern Islamic law, is seen by many Muslims today as a tool for preventing Muslims from converting to another religion, or for forcing intellectuals, thinkers, writers and artists to remain within the limitations of the established orthodoxy in a given Muslim state.” (Saeed and Saeed, 2004, pg 2).

It is this return to pre-modern Islamic law in regard to leaving one’s faith which has created an atmosphere in which ex-muslims, atheists, and individuals questioning their faith are living in fear for their freedom and, in some cases, their lives.

2.1.1 Apostasy in Contemporary Society

While numerous religious doctrines aim to prevent the faithful from wondering astray, there has been a resurgence among modern Muslims of support for the pre-modern, Islamic law on apostasy. Saeed Al Mutar states that “In Islam-dominated countries, there is little to no freedom of religion or speech, widespread support for religious law...This is not coincidence; it directly reflects mainstream interpretations of orthodox Islam.” (Saeed Al Mutar, 2015, pg 32). These laws not only affect those who wish to leave the Islamic faith, but also those who do not believe in god. Atheists and non-believers along with ‘apostates’ are rarely faced with capital punishment, but are often jailed for varying lengths of time with an eventual opportunity to reaffirm their faith prior to release (Benchemsi, 2015). This widespread support for the law against apostasy does not always result in Islamic countries officially instating and practising the law, however they will often apply it under a legal pseudonym; “Arab countries with no apostasy laws still have ways to deter the expression of religious disbelief. In Morocco and Algeria, prison terms await those convicted of using “means of seduction” to convert a Muslim. Egypt resorts to wide interpretations of anti blasphemy laws to condemn outspoken atheists to jail. In Jordan and Oman, publicly leaving Islam also exposes one to a sort of civil death—a set of legal measures including the annulment of marriages and the stripping of inheritance rights.” (Benchemsi, 2015, pg 26).
This is reflected in the findings of a 2013 research paper by The Pew Research Center. It found that among Muslims who believe that sharia should be the law of the land in Egypt and Jordan, over 80% of those asked thought that the penalty for Apostasy, or leaving Islam, should be death (see Figure 1). While this research was concerned with the opinion of the questioned individuals, and is not representative of Muslims as a whole (Ahmadiyya Muslims are a minority in Islam in saying that there should be no punishment in this life for apostasy, and they emphasise that there should be no compulsion in religion. They are themselves regarded as heretics by some Sunni sects and persecuted in Pakistan) (BBC, 2015) the findings are troubling nonetheless, and show a trend in attitudes towards those who leave their faith or who speak against it.

These attitudes are not confined to majority Muslim countries. In Britain, for example, there are thousands of ex-Muslims who are living in fear of violent reprisals for leaving the faith, and others who are afraid to admit their renunciation of the faith (Bulman, 2016).

Whitaker highlights the levels of persecution suffered by ex-Muslims and atheists, stating that: “In countries where religion permeates most aspects of daily life, publicly challenging belief shocks families, society and governments. Many have been imprisoned merely for expressing their thoughts, others have been forced into exile and some threatened with execution. Many more (non-believers) keep their thoughts to themselves, for fear of the reaction from family, friends and employers.” (Whitaker, 2014, pg 5).

This has been the case for many years and, as Whitaker points out, there has probably always been non-believers in the middle east (2014), however the difference now is that non-believers are beginning to speak out in great numbers. A key reason for this, highlighted by Whitaker, is the
prevalence of social media across the world: “...but now they [non-believers] have begun to find a voice. Social media have provided them with the tools to express themselves...” (2014, pg 5).

One of the main reasons that the act of apostasy, within an Islamic context, is seen as such a severe transgression and, in certain countries, is dealt with so severely is that when a suspected apostate is brought before an Islamic court many jurists will view the individual’s act not as an isolated case i.e. one person discarding their faith and loyalty to a given belief system, but as an attempt to bring down the entire Islamic community or ‘ummah’ from the inside (Cottee, 2015). In regards to Islamic society/societies it is not interpreted a personal choice which dictates how an individual wishes to live his or her life but as a deliberate act of subversion; a threat to Muslims’ very way of life and the doctrines which they hold dear. This is reflected in the Pew research figures as previously discussed. Cottee outlines the way in which apostasy is viewed by wider Islamic society and why it is faced with such hostility:

“The apostate’s offence...is to cause remaining members of the group to reflect on their own commitment to the group. This can be unsettling and explains why apostates excite such intense retributive sentiments...It offends and unites the righteous...[and]...demands a forceful punitive response: ritual degradation; shunning; ‘correction; banishment. Or worse: imprisonment; torture; death.” (Cottee, 2015, pg 14).

The situation than an apostate in the Arab world finds themselves in is a precarious one to say the least. Many apostates are ‘closet apostates’, who are yet to, or who feel that they cannot, openly declare their departure from Islam. These individuals remain outwardly compliant to the doctrines and cultural practices to which they, inwardly, no longer give credence (Cottee, 2015).

2.1.2. Apostasy vs. Blasphemy

As Saeed and Saeed (2004) have highlighted, the Islamic ruling regarding apostasy is one key aspect of this debate. The second aspect, is the intolerance of blasphemy. It is this which causes a ‘muddying of the waters’ between apostasy, atheism, blasphemy, and non-belief. The definition of blasphemy will vary from one individual to the next and will depend on that individual’s culture, level of religiosity, interpretation of Islamic scripture, attitudes towards religious reform, etc. but it is a term which is universally understood (in an Islamic context) to refer to anything which defames, disrespects or mocks the prophet Mohammed or Islam as a belief system.
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Laws and attitudes regarding apostasy are blurred with attitudes towards atheism and blasphemy. These attitudes are not confined to Muslim majority countries. For example, even in 21st century Britain ex-muslims and culturally Muslim atheists are targeted and ostracised by their own families and communities. A BBC investigation found evidence of young people suffering threats, intimidation, being ostracised by their communities and, in some cases, encountering serious physical abuse when they told their families they were no longer Muslims. (BBC, 2015).

Extreme examples of intolerance toward anything deemed blasphemous have occurred in Bangladesh within the last 5 years. Between 2013 and 2015 there have been 10 attacks on atheist and secularist bloggers, writers, and free thinkers. 7 of these attacks resulted in the deaths of the individuals who had been targeted. These have thankfully been clamped down upon by the Bangladeshi government, but those attitudes still exist and people are still threatened as a result of the content they post online. This is a phenomenon which occurs all over the Islamic world. However, the use of online platforms, such as social media, is allowing previously ‘silent’ ex-Muslims and atheists to have a voice online and to find strength in numbers. This has been facilitated by the growth in popularity of, and access to, social media (Whitaker, 2014).

2.2. Case Studies

The first of my two chosen case studies is the Facebook group; Arab Atheist Network and Forum. This group, along with my second case study, is part of a network of similar Facebook pages. Some of these groups share administrators, many members belong to more than one of these groups and a number of groups serve as ‘back up’ pages when others are shutdown by Facebook or over run with trolls. Arab Atheist Network and Forum has gained over 47,500 members since 2008. ‘The Network’ or ‘Shabakah’, as it is known within the community, has existed for a long time prior to 2008 but in the form of an internet forum. This forum was eventually hacked by ‘cyber-jihadists’ and subsequently transformed into a Facebook page. This provided the group with a much more stable and secure platform on which to ‘meet’ like-minded individuals.

My second case study is the Facebook group “Radical Atheists”. The group has been active since November 2013 and has the group has only ever existed in its current form, as a Facebook group. It currently has 45,982 members (at time of writing) and has a large quantity of content posted to it’s wall on a daily basis. The two groups share members and administrators, and members and admins alike are familiar with individuals from the other group.
The ‘cyber-jihad’ attacks which forced Arab Atheist Forum and Network to abandon it’s forum platform and become a Facebook group continued to be carried out against both groups, but this time in a different form.

Devout Muslims who wished to censor anything which they deemed to be promoting secularism or non-belief among within Muslim societies would partake in orchestrated, mass reporting of Arab atheist facebook pages/groups in an effort to have them closed after a review by Facebook community standards. Members of these cyber-jihad groups would join as members and then inundate the pages and groups with pornographic photos, then report the images to Facebook before the administrators would have had a chance to notice and remove the images;

“They post something that looks innocuous – something like pictures of destruction in Syria. They would post maybe 30 pictures, and the pictures that you would see on the outside would be just regular pictures of destruction. But then if you scroll through the pictures when you get to picture 23 or 24 you would start seeing porn.” (Al-Binni, February 2016).

These types of attacks led to the closing down of 16 Facebook groups during February 2016 (Whitaker, 22nd February 2016). Many groups similar to and/or directly connected to Arab Atheist Forum and Network and Radical Atheists haven taken to creating backup pages, which the members can revert to, should their main pages fall victim to such attacks and are subsequently removed.

3. Literature Review

Saskia Schafer’s 2016 study into the actions of Indonesian atheists online outlines the importance of social media platforms within the formation of collective identities among an oppressed and voiceless minority. She breaks down the role that communication technology platforms play, stating that they not only act as meeting points for atheists within a majority Muslim society, but they provide a space in which atheists can share their opinions and experiences and inform the public online of their own perspectives (Schafer, 2016). Her study found that the internet plays an important role in the establishment of an identity among the atheist members, an identity which is discouraged within Indonesia and enables closeted atheists to connect with like minded individuals (Schafer, 2016).
In his research on faith based internet censorship, Helmi Noman provides a contextual backdrop to the wider issues at play in this area of study. For atheists and non-believers living in Muslim countries the ability to share their views online are severely restricted. This restriction can be imposed directly through the censorship of certain platforms and websites, or through self-censorship, for fear of being 'outed' as a non-believer in societies which are governed by Islamic law. Regarding the online self-censorship of non-believers within countries which are governed by Islamic law, Noman states that “...questioning Islamic belief is not...legally tolerated across most of the Muslim world, and most of the states have strict laws that censor objectionable content.” Noman, 2011, pg. 3). He discusses the climate of intimidation and the fear of extreme reprisals for criticising the faith as key factors which prevent many atheists and non-believers from creating online communities or simply sharing their opinions on social media.

The direct restrictions on the online activities of atheists and non-believers are imposed by blocking specific content based on a number of categories (see Figure 2.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blocked Content Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Considered prohibited by Islamic Sharia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaza Strip</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
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<td>Iran</td>
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<td>Tunisia</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Faith based technical filtering in majority Muslim states (Noman, 2011).  

Within the categories of blocked content is liberal, secular and atheistic content, as well as anything which is deemed to be 'blasphemous, offensive, or contrary to the Islamic faith'. Censoring content because it falls under a vague category such as 'that which is perceived as offensive or blasphemous' undoubtedly affords the atheist blogger or the agnostic Facebook administrator very little freedom to cast a critical voice over the Islamic faith.
Noman's findings outline the circumstances which atheists and non-believers in Muslim countries are faced with, regarding their lack of freedom to create critical or subversive online content. In his 2015 research paper Noman exclusively examines the Arab atheist online community and poses a central question; *Whether the internet enhances individual autonomy in matters of faith.*

He begins by acknowledging that Arab atheists 'exist' largely (if not solely) online. That is to say, their presence is not felt in the 'real world'. Nomi provides an insight into the Arab atheist community and therefore frames the research in the context of the hostile social, political, legal and religious Arab atheist experience (Noman, 2015). Noman highlights the new 'class' of atheists who have, in his opinion; “...successfully created a robust, longstanding community that would not have been possible without the affordances of digital communication networks.” Noman states that this relationship between atheists and the internet is not confined to atheists in the Arab world, but rather a trend which has been recognised in other parts of the world.

His research examines the content and discourses present on various social media platforms that are utilised by Arab atheists. He found that the groups 'negotiated' the online spaces via non-hierarchical interaction, stating that; “*The...content and flow of discussion indicate that the community is actively engaged in a thoughtful and informed discourse...interaction is horizontal (many to many).*” (Noman, 2015, pg. 5). Noman also found that many of the forums were welcoming of comments and content that was posted by religious individuals. Although they were always challenged by the majority of the atheists and non-believers who visited the online platforms. (Noman, 2015).

Noman's findings on the Arab atheist online communities is reflective of Lievrouw's (2011) take on the new media practices of social movements. She states that “*In new social movements, mobilisation is accomplished by cultivating collective identities, shared values, and a sense of belonging among people linked in diffuse, decentralized social and community networks.*” (Lievrouw, 2011, pg. 155). In the case of atheistic content on internet platforms the individuals already possess a collective identity prior to joining the Facebook group, or forum of their choice. They become aware of this shared identity and go on to consolidate and develop a collective identity with the other individuals with whom they share an online community.

Lievrouw makes a distinction between traditional social movements and what she refers to as *new social movements* (2011, pg. 46). The distinction is made by Lievrouw in regards to the 'unconventional' forms of social movements. She outlines the characteristics of *New Social
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*Movements* by focussing on two key aspects; actors and actions. According to Lievrow, new social movement actors possess a collective identity. In the context of Arab and culturally Muslim atheists, their non-belief and the persecution which many of them will have experienced as a result provides them with a collective identity before they have even encountered one another online. Lievrouw discusses her second key aspect of a new social movement; actions. She describes the movements as social networks, stating that they are loosely affiliated, informal, decentralized, anti hierarchical networks of interpersonal relations (2011, pg48). This description of a loosely affiliated and non hierarchical group is applicable to Noman’s findings on the Arab atheist online community: He states that “*The...content and flow of discussion indicate that the community is actively engaged in a thoughtful and informed discourse...interaction is horizontal (many to many)*”. (Noman, 2015, pg. 5). Lievrouw goes on to outline the way in which new social movements use new media and ICTs; describing communication and representation as principle fields and as forms of actions within themselves (Lievrouw, 2011, pg 48).

The notion that communication and representation are ‘acts’ in of themselves, as discussed by Lievrouw, is touched upon by Castells (2010). He discusses meanings of occupying urban spaces within the context of social change, stating that these occupied spaces “…create community, and community is based on togetherness. Togetherness is a fundamental psychological mechanism to overcome fear. And overcoming fear is the fundamental threshold for individuals to cross in order to engage in a social movement, since they are well aware that in the last resort, they will have to confront violence if they trespass the boundaries set up by the dominant elites to preserve their domination.” (Castells, 2010, pg 10). He goes on to draw a parallel between the traditional act of occupying urban spaces and the act of ‘occupying’ a networked space. New social movements, for some of whom the act of communication and representation are acts of social change in of themselves (Lievrouw, 2011), are concerned with occupying networked spaces within which communication and self representation can be practised. In the context of new social movements the public urban spaces which are occupied as a means to bring about some form of social change are either replaced or combined with the occupation of what Castells describes as; “…*this new public space, the networked space between the digital space and the urban space...a space of autonomous communication.*” (2010, pg 11).

The non hierarchical nature of new social movements, as described by Lievrouw (2011), is something which Castells (2010) sees as being key to the sustainability and longevity of new social movements online; “*It also reduces the vulnerability of the movement to the threat of repression, since there are few specific targets to repress, except for the occupied sites, and the network can*
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reform itself as long as there are enough participants in the movement, loosely connected by their common goals and shared values. Networking as the movement’s way of life protects the movement both against its adversaries and against its own internal dangers of bureaucratization and manipulation.” (Castells, 2010, pg 250).

4. Theory

The social media groups which I am examining as case studies are going to be viewed through the lens of social movement theory. The term ‘social movement theory’ is one which has many interpretations, and numerous definitions which have been developed over the course of the last 30 years and continue to evolve and be redefined. To attempt to settle on any given definition or interpretation is perhaps a too constrictive approach to take when analysing social media case studies. Therefore, I will explore some of the commonly discussed and scrutinised criteria which qualify a group of individuals to be discussed under the banner of social movements.


The basic, fundamental features of a social movement provide us with a platform from which a more in-depth investigation can be developed. These features can be outlined as: numerous individuals, groups and/or organisations who are engaged in cultural or political conflicts, based on a shared identity (Diani, 2003). This definition is one of many, but regardless of where it may tessellate or part ways with other definitions it covers the basic elements which a group must possess in order to be accurately described as a social movement. However, despite the seemingly straightforward and ‘universal’ definition which Diani (2003) presents us with, there is still a potentially contentious aspect within it: collective identity. The notion of shared identity, in the context of social movements, is one that has been examined as a key facet of new social movement theory. The importance of shared or collective identities amongst social movement actors has been highlighted by writers such as Melucci (1995), who stated that a sense of shared identity between individual actors in a social movement is of great importance to the initialisation of collective behaviour, and by Taylor and Whittier, who described collective identity as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (1999, p.
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170). Ackland and O’neil (2011) outline 3 levels at which collective identity exists within a social movement;

- The collective identity of the social movement itself – all actors...share a common goal.
- Distinct and identifiable collective identities within the social movement.

This aspect has influenced new social media theory and remains a common focus in contemporary research.

This focus on the shared identities of social movement actors had previously been neglected, with the focus being placed solely upon the actors common ideologies and actions. The shifting of this focus was the defining moment for new social movement theory. European theorists such as Touraine, Melucci, Diani, and others did not believe that the two main American approaches to social media theory – collective behaviour and resource mobilization, provided sufficient focus on the agency of the individual actors engaged in ‘unconventional’ forms of social activism (Lievrouw, 2011). This resulted in the development of new social media theory, an approach which focussed on a set of core characteristics which differentiated new social movements from the social movements as studied using the American approaches. Lievrouw (2011) lists these characteristics as; 1.
Collective identity (actors) 2. Movements as social networks (action) and 3. Use of media and ICTs (action). The importance placed on shared or collective identity in new social movement theory can be seen in Lievrouw’s list of characteristics.

The focus of new social movement theory on the use of ICTs is also of particular relevance to my research and chosen case studies. In the context of online social media (which my study is focussed on) the use of ICTs by new social movements ties in with Lievrouw’s (2011) third characteristic; movements as social networks.

4.2. Social media and new social movements

The widespread availability and popularity of social media platforms has meant that discourses around social movements have had to open up to the huge role that these online platforms play in social movements worldwide. The traditional notion of a social movement as an organised group who take to the streets to hand out ideological literature and protest is one which has been required to update and explore the role of online communications in new social
movements, including those which still fit a more ‘traditional’ Marxist definition (Touraine, 1985); organising offline as well as using online communication technologies.

The idea of social movements being ‘networks’ has been a common theme within the field of social movement theory. This term has been updated within the context of a world immersed in social media communication platforms. The term ‘network’ can now be accurately used to describe and discuss the role which online social networking platforms play within social movements. Theses virtual spaces allow for individuals to create a collective identity and online communities. Social media platforms can facilitate the formation of connections, or networks, between previously disparate groups and their members, creating “a sense of ‘critical mass’ or authority for a message that may be missing in the real world.” (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011, pg. 180). This notion that social media platforms can create “a sense of critical mass, as discussed by Ackland and O’Neil (2011), is very relevant to the positioning of ex-Muslim/atheist groups within the new social movement framework. Given the hostile environments within which many ex-Muslims and culturally-Muslim atheists occupy, the critical attitudes, debate and discussion which are taking place on social media are nothing new: They have simply never seen been fully exposed to the world. Sarami (2012) makes this point regarding such views in the middle east;

“The internet and social networking websites have not come up with anything that was not already there. They have just unravelled what was hidden from us whether owing to the nature of our culture or the level of local and social awareness.” (in; Whitaker, 2014, pg. 25).

Ackland and O’Neil’s assertion that social media platforms create a sense of critical mass and subsequently give voice to a message which is not being heard in the real world (2011) can be seen in the creation of communication networks between ex-Muslims/atheists. These non-believers and/or individuals who are questioning their faith are spread across the Arab world and beyond, and are made to feel less isolated and sometimes even provoked into making contact with members of these groups, despite the fear of reprisals which such actions can bring (Whitaker, 2014).

5. Methodology

This section will attempt to outline the research methodologies which are to be implemented. I intend to interview group administrators using a set of pre written interview question as well as conducting a survey of the groups’ members. I want to explore how the platforms are utilised, by whom and to what end. It is likely that different individuals will participate in different ways and for different reasons, but my research will aim to identify whether there is an overarching or collective group identity formed through the member's communicative patterns and forms.
I have chosen two social media groups as my case studies. As previously stated they have a large number of members/followers and both clearly outline their long term objectives with regard to creating changes in society.

5.1 Interviews and Survey

I will use a semi-structured set of interview/survey questions in order to gather information of relevance to my particular research questions. The inclusion of open ended questions within my survey means that some of the data collected will be that which cannot be easily condensed into a yes/no or multiple choice answer (Hansen, Cottle et al, 1998). The use of interviews and surveys containing open ended questions affords me the opportunity to collect quantitative data alongside information which can be used qualitatively to support arguments and reflect opinion in the form of direct quotes from participants.

5.2 Mixed Method Approach

I have chosen a mixed methodology as I wish for my research to convey findings that are based on what Greene (2008, pp 274-275) refers to as a “…more complete and full portrait(s) of our social world through the use of multiple perspectives and lenses.” by utilising “…methods that gather and represent human phenomena with numbers …along with methods that gather and represent human phenomena with words.” Greene also discusses the ‘crossover track analysis’ method (2008) in which qualitative and quantitative data are collected parallel to one another, on separate research ‘tracks, and then the data from one track will be brought over to the other track for further analysis and comparison (Greene, 2008). As I previously outlined, I intend to employ qualitative and quantitative methods in parallel, subsequently bringing the two data sets together in order to form detailed and well supported analysis.

5.3 Interviewees and Survey Participants

The interviews I have conducted are with administrators of the two Facebook groups which I have chosen as case studies. I wanted to collect specific information regarding the two groups and gain an insight into their Facebook pages’ traffic, members, history, uses, and identity. I had been in contact with the admins for some time before the interview questions were answered, as I wanted to see how much of an insight they had not only into the Facebook groups but into the wider societal context in which the groups and their members exist. The structured interviews were completed in
the form of word documents containing the relevant questions. This allowed me to gather very specific information and also allowed the interviewees to provide me with considered answers and input, as they had the opportunity to complete the interview questions in their own time, rather than having to answer questions ‘on the spot’ via a Skype or face to face interview.

The individuals interviewed were:

- **Usama Al Binni** – Administrator of the *Arab Atheist Forum and Network* Facebook group.
- **Ayman Pheidias** – Former administrator of the *Radical Atheist* Facebook group.

The 2 interviewees were given the same sets of questions and were given no strict time limit within which to complete their answers.

My correspondence with the interviewees began when I contacted Usama Al Binni (*Arab Atheist Network and Forum*). I had read an interview with him in which he discussed the cyber-jihad attacks on various atheist groups. Given the animosity which members of the groups can potentially face I was required to establish a good dialogue with him and outline clearly my intentions and the purpose of my research. Eventually Usama was able to put me in touch with members and admins from the *Radical Atheists* group and I was able to arrange the subsequent interviews. The interviewees were also instrumental in promoting my survey among the 220 group members who participated in the study.

### 5.4 Ethical Issues

As I have previously discussed, I was aware of the sensitivity of this topic and the problems which may have been brought about for individual members should their views on religion be disclosed. Once I had developed a strong dialogue with the group admins I was able to state my intentions to not divulge any members’ personal information other than their first name, provided that they were willing for me to do so.

Another major ethical issue was my personal positioning as a Western non-Muslim exploring and discussing the issues around atheism in an Islamic context. My own views and experiences regarding my chosen research topic were required to be of no influence to my academic positioning on the subject.
6. Analysis

6.1. Intro

The research which has been conducted has provided both quantitative and qualitative data, which I intend to examine on parallel ‘tracks’, in order to allow for further comparison and analysis.

The 2 interviews were completed independently of one another and the interviewees were able to answer the questions in their own time. Each interviewee is directly involved with one of the 2 case study Facebook groups. I had been engaged with the interviewees for several months and all gave consent to use their names in the study;

- Usama Al Binni; Admin of Arab Atheist Network and Forum, as well as other affiliated groups.
- Ayman Pheidias; ex-admin of Radical Atheists.

All interviewees were given an identical set of structured, open ended questions.

6.2. Utilisation of social media platforms.

“I no longer feel that I alone carry the weight of these ideas…”

(Nizar, Radical Atheists member).

6.2.1 Communication Networks

The proliferation of social media has allowed individuals who are vilified and/or oppressed for the same reasons to overcome geographical boundaries, and barriers to free speech; be they religious authorities, cultural norms, or authoritarian governments. Lievrouw’s work on new social movements and ICT’s explores the benefits of communication networks such as social media. She describes communication and representation as principle fields and as forms of actions within themselves (Lievrouw, 2011, pg 48). Groups like Arab Atheist Network and Forum and Radical Atheists provide platforms for communication and representation which, as she states, can be
described as forms of action within themselves. This type of remote, many to many interaction is facilitated by new media forms such as Facebook in this case, and allows communication networks of dedicated individuals to form and evolve.

“I, like many members of our group are loosely affiliated with a broader community of people running a host of pages and groups on various social media. Each page has a different flavour, and many people participate in more than one venue and often in multiple roles. That mode of operation is very common due to the fact we’re all volunteers, but also because we collaborate virtually without direct physical interaction.” (Usama Al Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April, 2017.)

Noman, in his research into Arab atheists and sceptics online, echoes Lievrouw’s thoughts on the communication approach that these virtual new social movements implement, stating that the groups she studied implemented a horizontal approach rather than a top-down operation (2015). This can be seen in the day to day utilisation of the online spaces by group members and admins alike. The groups operate as part of a wider network or movement, but also as self contained, collectively operated forums.

“The group’s creation was motivated by the aspiration of its founders to secure an open discussion platform, where Arabic speaking free thinkers, atheists and secular individuals can discuss their stands regarding public life, society and general politics with non-religious and religious group members.” (Ayman Pheidias, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

New social movement theory places emphasis on the role of communication networks, and the assertion that social media platforms can facilitate the formation of connections, or networks, between previously disparate groups and their members, subsequently creating “a sense of ‘critical mass’ or authority for a message that may be missing in the real world.” (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011, pg. 180). The members of Arab Atheist Network and Forum and Radical Atheists are located across the Arab world, as well as in North Africa and other continents.

Arab Atheist Network and Forum has members from Jordan (4.8%), Israel (3.2%), Sudan (3.2%), USA (1.6%), Algeria (8%), Tunisia (3.2%), Morocco (6.4%), Palestine (8%), and Libya (3.2%). With the majority of members located in Egypt (14.5%), Iraq (19.3%), and Syria (24.1%).

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The members of Radical Atheists are equally diverse geographically; Tunisia (8.3%), Egypt (11.8%), Morocco (9.7%), Kuwait (0.6%), Lebanon (3.4%), Algeria (10.4%), Kurdistan (0.6%), Saudi Arabia (0.6%), Libya (0.6%, Jordan (0.6%), Oman (0.6%), and Palestine (3.4%). With the majority of members located in Iraq (20.2%), and Syria (27.9%).

The groups’ pages are utilised in various ways by the members, but the predominant utilisation of the groups was for the purpose of discussion and voicing opinions. 72.5% of Arab Arab Atheist Network and Forum’s members who participated in the survey gave this as their main form of participation in the group. This was reflected among the participants from Radical Atheists, 54.4% of which stated that voicing their opinions was the main way in which they interacted within the group. This is in keeping with the admins’ motivation to found these groups, which was to create an open discussion platform where people of varying backgrounds and opinions are able to discuss issues and subjects which are considered by some to be too taboo to be openly debated in the real world. While the use of new media platforms such as Facebook has afforded atheists and ex-Muslims in majority Muslim countries the ability to openly state their opinions on and criticisms of Islam, these new media platforms have not created a new phenomenon within the Muslim world, they have simply uncovered something which has always been there but has never been so open, nor consolidated into a collective of individuals (Sarami, 2012, in; Whitaker, 2014, pg. 25). New media has not ‘come up’ with anything new, as Sarami points out, however it can be argued that the exposure which ex-Muslim, atheist, and critical narratives enjoy has prompted many more individuals who may be questioning their faith or who have already abandoned Islam to search out others who share their ideas and who have potentially faced the same issues regarding their apostasy and closeted atheism.

The number of individuals involved in the groups, and the sometimes candid nature in which they discuss ideas and their own critical opinions in a semi-public forum gives the Muslim who is questioning their faith the confidence they need in their own convictions to actively discuss and critique the aspect/s of the religion with which they are concerned.

“Some are newly minted atheists that have been exposed to materials like Dawkin’s the God Delusion, or have been fascinated by watching the Cosmos series or have been following Arab atheist YouTubers, or read or written blogs, .. etc. These come full of excitement to debate

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2See Appendix - B
3See Appendix - A
4See Appendix - B
and expand their knowledge...the point is many are curious about us, and we think this is a good thing.” (Usama Al Binni, AArab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April, 2017.)

To an individual who is living with shame or perhaps fear which prevents them from revealing their atheism or scepticism of religion to their friends, family, or communities, social network groups like these assure them that they are not isolated in the struggle between societal acceptance and individual conviction. The sheer number of members and said individual’s subsequent interaction with those fellow members provides the resilience needed to continue questioning the faith, confident in the knowledge that they are part of a wider movement.

The persecution of atheists and apostates in many Muslim majority countries has prevented many of the groups’ members from openly discussing their rejection of Islam and religion in general in their day to day lives. The participating members of the Radical Atheist group stated that the majority were not open about their atheism/apostasy (54.6%)\(^5\). There were a number of reasons for this;

“Because of the risk of being killed or tortured” (Rita, Radical Atheist group member).
“No. For fear of my life” (Ahmed, Radical Atheist group member).
“Exposure to family and societal abuse then harassment that turns into persecution and ultimately murder.” (Nouruddin, Radical Atheist group member).

Of the participating members from the Arab Atheist Network and Forum group 45.7% said that they were not open about their atheism/apostasy\(^6\). They gave similar reasons as to why they could only be open about their atheism online;

“Because the consequences would be catastrophic” (Anon, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).
“Because I will face imprisonment for more than 5 years according to the law - because of the direct expulsion from work simply because I do not believe or not to believe that Islam is a heavenly religion from the Creator - for the reason to face murder even in prison by the prisoners” (Anon, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).
“For fear of my life and the life of my family” (Laith, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

\(^5\)See Appendix - B
\(^6\)See Appendix - A
A large number of both sets of participating members stated that they were open about their atheism; 45.3% (*Radical Atheists*) and 54.2% (*Arab Atheist Network and Forum*). Despite the majority of members belonging to the *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* group stating that they are open about their atheism, many of them included caveats to their replies i.e. that they are only open with close family and friends. Many more included the effects of being openly atheist in a majority Muslim country;

“...beaten and threatened with a knife by an Iraqi Kurdish Muslim.” (Ghaith, *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* member).

“Yes, I have been subjected to many embarrassing situations of insult and ridicule...etc” (Bashar, *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* member).

This was also reflected among the 45.3% of *Radical Atheists* members who were open about their atheism;

“Yes...it's a big problem when you walk in the street” (Azer, *Radical Atheists* member).

“I confront other people in real life talking about religion and atheism. And yes had a lot of troubles and some times I had to change my home.” (Selim, *Radical Atheists* member).

Of all of the survey participants from both groups the main reasons given behind their decision to join the groups were; for the purposes of communication (*Radical Atheists* 29.7%, *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* 5%), meeting other Atheists (*Radical Atheists* 19.5%, *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* 34.1%), and acquiring knowledge about specific topics and atheism itself (*Radical Atheists* 25.3%, *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* 17.6%). For many members the groups reassured the new members that there were others who shared the same point of view and were facing the same oppression and persecution in society;

“...because it is simply the only cultural outlet for us” (Ahmed, *Arab Atheist Network and Forum* member).

“I no longer feel that I alone carry the weight of these ideas...” (Nizar, *Radical Atheists* member).

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7See Appendix - B
8See Appendix - A
9See Appendix - B
10See Appendix – A and B
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“Because it is the only escape for me to express my opinion and what I think without fear”
(Nouruddin, Radical Atheists member).

The utilisation of media communication platforms (Facebook in this case) in the context of new social movements has given individuals within a heavily persecuted minority a ‘space’ in which to assemble and become aware of the existence of others who find themselves in similar positions. Given that non-believers are not simply a minority in a particular country but in the entire Arab world, as well as north Africa, Facebook’s ability to transcend geographical barriers has brought a hugely disparate social minority together, and given individuals within the minority a sense of hope in knowing that they are not alone in their struggle.

6.2.2 Free Discussion

The presence of religious group members allows for free discussion and debate to take place, which is something that is widely lacking in the real world. The groups bring together individuals who may not even interact offline if the religious individual was aware of the sceptic or atheist individual’s views on religion or Islam more specifically. On the whole this has been a positive achievement of the groups admins and members. They have not merely established an echo chamber but have nurtured a hub of genuinely free discussion and criticism.

“The group has been established on the basis of freedom of thought and expression for all individuals, regardless of their beliefs or religious affiliations.” (Ayman Pheidias, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

The ‘secure’ nature of these groups is not only of benefit to atheists and sceptics who do not wish to be open about their beliefs in society, but also provides Muslims who wish to converse with atheists a platform in which to do so.

“...you find that many of our members, especially atheists, use pseudonyms and fake accounts. But some Muslims who don’t want to be openly seen conversing with atheists do the
same as well.” (Usama Al Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April, 2017.)

It is unusual for groups who wish to see change in society to welcome individuals that are in direct opposition to their raison d’être as members of their network. Castells states that “Networking as the movement’s way of life protects the movement...against its adversaries” (2010, pg. 250), but this is not the case with these groups. It is precisely the fact that networking is ‘their way of life’ which encourages them to welcome their adversaries into the fold. The varying levels of inability to freely debate and criticise Islam in any regard in certain countries is a factor which the groups members wish to see changed. By not shutting out people and opinions that do not align with the group’s majority the admins and members have created a truly free forum for discussion and debate;

“The group has been created to be a dialog platform where topics related to religion, society and politics can be freely presented and discussed. It is only a natural arrangement to have all kinds of ideas and beliefs within the group, thus the importance of the presence of religious members.” (Ayman Pheidias, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

Of the members of Arab Atheist Network and Forum who participated in the survey only 3% identified as Muslims¹¹, and only 1.9% of the participants from Radical Atheists did the same¹². Their reasons for joining the group were all to communicate and to ‘defend Islam’;

“...all I care about is to prove the existence of God to them.” (Ibrahim, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

“At first it was just curious to know what the atheists were thinking but ended up being challenged” (Anon, Radical Atheists member).

The interactions between atheist members and those who practise Islam is a contentious issue, which brought with them interesting discussion and debate, as well as insults and threats. The Radical Atheist survey participants had very oppositional views and experiences regard the interactions between atheists and Muslims within the group, with the majority claiming to have experienced both positive and negative interactions; 32.2% stated that the interactions were usually

¹¹See Appendix - A
¹²See Appendix - B
constructive and civil, 23.6% claimed that the interactions descended into insults and threats, and 44% said that they had experienced both positive and negative interactions with Muslim members\textsuperscript{13}.

“...depends on the intellectual level of the parties involved. Noting that the probability of turning into fights is higher” (Anon, Radical Atheist member).

“usually starts as a simple debate. But when we get deeper and the opposite side would hit a wall the discussion ends with cursing and badmouthing” (Selim, Radical Atheist member).

The same split in opinion and experience was found among the participating members of the Arab Atheist Network and Forum group, however a majority found that the interactions were not constructive; 32.2% of the participants stated that the interactions were usually constructive and civilised, 45.1% stated that the interaction descended into insults and threats, and 22.5% claimed that they had experienced both positive and negative interactions\textsuperscript{14}.

“...the dialogue on the web is always violent. The believers consider us atheists or secularists as agents of global Zionism or psychopaths or we did not understand Islam well.” (Nizar, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

The mixed experiences of the individual members is reflected in the views of the group admins in regard to the active involvement of Muslim members within the groups. This is due to the fact that there are Muslim members which abuse the groups’ tolerance and their wish to promote free thought and expression. This is one of the unfortunate shortcomings of the groups’ acceptance of both religious and non religious individuals.

“A place like Facebook, which is open to all, invites both critics of Islam and Muslims, and the same way there are blasphemy laws and conventions in society, so is cyber space. So, why brand this as a form of Jihad? Islam is meant to be the sole global religion of all humanity, and the presence of Muslims on a place like Facebook is akin to them being present in a new land, but one that is also an extension of their existence in everyday life, and so they consider it to be within their jurisdiction to enforce these blasphemy laws and conventions, and to do so by any means possible”

“In February last year we were nearly decimated from Facebook. All our major groups, the ‘Network’ and a few other big groups were shut down because of this. Every time we would

\textsuperscript{13}See Appendix - B
\textsuperscript{14}See Appendix - A
open a new replacement it would be shut down within a few days.” (Usama Al Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April, 2017.)

“Members of most atheist Facebook groups are widely diversified and fall in one of the following main categories: individuals who are sceptic regarding their background beliefs (the religions they inherited), others who have already rejected religion and are interested in accessing a network of like-minded people, and religious individuals who are convinced it is their religious duty to go face-to-face with irreligiosity and rebut its claims and guide “deluded atheist youth to the rightful path”.

“Nonetheless, there is a number of trolls, who are within the group just to disrupt healthy and constructive discussion. Moreover, there is a large number of cyber-jihadists who join the group in order to launch abusive reporting campaigns against the group, its posts and its atheist members’ accounts to close them.” (Ayman Pheidias, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

While some have stated that a benefit of utilising non-hierarchical online networks within new social movements is that it provides an autonomous space in which the movements can operate (Castells, 2010. Lievrouw, 2011) the atheist groups which have been analysed have embraced and provided a platform for individuals who are in direct opposition to them and their motives, all in the name of free thinking and free speech. To create an autonomous space which exclusively serves the motives of the groups and forbids the involvement of individuals who do not stand with them would be to recreate the type of environment which censors ex-Muslims in society.

The diversification of the groups’ memberships exemplifies a genuine will to create platforms in which the free exchange of ideas and opinions can take place, but also reflects the attitudes and obstacles which atheists and free thinkers encounter daily in the real world.
6.3. Collective Identity.

“...most of the members belong to the Arab-Islamic geographical area, where terrorist ideology and religious dogmatism are prevalent. We are obliged to unite and deliver our voice as rejected and persecuted minorities of the world as a whole.”

(Med, Radical Atheists group member.)

6.3.1. Members of an oppressed minority

The importance of a shared or collective identity among members to the achievement of a movements motivations and aims is highlighted by a number of academics working within the field of social movement theory. Lievrouw states that one of the prerequisites for mobilisation and success within a social movement is the cultivation of collective identities (2011). Collective identity has been discussed as not simply a tool to promote collective action but as “an objective itself” (Coretti and Picca, 2015, pg. 952). The groups which have been analysed in this study are relatively unique, in that the majority of individual members come to the group with not just a set of common or shared goals (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011) but with a concrete identity; atheist.

“More often than not, we react as a group in similar ways, we have similar stands on many issues and we are all united by a realization that religion is mostly a negative phenomenon that needs to be fought.” (Usama Al-Binni, Arab Atheist Forum and Network, interview conducted April 2017).

Whereas many new social movements are formed around a shared objective; Occupy Wall Street for example, and seek to attain a collective identity among its members as a subsequent objective, the Arab atheist Facebook groups are formed around a common identity. The majority of the participating members from both groups stated that they felt that the members within groups to which they belonged possessed a collective identity. Of the participating members from the Arab Atheist Network and Forum group 83.9% said that they felt that the members possessed a collective
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identity\textsuperscript{15}. This was echoed among the members of the Radical Atheists group, 90.5\% of which also said that they felt a sense of collective identity among the members\textsuperscript{16}. There were a number of reasons given for this by both sets of participating members, many of which were the self identification of the members as atheists. However, the majority of replies were in regard to the varying degrees of oppression which ex-muslims and atheists in majority Muslim countries are subjected to.

\textit{“Many friends (group members) in more conservative countries have been subjected to oppression from their families and close entourage, property vandalizing brutal assaults, etc. Others have been legally prosecuted for expressing their views against religion, religious traditions and religious authorities.”} (Ayman Pheidias, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

This notion that the members’ collective identity is consolidated due to the fact that the majority have faced similar forms of oppression and discrimination was reflected in many of the individual responses from the participating members of each group.

\textit{“...everyone suffers from persecution in real life, which led to cohesion and the formation of collective identity.”} (Anon, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).
\textit{“...most of the members of the group are oppressed in the present life, they come together to support each other, which made them like the family”} (Anon, Radical Atheists member).
\textit{“Solidarity with members of the group of atheists / atheists who live under threat because of their beliefs and their criticism of Islam in particular”} (Anon, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).
\textit{“Common repression”} (Ahmed, Radical Atheists member).
\textit{“Because we are an oppressed and outcast minority of our society. As do minorities in any society”} (Anon, Radical Atheists member).

The feeling of collective identity and solidarity, which has been consolidated as a result of the varying levels of oppression and discrimination which the majority of members have faced, is also reflected in the number of members from both groups who stated that they were not open about their atheism in the real world. The participating members of the Radical Atheist group stated that the majority were not open about their atheism/apostasy (54.6\%)\textsuperscript{17} and a large proportion of the participating members of the Arab Atheist Network and Forum group also stated that they were not

\textsuperscript{15}See Appendix - A
\textsuperscript{16}See Appendix - B
\textsuperscript{17}See Appendix - B
open about their atheism/apostasy in the real world (45.7%)\textsuperscript{18}. Those who stated that they were open about their departure from Islam in the real world described the varying levels of oppression and victimisation they suffered as a result.

Taylor and Whittier (1999) share their definition of collective identity within the context of social movement actors, describing it as “...the shared definition of a group that derives from the members’ common interests, experiences and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier, 1999, pg. 170). The statements given by the participating members of both groups are in line with Taylor and Whittier’s definition of collective identity; It has been identified that the members common interests are to communicate with other atheists (Radical Atheists 29.7%, Arab Atheist Network and Forum 5%), meet other Atheists (Radical Atheists 19.5%, Arab Atheist Network and Forum 34.1%), and acquire knowledge about specific topics and atheism itself (Radical Atheists 25.3%, Arab Atheist Network and Forum 17.6%)\textsuperscript{19}. The members’ common experiences were shown to be focused around the varying levels persecution and oppression, and the inability to speak freely about their rejection of religion or their criticisms of Islam. The third factor in Taylor and Whittier’s (1999) definition; solidarity, was created as a result of the members status as members of an oppressed minority within their respective societies, and the knowledge of their common experiences. The idea that the formation of a collective identity among a movement’s members is itself an objective of a social movement (Coretti and Picca, 2015) can be applied to the atheist Facebook groups. Despite the groups being formed initially around a common identity, this identity evolves and is consolidated into a collective identity by the shared experiences of the members, and their common goals and motivations. The solidarity and sense of commitment which comes with the establishment of a collective identity has been noticed by group admins as well as the individual members;

“...members seem to have a sense of commitment to the group...With a clear and transparent set of rules being applied impartially in all circumstances, with no discrimination between members in any way, members have a remarkable engagement in the moderation of discussions and the follow up of the group’s rules. This has resulted in a personal commitment from most members to the group itself, and to other group members.” (Ayman Pheidas, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

\textsuperscript{18}See Appendix - A  
\textsuperscript{19}See Appendix – A and B
6.3.2. ‘Cyber-jihad’.

The creation of both groups was the culmination of a sustained period of ‘attacks’ on the previously inhabited online communication spaces. Arab Atheist Network and Forum existed, initially, as an online discussion forum;

“The ‘Network’...has been around as a Facebook group since about 2008, but it existed well before that as an internet forum until it was hacked by cyber Jihadists. The subsequent move to Facebook had to do with security and stability. It has provided the benefit of being more engaging, given that Facebook is an experience that brings the whole person in with the group...” (Usama Al-Bini, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April 2017).

These attacks prompted the Arab Atheist Network and Forum group to relocate to Facebook, alongside the Radical Atheists group. While the utilisation of this new media platform has afforded the groups’ members a greater level of accessibility and communication they too have been the target of attacks.

“Most of the major Arabic speaking atheist Facebook groups and pages have been, and still are, targeted with abusive reporting from cyber-jihadists. In fact, “Radical Atheists” has been closed twice by Facebook based on such campaigns, beside a huge number of accounts of its admins and its most active atheist members.” (Ayman Pheidias, Radical Atheists, interview conducted May, 2017.)

The groups have been targeted at times by ‘infiltrators’ from within their own ranks. While the inclusion of individuals into the group who’s aim is to defend their religion against atheists and the criticism they promote creates an atmosphere which encourages free speech and debate (as previously discussed) it can cause issues when those religious members join the group with ulterior motives, and aim to disrupt the communicative networks which have been created and developed by the admins and members.

“Muslims are extremely sensitive to any form of criticism, whether by a clever cartoon or comedy or through a sober academic study. Most of it is branded as blasphemy even if it’s criticism with an intent to reform. And while this reflex is institutionalized, Muslims as individuals are taught the principles of policing thought very early on.” (Usama Al-Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April 2017).
While disruptions to the groups’ activities can come from ‘within’, many come from organised opposition to Arab atheist groups and their criticism of Islam.

“...they consider it to be within their jurisdiction to enforce these blasphemy laws...we were nearly decimated from Facebook. All our major groups, the ‘Network’ and a few other big groups were shut down because of this. Every time we would open a new replacement it would be shut down within a few days...” (Usama Al-Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April 2017).

The oppression of any criticism of Islam and its doctrines, as well as the oppression and victimisation faced by the groups’ members in the real world who attempt to criticise or simply leave Islam is reflected in these online communication networks. In the real world the majority of members from both groups have faced these issues and that has played a key role in the formation of a collective identity within the groups. The reflection of these real world issues online is caused by Muslims who wish to claim online spaces such as Facebook as being within the jurisdiction of Islamic laws. The fight to re-claim these spaces from Muslims who carry out these organised ‘cyber-jihad’ attacks has also hardened the groups’ sense of solidarity and collective identity, just as the oppression faced in the real world has done.

“we have learned to live with this as a natural part of our fight for recognition and to have our voice heard.” (Usama Al-Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum, interview conducted April 2017).
6.4. Motivations and outcomes

“It's a brutal desire within us to ignite a candle in the dark.”

(Ahmad, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

6.4.1. Spreading Awareness and provoking change.

The focus on shared motivations and collective goals within social movements is an aspect of social movement theory which is reflected in the actions and the study of online social movements. The 3 key characteristics of a functioning social movement organisation, as outlined by Taylor and Whittier (1999) are; a set of common interests among the individual members, shared experiences, and a single or set of identifiable common goals and motivations. This is a part of a general definition of social movements and their shared qualities. The 3 characteristics put forward by Taylor and Whittier can also be seen within online social movement organisations. Caren et al (2012) outline the 3 characteristics as put forward by Taylor and Whittier (1999) but with a specific focus on online social movement communities, describing them as a set of individuals who possess similar goals and interests linked through semi public online discussion (Caren et al, 2012, pg.163).

The common interests and shared experiences of the Arab atheist groups have been outlined regarding the members’ preexisting common identity and the subsequent formation of a collective identity among them. The shared goals and motivations for continued activity within the group which were outlined by the groups’ members and administrators share a common theme and provide a cohesive and shared focus among both groups. Of the members from the Arab Atheist Network and Forum group who participated in the survey 51.7% stated that their motivation for continued interaction with the group was to spread knowledge and awareness.

“Spread intellectual and social awareness and get rid of the authority of religion” (Zorba, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

This was also the case among the members of Radical Atheists who replied to the question regarding their individual motivation. Of the participating members 65.7% stated that their motivation for continued action within the group was to spread knowledge and awareness.

20See Appendix - A
21See Appendix - B
“Raising the awareness of the Arab and Muslim community especially to trim the claws of the religion that are ravaging these societies” (Mohammed, Radical Atheists member).
“Showing people the truth about the evil on Islam” (Najib, Radical Atheists member).

The individual members had individual variations on the notion of ‘spreading knowledge and awareness’ as well as different reasons for wanting to do so. However there was a shared motivation and objective within the group which even manifested itself online. The inclusion of Muslim group members and continued debate and interaction with them was achieving one of the initial goals of the groups’ founders’ and admin;

“One of our aims is to create a common platform where instead of being demonized and denigrated by Muslims, we encounter them through discussion.” (Usama Al Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum administrator, interview conducted April 2017).

The utilisation of an online communication platform has allowed group members, many of whom were not able to be open about their atheism and/or were unable to critique religion in the real world, to discuss with Muslims and put their ideas forward without hysteria from the religious individuals they were in contact with.

“Interaction points like the Network offer a way of spreading awareness about who we are and why Muslims need to listen to us.” (Usama Al Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum administrator, interview conducted April 2017).

This was echoed by many of the participating group members;

“Dialogue and finding solutions on the ground of reality conducive to peaceful coexistence” (Amira, Radical Atheist member).
“show that there are other ways of life, thinking and entertainment” (Evin, Radical Atheist member).
“My love for enlightening minds and changing ideas The nominal goal is to define the Arab religious meaning of freedom because they are completely absent..Dialogues always lead to research, increase knowledge, change ideas, reflections and ideas” (Anon, Radical Atheists member).
Matthew Thomas

One of the outcomes of this continued interaction which the group was afforded by the use of an online communication platform was the change in perceptions about atheism held by some of the Muslim members.

“At first, I had to defend Islam - and then I saw that their words were much more logical than what I said” (Abdullah, Radical Atheists member).

While the group members and admins were not aiming to ‘convert’ Muslims to atheism, they were utilising the reach of online communication platforms to enlighten individuals who may never have thought that questioning the Islamic worldview was even a possibility, due to a lack of exposure to free speech and critical thinking.

“On the one hand, there is reason to believe that globalization and the proliferation of knowledge and exposure to the West and its values have all contributed to an increased questioning of Islam that would have been unheard of at this scale just a mere century or two ago. On the other, the internet with all the inventions that came along with it has provided a platform where people could interact and organize. And so, the former set of factors provide a catalyst of doubting religion, and the latter makes the dissidents more visible.” ((Usama Al Binni, Arab Atheist Network and Forum administrator, interview conducted April 2017).

The exposure of Muslims to Western values as well as the increased visibility of non-believers due to the proliferation of online communication platforms has opened up certain individuals within the Islamic world to ways of thinking which they may have never encountered prior to the creation of universally accessible social media. Ayman Pheidias, ex-administrator of the Radical Atheists group, puts Islamic terrorism, as well as exposure to atheism online, in his explanation to the contemporary rise of Arab atheists;

“The increasing number of Arab atheists may need both factors to be explained: the rise and proliferation of Islamic terrorist groups in the region and the access of individuals to social media platforms, where they can get exposed to genuine and direct presentation of the authentic texts and teachings of their religions...most Muslims, who join groups like “Radical Atheists” to defend their religion against that approach, soon discover that most – if not all – crimes committed by terrorist groups are backed up with the Quran and Hadiths teachings” (Interview conducted May 2017).
The responses from many of the participants from both groups who stated that their motivation to spread knowledge and awareness described in more detail what that would entail.

“To educate and eliminate the ignorance and backwardness that plagued us for more than 1440 years” (Ahmad, Radical Atheists member).

“the hope that what we do here no matter how small and trivial could make a difference and help in making a better tomorrow” (Hakim, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

“It's a brutal desire within us to ignite a candle in the dark” (Ahmad, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

The will to provoke change in attitudes and actions within Arab society is a goal that the groups’ participating members and administrators were focused upon; a shared objective. While the groups are active almost exclusively online, due to the societies in which many of the members find themselves, they possess a set of tangible, shared objectives. Ackland and O’Neil state that the use of online communications has connected “previously disparate groups and their audiences” as well as “creating a sense of ‘critical mass’ or authority for a message that may be lacking in the real world.” (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011, pg. 180). In his study into Arab atheists online Noman found that they had accomplished the creation of “a robust, longstanding community that would not have been possible without the affordances of digital communication networks.” (Noman, 2015, pg. 2) and this also seems to be the case with both case studies in this project. With the large number of members which these groups, and many others like them, have as well as their increased visibility as a result of utilising online communication platforms, their voice is given an authority which other voices, calling for the same changes, may have lacked in the past.

7. Self reflection

The interviews carried out for the purpose of this study were all completed after having established a dialogue with a number of administrators of the 2 groups which I chose as case studies. The majority of communication occurred via the Facebook messaging service, as well as some contact via email. The interaction with individuals involved in the study remained professional throughout the course of my research. The interviewees were sent an identical set of open ended questions in a word document. This allowed the individuals involved to provide me with lucid answers and opinions which were utilised as qualitative data in the analysis section of the project.
Establishing contact with the administrators prior to submitting the survey for the group members was a well considered and constructive decision, as it gave the admins time to fully understand my motives before agreeing to expose the group members to a research survey.

The survey also contained a number of open ended questions, which I feel provided an insight into the actions and motives of the group’s membership base. To add to this many of the ‘yes/no’ questions within the survey were followed by a section where the participants were asked to provide more details to their yes/no answer. This allowed me to provide quantitative statistical data which was supported by the qualitative data taken from the members’ survey statements and the admin interviews.

The admins pinned a link at the top of both groups’ pages which took the members to the Google doc survey, and they provided the members with a description of who I was, the purpose of my study, and the assurance that no personal details would be made public by me other than their first name, provided that they gave their consent to do so.

Despite the assurances given to members by the admins of both groups regarding the validity of the study and the offer to remain anonymous, the group members appeared reluctant to participate. A combined number of 220 members took part in the survey (155 members of the Radical Atheists group participated, and 65 members of the Arab Atheist Network and Forum participated). Links to the survey document remained on the groups’ pages for 4 weeks prior to the analysis of the collected data. The time frame given to members to participate could have been extended, and may have provided the study with a larger sample size.

In a follow up discussion with one of the group administrators he stated that the relatively limited response may have also been as a result of the reluctance of Arab atheists to publicly expose themselves to any greater extent than their interactions within the group. As they did not know me they may not have been willing to provide personal information despite assurances that none of it would be divulged without consent.
8. Conclusion

“...what we do here no matter how small and trivial could make a difference and help in making a better tomorrow.”

(Hakim, Arab Atheist Network and Forum member).

The groups’ members’ utilisation of social media communication technology has developed into a wider movement, and established a communication network among similar groups who occupy the same social media platform. Both operate in a non-hierarchical manner, allowing instead for a many-to-many approach within their interactions. The global reach of online communication technology has allowed the groups to transcend both geographical and cultural barriers, and maintain visibility despite direct opposition to their existence. While communication technology has not been used to create a new movement it has ‘unearthed’ something which has always existed within the Arab world but has never had a globally accessible platform on which it can be witnessed in it’s full scale. The visibility afforded to the dissenting voices of Arab atheists by communication technology, such as Facebook, has provided individual atheists, and Muslims who are questioning their faith, a window to a wider movement and the opportunity to join a collective of like minded individuals who are now free to voice their opinion to the world from the safety of their laptops. The active involvement of Muslims within the group has brought with it some issues; with a number of atheist members claiming that interaction with them is not constructive. However this was not always the case, and the groups’ commitment to encouraging dialogue between atheists and Muslims despite this is a testament to their commitment to free thinking and social development. In this case Facebook has provided the forum for such interactions which are lacking in the real world. This is in line with the findings of Schafer (2016) and Noman (2011, 2015) who both highlighted the importance of social media within the context of online atheist communities in majority Muslim countries.

A large majority of the participating members from both groups stated that they felt there was a collective identity among them. The main reason for this put forward by the members was their shared experiences as members of an oppressed minority. While the groups’ members come to the groups as atheists or sceptics they do not initially possess a collective identity, but after their subsequent online interactions they learn of each others shared experiences of discrimination and oppression. This interaction between a geographically diverse membership base via a social media platform has caused a collective identity to be formed among a disparate group of ex-muslim
atheists who, in some cases, were previously not at liberty to speak out freely in denunciation of Islam or religion in general.

As well as possessing a shared or collective identity the groups’ members voiced a coherent set of shared motivations. The majority of participants stated that their motivation and shared objective for continued action within the group was to spread knowledge and awareness. Details offered by the admins and members described a will to ‘expose’ Muslims to their way of thinking, in order to help them understand their reasons for leaving the religion as well as their continued criticism of religion in general. The increased visibility which Arab atheists have been afforded by communication technology has also benefited them in regard to working toward this shared objective, as the members and their collective identity have been made visible to Muslims who may never have had an opportunity to interact directly and constructively with an atheist. Some Muslims approached the group with a reactionary mindset but the secure social media platform which the groups occupy means that they are able to persevere with an open forum for dialogue with a much reduced risk of members facing violence or discrimination should the interactions prove to be nonconstructive.

This online platform affords the groups the opportunity to meet, share opinions and experiences, and achieve meaningful dialogue with people who may have harbored animosity toward atheists and/or previously misunderstood their views, with a view to improving social cohesion within the Arab world and promoting the acceptance of atheist voices within society.

9. Concluding remarks

The group administrators claimed that a possible explanation, in part, for the rise in Arab atheists is the exposure of Muslims to atheists and atheist content online and the subsequent interactions between them. While this study did not place a specific focus on the Muslim members of the groups nor those who may have been inspired to question their beliefs as a result of their online exposure, this could prove to be an interesting avenue for further research.
References.


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Appendix – A

Arab Atheist Network and Forum – Member survey results.

Location

Reason for joining.
Content shared

Interaction with Muslim members

Atheist
Open about atheism in real world

Collective identity

Motivation
Appendix – B

Radical Atheists – Member survey results.
Content shared

Open about atheism in real world

Interaction with Muslim members
Appendix – C

Group administrator interview transcripts.


- How long have you been living in America for and what were your reasons for moving there?
  I have been living in America since 2005 where I came to do a PhD in physics. However, long before I came to study in the US, my intention was to leave my home country, Jordan, for a Western liberal democracy, as I always identified with the values of such societies and felt a certain level of alienation where I was supposed to belong. The US was not my first choice, but getting admission and financial support as well as having access to a huge variety of graduate schools made the US a sensible choice. Up until the last elections I considered the US to be my adopted home. Right now, I’m starting to consider things from a somewhat different light.

- How many pages alongside Arab Atheist Forum and Network are you directly involved with?
  I am also an editor and contributor to the Arab Atheists Magazine, an electronic monthly publication featuring material written by atheists or of concerns to atheists, we actually have a wide spectrum of contributors, in December last year the Magazine celebrated its 4th anniversary. In addition, I am also involved with the Atheist Alliance – Middle East and North Africa, which was established about a year ago with the aim of being an advocacy group concerned with issues of discrimination and persecution of Arab atheists and ex-Muslims, and also defend free-speech in the Middle East. The efforts of the group that founded the Alliance were instrumental in recovering many of the atheist pages and groups that were shut down en masse last year by Facebook. However, I, like many members of our group are loosely affiliated with a broader community of people running a host of pages and groups on various social media. Each page has a different flavour, and many people participate in more than one venue and often in multiple roles. That mode of operation is very common due to the fact we’re all volunteers, but also because we collaborate virtually without direct physical interaction, which has advantages and disadvantages as opposed to how organizations typically operate.

- How long has Arab Atheist Forum and Network been in existence?
  The ‘Network’ or Shabakah as it’s known within the community has been around as a Facebook group since about 2008, but it existed well before that as an internet forum until it was hacked by cyber Jihadists. The subsequent move to Facebook had to do with security and stability. It has provided the benefit of being more engaging, given that Facebook is an experience that brings the whole person in with the group being just one part of a bigger varied presence. However, this also caused a dilution of sorts to the type of writing and depth of writing owing to the facility with which new communities can form and the fact that a Facebook account is sometimes also part of
one’s personal identity and life. And with Facebook requiring far less effort to create and maintain a group than stand-alone forums, and with internet access becoming so ubiquitous, we see a huge flourishing of those groups. And so, many of the groups that exist today spawned from a few forums in the early and mid 2000s which used to be more dedicated and allowed for more specialization at a time when the internet and the freedom it afforded were novel and genuinely ground-breaking and the internet had far fewer distractions and content than it has today.

- **What was the main reason or reasons for the group's creation?**

- It was simply a manifestation of a movement brewing under the surface. The proliferation of knowledge through the internet offered for the first time in 1400 years since the inception of Islam the chance to actually debate its tenets. People who doubted Islam in past centuries typically had to live in isolation, and only during brief periods in Islamic history could criticism be heard and even then, those who sounded it were faced with suppression of varying degrees. But it’s not just those self-contradictions of Islam that drove people to gather and create something like our group. Rather, it’s also the fact that the new medium also brought with it a contrast with the prosperity of the West and the fact that its values differ from those of Muslims, it brought with it science, which questioned fundamentals of the faith, and so there is a lot of motivation to start such a group. Our group, historically, happened to be one of the most persistent and best organized, but the motivation for something like it also manifested itself through personal blogs at the time, and later on through YouTube channels and the like. So, while showing persistence and continuity, I would say its prominence has to do more with organization and passion of the various individuals that helped make this happen.

- **From your time as an administrator and from your experience of viewing and creating content on the page, what would you say is the main reason that people join the group and interact on the page?**

- There’s a wide spectrum of people who join. There are of course the atheists who wish to find a home to belong to. When I joined, I had already left Islam for nearly two decades, I was looking for like-minded people who can have meaningful interaction about issues that concern me. And indeed, I have found so many wonderful thoughtful people who have become friends and colleagues. But not everyone comes in already at that stage. Some are newly minted atheists that have been exposed to materials like Dawkin’s the God Delusion, or have been fascinated by watching the Cosmos series or have been following Arab atheist YouTubers, or read or written blogs, .. etc. These come full of excitement to debate and expand their knowledge. There are also Muslim doubters who come with the intent of expunging doubts they have by debating (and the hope to win over) atheists, and there are of course Muslims who think they can save our souls by debating us. There are also the trolls and the disrupters who have no intention to debate whatsoever. Sometimes these would join just to have the chance of posting some obscenities filled with cuss words targeting atheists before we kick them out. There are a few other categories, but the point is many are curious about us, and we think this is a good thing.

- **Do you believe that the members of the group possess a collective identity and/or sense of solidarity?**

- The situation is more complex, but essentially yes there is solidarity, sense of purpose, camaraderie. Amongst ourselves there are close friendships and personal relations that
exceed nameless impersonal interactions. More often than not, we react as a group in similar ways, we have similar stands on many issues and we are all united by a realization that religion is mostly a negative phenomenon that needs to be fought. That said, we are far from being homogenous, and we differ on many issues and suffer from all the common shortcomings of any human group.

- Could you tell me about the 'cyber jihad' attacks on this Facebook page and about any other issues that have arisen (with this group and any other pages that you are involved with).

- Muslims are extremely sensitive to any form of criticism, whether by a clever cartoon or comedy or through a sober academic study. Most of it is branded as blasphemy even if it’s criticism with an intent to reform. And while this reflex is institutionalized, Muslims as individuals are taught the principles of policing thought very early on. A place like Facebook, which is open to all, invites both critics of Islam and Muslims, and the same way there are blasphemy laws and conventions in society, so is cyber space. So, why brand this as a form of Jihad? Islam is meant to be the sole global religion of all humanity, and the presence of Muslims on a place like Facebook is akin to them being present in a new land, but one that is also an extension of their existence in everyday life, and so they consider it to be within their jurisdiction to enforce these blasphemy laws and conventions, and to do so by any means possible. These Jihadists typically organize themselves in groups, some of their groups number in the hundreds of thousands and a few of the big ones exceed a million. The goal is to silence any criticism of Islam on social media, and they do so either by abusing the reporting system of Facebook for example, where they create massive campaigns against a page or a group or a personal account, or they resort to malicious software to take down the offending page. Very often they do a combination of those two plus a few other techniques that utilize loopholes in the system. For most of them this is Jihad, they are fighting infidels and apostates and are doing so from the comfort of their homes and they view it the same as real war where they assume Allah will be rewarding them for their ‘good deeds’ defending his religion and spreading it. Some of these don’t resort to this disruptive behaviour only, they also try to join our groups and debate with the aim of proselytizing, but sometimes also flooding a group with religious material. One technique that worked very effectively for a while was for a few of them to join our groups and start posting porn or bloody scenes that are in violation of Facebook Community Standards. Then others come and report that content, and the group is taken down. In February last year we were nearly decimated from Facebook. All our major groups, the ‘Network’ and a few other big groups were shut down because of this. Every time we would open a new replacement it would be shut down within a few days. The only way we could fight this was by contacting people who might help us pressure Facebook to deal with the problem. Eventually that paid off and we regained our groups. The ‘Network’ now exists in 5 reincarnations, each of which at one point replaced the original after being shut down. We hope that has created some form of protection for the major groups, but pages and personal accounts still suffer from this problem, and there is a huge amount of valuable content that was likely irrecoverable. However, we have learned to live with this as a natural part of our fight for recognition and to have our voice heard. One way to deal with this situation prompted a group to create the Arab Atheists Magazine. The aim of the Magazine was to preserve the thought of Arab atheists at a crucial juncture in this period in history and to overcome the ephemeral nature of internet forums and Facebook groups.
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- I’ve noticed that there are a lot of pious/practicing Muslims who are members of the group and they often challenge or mock the views of the atheist members. Do you find that this creates discussion and civil disagreement? Or have some of them simply joined the group as ‘trolls’?

- The Network is meant to be a place for debate and free-expression, we welcome everyone in the group. One of our aims is to create a common platform where instead of being demonized and denigrated by Muslims, we encounter them through discussion. This works with some of them where meaningful debates do take place, but more often than not Muslims are silent observers that do not participate in the discussion. Every once in a while a Muslim breaks rank and starts changing position from being a staunch defender of the faith to a doubter and finally to an ex-Muslim of some sort. We strongly believe that in addition to wanting rights in Muslim-majority countries, we as atheists have positive things to contribute to society, if only given the chance to be heard. Interaction points like the Network offer a way of spreading awareness about who we are and why Muslims need to listen to us.

- In your opinion, what kind of issues (if any) can arise for someone living in an Islamic country, or a country where Islam is the dominant religion, as a result of openly joining a group like this?

- It varies, but more often than not it’s quite undesirable to be open about it, and for this reason you find that many of our members, especially atheists, use pseudonyms and fake accounts. But some Muslims who don’t want to be openly seen conversing with atheists do the same as well. Fake accounts are vulnerable to attacks, given Facebook’s policy on the use of real identity, and that’s one loophole that cyber Jihadists have been using against many of us, and they’re often successful in taking accounts down. There are cases where people have been harmed for criticizing religion on social media, sometimes they get ostracized but there were cases of violence and even murder.

- Let me give you two examples from my own country, Jordan. In late 2015, a Facebook activist shared a fake Quranic chapter on his page. His real identity was found out (or he was using his real name to begin with, it’s not clear). He was charged with blasphemy and sentenced to 3 years in prison. Another case, took place last year where a Christian Jordanian leftist writer shared a cartoon on his Facebook page. The cartoon was deemed offensive and he was accused of blasphemy. One day, right after a court hearing in his trial, just outside the court he was shot dead by a Muslim extremist, who probably thought the court will not be harsh enough with him and would not implement the sanctioned Sharia punishment (death). Another case was in Yemen also last year, where a teenager criticizing certain aspects of Islam (not outwardly showing atheism) was kidnapped and killed after having been threatened over his Facebook posts. The killer boasted on social media about what he did and announced he was prepared to kill anyone else in Yemen who blasphemed if people inform him of about such ‘offenders’. There is also a large number of cases where people are threatened after activism, and this happens whether they use their real identity or not. So, you can imagine that using the real name and photo are likely to get a person into trouble. I have personally lost many friends and some family members due to my activism, and while it saddens me to see that happens with some people I consider friends, I feel that being out as an atheist is probably one of the best things I have done, and that despite the loss I am probably better off. I have lived too many years pretending to be someone I am not to protect myself and appease those around me, and that’s a very unhealthy way to live.
• In your experience, has the number of ex-Muslims and culturally Muslim atheists increased? If so, has this rise been reflected in the number of people joining this group and others like it?

• That is a hard question to answer. On the one hand, there is reason to believe that globalization and the proliferation of knowledge and exposure to the West and its values have all contributed to an increased questioning of Islam that would have been unheard of at this scale just a mere century or two ago. On the other, the internet with all the inventions that came along with it has provided a platform where people could interact and organize. And so, the former set of factors provide a catalyst of doubting religion, and the latter makes the dissidents more visible. And so, yes, there’s probably an increase, but it’s hard to measure it because of lack of statistics and because of the way social media has facilitated that visibility. However, we have seen social and political changes over the past decade that did likely drive up the numbers of people leaving Islam, namely, the Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamic State. The former challenged norms and upended old systems (albeit as a whole it failed in many respects), and the latter has demonstrated a form of fundamental Islam that is very hard to dispute on religious grounds, especially by the Sunni majority. It is often said that ISIS has been a major force driving people away from Islam in the last couple of years. I would like to mention something about the use of the term ‘Cultural Muslim’, because I personally think it’s a very untenable identity in Islam at this point in history. Compared to a ‘real’ Muslim ready to defend every point in his faith or an ex-Muslim who rejects the faith as a whole, a so-called cultural Muslim lives on precarious grounds; willing to break many of the taboos of religion while trying to maintain its basic principles in an uneasy and unnatural mix. Such people often have a hard time formulating a coherent position. In the Middle East, these would consider themselves ‘moderate’ Muslims and while some of them might tolerate full ex-Muslims, many would be hostile to various degrees towards us. While I (and many ex-Muslims) applaud the efforts of the ‘moderates’, so far their project is a failed one.
Ayman Pheidias: Radical Atheists.

Are you living in an Islamic country, or a country in which Islam is the dominant religion? If so; what is your experience of living there as an atheist and someone who is involved with a page which may be deemed ‘blasphemous’ by Muslims?

I live in Beirut – Lebanon. This country’s population is around 54% Muslims (Sunna and Shia equally), 41% Christians (with 9 different denominations) and concentrated minorities of Druze and Alawites.

The diversity in Lebanon has always been a main reason for a more tolerant approach to freedom of thought and expression, both legislatively and socially. Despite the existence of laws against “insulting the Divine Self” and “stimulating sectarian strife”, which are sometimes exploited to oppress freedoms, these are generally applicable to literature and art productions. In large cities, you don’t generally get into trouble for voicing your anti-religion stands or opinions. Street justice may be a serious threat in more rural areas though.

How many pages alongside Radical Atheists are you directly involved with?

As a matter of fact, “Radical Atheists” is a discussion group on Facebook, not a page. This is the only Facebook group I’m involved in as admin.

How long has the group been in existence?

“Radical Atheists” has been founded in November 2013.

What was the main reason or reasons for the group's creation?

The group’s creation was motivated by the aspiration of its founders to secure an open discussion platform, where Arabic speaking free thinkers, atheists and secular individuals can discuss their stands regarding public life, society and general politics with non-religious and religious group members. The group has been established on the basis of freedom of thought and expression for all individuals, regardless of their beliefs or religious affiliations.

From your time as an administrator and from your experience of viewing and creating content on the page, what would you say is the main reason that people join the group and interact on the page?

Members of most atheist Facebook groups are widely diversified and fall in one of the following main categories: individuals who are sceptic regarding their background beliefs (the religions they inherited), others who have already rejected religion and are interested in accessing a network of like-minded people, and religious individuals who are convinced it is their religious duty to go face-to-face with irreliigiousness and rebut its claims and guide “deluded atheist youth to the rightful path”.

Nonetheless, there is a number of trolls, who are within the group just to disrupt healthy and constructive discussion. Moreover, there is a large number of cyber-jihadists who join the group in order to launch abusive reporting campaigns against the group, its posts and its atheist members’ accounts to close them.

Do you believe that the members of the group possess a collective identity and/or sense of solidarity?

“Radical Atheists” members seem to have a sense of commitment to the group, I would say it is the result of the approach of the group’s administration team. With a clear and transparent set of rules being applied impartially in all circumstances, with no discrimination between members in any way, members have a remarkable engagement in the moderation of discussions and the follow up of the group’s rules. This has resulted in a personal commitment from most members to the group itself, and to other group members. The group’s administration has been very attentive to provoking inter-
member mingling and interaction, through general discussion programs as well as many entertainment activities, in order to break the ice between members and round the edges.

**Could you tell me about the 'cyber jihad' attacks on this Facebook page and about any other issues that have arisen (with this group and any other pages that you are involved with)?**

Most of the major Arabic speaking atheist Facebook groups and pages have been, and still are, targeted with abusive reporting from cyber-jihadists. In fact, “Radical Atheists” has been closed twice by Facebook based on such campaigns, beside a huge number of accounts of its admins and its most active atheist members.

In February 2015, our group has been closed along with 9 of the major groups and about 15 pages, for about a month. Admins of the closed groups and pages have organized an intensive social media campaign reaching secular activists and opinion leaders in the US and the UK. It is not possible to guarantee that the groups were reopened strictly because of the campaign, but it is safe to say it has been an important exposure and pressure against Facebook’s policy.

**I’ve noticed that there are a lot of pious/practicing Muslims who are members of the group and they often challenge or mock the views of the atheist members. Do you find that this creates discussion and civil disagreement? Or have some of them simply joined the group as ‘trolls’?**

As I have mentioned in a previous answer, many religious members have joined the group as trolls and are more interested in attacking atheists or ridiculing them than in participating in debates and constructive discussions. The group’s rules do not tolerate such a behavior to be carried on once detected, and that kind of members are usually banned from the group after a couple of warnings. However, the admins have a clear differentiation between the above described trolls and the enthusiastic religious individuals who have not been previously exposed to what atheism is all about. A huge number of religious members have joined the group based on a ridiculous stereotype of atheists propagated by clergymen in media. After being approved into the group, many of them experience a kind of shock, which is often expressed with improper behavior. Such members are generally given the chance to adjust their interaction and align their behavior with the group’s rules.

The group has been created to be a dialog platform where topics related to religion, society and politics can be freely presented and discussed. It is only a natural arrangement to have all kinds of ideas and beliefs within the group, thus the importance of the presence of religious members.

**In your opinion, what kind of issues (if any) can arise for someone living in an Islamic country, or a country where Islam is the dominant religion, as a result of openly joining a group like this?**

Joining an atheist group as a religious member to debate with atheists and familiarize oneself with atheism does not cause any trouble as long as the purpose is clear. I believe the question deals with being open about one’s atheism (or irreligiousness) while living in Islamic societies.

It is certainly risky to come out as atheist in communities where the majority are Muslims, but it becomes increasingly dangerous when the government is also influenced by religion, and even fatal if it is a theocracy. Not all societies in the MENA region have the same approach obviously, and the price one pays in such a scenario vary considerably from a country (or region) to another. An atheist in Beirut may be generally accepted in mixed communities, at the most frowned upon in some conservative ones; very similar in urban Syrian, Tunisian and Egyptian regions. In rural areas, an atheist has to be more cautious when expressing his/her views. The spectrum of atheism intolerance is very wide, ranging from what’s described above to a serious threat to one’s very life. Social and professional discrimination is to be expected in most Muslim and Arab societies, it does not stop at that however. Many friends (group members) in more conservative countries have been subjected to oppression from their families and close entourage, property vandalizing, brutal assaults, etc. Others have been legally prosecuted for expressing their views against religion, religious traditions and religious authorities. Hefty fines and imprisonment are common in some countries as punishments for “crimes” relating to “contempt of religion”, but some countries have a clear capital punishment policy for apostates, as stipulated by the Islamic Sharia, such as KSA and Iran.
In your experience, has the number of ex-Muslims and culturally Muslim atheists increased? If so, has this rise been reflected in the number of people joining this group and others like it?

It is remarkable that this decade has seen an important increase in the number of ex-Muslims. I would personally agree of the observation that suggests a correlation between the sustained rise of Islamic extremist movements in many parts of the region and the increase in ex-Muslims number. The traditional “moderate Muslim” interpretation is that “individuals of weak faith” have been deceived by western, anti-Muslim media to think that Islam is bad as presented by Islamic extremists, while the latter have no real understanding of the “genuine Islam” as taught by Muhammed and found in the Quran and Hadiths. However, most Muslims, who join groups like “Radical Atheists” to defend their religion against that approach, soon discover that most – if not all – crimes committed by terrorist groups are backed up with the Quran and Hadiths teachings.

The increasing number of Arab atheists may need both factors to be explained: the rise and proliferation of Islamic terrorist groups in the region and the access of individuals to social media platforms, where they can get exposed to genuine and direct presentation of the authentic texts and teachings of their religions.
Appendix - D

Member survey questions (Arabic and English).

اَسْتِطْلَاع

- هذا الاستطلاع هو جزء من دراسة يعدها Matthew Thomas وال-Muslims previous nationals of the Arabic and English-speaking.
- في حال وجود أي معلومة ترغب بتقديمنها، يرجى إعمل السؤال.
- سنستلم ترجمة إجابتك إلى اللغة الإنجليزية أياً بعد استلامها، لكي يمكن نسج الاستطلاع أن يستمرها. لذلك يرجى ملك استخدام اللغة العربية الفصحى وتبسيط تركيب الجمل في الإمكان.

أولاً:

إن يتم ذكر اسمك بالكامل ضمن الدراسة. في حال لم تمانع ورد اسمك الأول (دون الشهرة) ضمن الدراسة، يرجى توضيح ذلك.

الاسم: ________________________________

أوافق على ورود اسمي الأول في الدراسة (نعم/لا): ____________

العمر: ____________________________

العرق / القوميّة: _________________________

الجنس: __________________________

الجنسية: __________________________

مكان الإقامة: __________________________

ثانيًا:

منذ متى كان انضمامك إلى هذه المجموعة؟

لماذا قررت الانضمام إليها؟

ما هي المواد التي تنشرها عادةً في المجموعة؟ ميز، صور، فيديوات، أراء، إلخ؟

هل تواجه مباشرةً مع أشخاص يختلفون معك في أركان حول الأديان و/أو الإسلام (نعم/لا)؟

إذا كانت إجابتك "نعم"، يرجى وصف كيفية هذه المواجهات.
هل تكون هذه المواجهات بناءة ومنتجة ومتخصصة؟ أم أنها تتحول إلى العنف والتعرض المؤذي؟

ثالثًا:

إذا كانت إجابتك "لا"، يرجى التوقف عن الإجابة بعد هذا السؤال.

هل أنت لاديني/ملحد (نعم/لا)؟

منذ متى أنت لاديني/ملحد؟

هل أنت مسلم سابق أو من خليفة اجتماعية/ثقافية إسلامية (نعم/لا)؟

يرجى تحديد تصنيفك لخليفة:

هل تجهر بلديّتك/الحائط في حيائك اليومي الواقعية (إذاً عن مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي) (نعم/لا)؟

إذا كانت إجابتك "نعم"، هل تعرضت لأي نوع من الاضطهاد في الواقع أو على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي بسبب جهلك بلديّتك/الحائط؟ يرجى ذكر التفاصيل.

إذا كانت إجابتك "لا"، ما هي أسباب عدم تصريحك مع موقفي وكافك اللاديني؟

هل كان لعضويتك في المجموعة أي آثر سلبي على حيائك (نعم/لا)؟

يرجى ذكر التفاصيل.

هل تشعر بوجود نوع من الهوية وحُسن الانتماء والتضامن بين أعضاء المجموعة (نعم/لا)؟

إذا كانت إجابتك "نعم"، يرجى توضيح كيف و لماذا نشأت هذه الهوية و هذا الحسن بالانتماء والتضامن بين الأعضاء.

ما هي دوافعك الخاصة للنشر في المجموعة والتفاعل مع أعضائها؟

شكرًا لكم.
Matthew Thomas

ORIGINAL POLL:

- This poll is part of a study by Matthew Thomas on the role of social networking sites and its applications for non religious / atheists and Arabic-speaking ex-Muslims.
- If there is any information you would prefer not to share, please disregard the question.
- Your answers will be automatically translated into English after they are received, so that the surveyor can employ them. Please use standard Arabic and simplify sentences as much as possible.

First:
Your full name will not be mentioned in the study. If you do not mind getting your first name (without your last name) in the study, please mention it.

Name: I agree to mention my first name in the study (yes / no):
Age: Gender: Ethnicity / Nationality:
Nationality: Place of residence:

Second:
How long have you been in this group?
Why did you decide to join the group?
What materials do you normally post in the group? Memes, images, videos, opinions, etc.?
Do people who differ with you directly confront you about your attitudes towards religion and / or Islam (yes / no)?
If your answer is "Yes", please describe how these confrontations occur.
Are these confrontations constructive, productive and civilized? Or is it turned into violence and harmful attacks?

Third:
Are you a non religious / atheist (yes / no)? If your answer is "No", please stop answering after this question.
How long have you been a non religious / an atheist?
Are you an ex-Muslim or from an Islamic social/cultural background (yes / no)?
Please specify you describe your background:
Do you speak out in your daily life about your non religiousness / atheism (away from social networking sites) (yes / no)?
If your answer is "Yes", have you ever experienced any kind of persecution in real life or in social networking sites because of your non religiousness / atheism? Please provide details.
If your answer is "No" what are the reasons why you are not open about your position and your non-religious ideas?
Did your membership in the group have any negative impact on your life (yes / no)?
Please provide details.
Do you feel that there is a kind of identity, sense of belonging and solidarity among group members (yes / no)?
If your answer is "Yes", please explain how and why this identity and sense of belonging and solidarity among members arose.
What are your personal motivations for posting in the group and interacting with its members?