



# Facebook Report: Rotherham, hate, and the far-right online



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## 1. Introduction

Since 2011, far-right politics have increasingly shifted to online platforms as primary sites for organising, recruitment, and communication. Facebook's platform is a key site for various far-right groups. Britain First, a new, prolific far-right party with a disturbing anti-Muslim agenda relies on Facebook for communication. Much of this communication is driven by reports in the media. As the newspapers cover certain issues, Britain First's members launch short term discussions using the comments section on specific posts. This report will cover the recent case of extensive child sexual exploitation in Rotherham and explore how Britain First uses the Facebook platform to create an environment that justifies *hate*. While not all of this hate is proscribed under British law as illegal, some of it in fact can be considered hate speech. Consequently, this activity demands that organisations such as Tell MAMA be proactive in monitoring social media platforms to identify and intercept hate online before it affects someone offline. Most importantly, Facebook provides an open-ended platform that is being used by the far-right to create environments that leaves hate mostly unchallenged. By exploring discourses used in comments on Britain First posts, a clear line can be drawn from derogatory and abusive remarks to the real threat of violent offline cases. Facebook's platform is being used as an environment to reproduce and perpetuate anti-Muslim hate and presents a serious concern for civil society working against hate crime. Given Facebook's role as a *platform*, we believe that Facebook has a unique ability to assist partners working against hate crime by helping us detect, report and monitor online hate.

## 2. Methodology

This short study is based on comments pulled from Britain First posts on Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014 using the Facebook Graph API when the Rotherham story broke in the press. Comments were scraped for all posts on the 26<sup>th</sup> and compiled into a large corpus. The corpus was analysed using linguistic methods.<sup>1</sup> A word frequency count was created to explore key issues and recurring themes. From there, terms relevant to anti-Muslim hate were selected (see Table 1, list of key terms and frequencies). These terms were then run through concordance (examining the key words in context) and collocation (co-occurrence of specific words within a ten-word range). After identifying key concepts, qualitative analysis using a close reading of a sample of comments and collocation network visualisation was conducted to illustrate how particular terms, concepts and discourses are used. Comments collected mostly reference the Rotherham incident, but a few posts on the day referenced ISIS movements in Iraq as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, P. (2006) *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum.

### 3. From hate to action: keywords and Britain First’s discourse on the Rotherham incident

The child sexual exploitation scandal in Rotherham exposed over 1,400 cases of child abuse, grooming and sex trafficking. The report by Professor Jay is explicit about the *Asian* ethnicity of gangs and references ‘racism’ as an excuse the police and council used to avoid confrontation with the offenders.<sup>2</sup> Britain First, however, has picked up specifically on the ethnicity of the criminals. In fact, the analysis below will demonstrate that Muslim, Pakistani and Asian are used almost interchangeably by Britain First commenters. These terms are used specifically to identify Muslims and Asians as the specific problem behind child sexual exploitation, using a racist and xenophobic lens to paint all Muslims as (in the most extreme of comments) ‘rapists’ and ‘paedos’ – (paedophiles).

**Table 1: Frequencies of key words**

Frequency	Term
379	countr*
207	scum*
353	muslim*
142	islam*
72	send
97	asian*
61	hang
49	dirty
48	action
48	deport*
58	paki*
39	bomb
34	death
27	gangs
24	nuke
16	gang
23	mosques
25	paedo*/pedo*

Using a word frequency count is an effective way to begin understanding key issues in a corpus of text. Of course, the most frequent words are grammatical, articles, or pronouns (‘a’, ‘the’, ‘of’, ‘it,’ etc.). Combining a qualitative, purposive sampling of ‘lexical’ words—those with functional meaning in the corpus related to questions around hate—allows the identification of key themes. We identified three key areas of hateful language with a relatively high frequency: identity, denigration, and action. These areas are explored in depth below.

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<sup>2</sup> Jay, A. (2014) *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham, 1997-2013*: 92.

**Table 2: categorisation of key terms**

<i>Identity</i> : language that expresses an anxiety about British identity and multiculturalism	<i>Denigration</i> : abusive and derogatory language	<i>Action</i> : words that call for direct action to be taken in response to the Rotherham incident
Asian*, Islam*, Muslim*, Paki*, Mosque*, Countr* (country/ies)	Pedo*, Paedo*, dirty, filthy, gang*, scum*	Bomb, death, deport*, hang*, nuke, send

These words are not necessarily the most used words in the corpus, though they did come up relatively frequently. Some of them were chosen because of their violent nature ('nuke', 'bomb') or their hateful content ('paedo', 'scum\*'). Asterisks are used to allow for plural and other forms of the word to come up in searches; for example, scum\* gives results that include 'scum' and 'scumbag'.

### **Identity**

The use of the terms Asian, Islam, Muslim, or reference to Pakistan heritage is a common occurrence in the corpus. Concordance of the term 'Muslim\*' reveals a significant level of anti-Muslim hate:

*"1400 reasons to hate Muslims & Islam and everything it stands for"*

*"normal behaviour for Muslims..."*

*"Muslims are filthy pigs, especially their prophet; Mohammed"*

*"Keep Britain Clean, Clean out the Muslims Ban Islam, Close Down All the Mosques"*

*"Why have these PC paid politicians allowed this to go on? Any fool knows Muslims do not assimilate"*

What we see is that commenters do not register the difference between Muslims and the criminals in Rotherham, rather they are interchangeable. 'Muslim' is deployed in order to cast *all* Muslims as synonymous with child abusers. As the third quote above shows, this is understood by some of the commenters to be the very *nature* of Islam and Muslims. 'Cancer' is an interesting term that is collocated with 'Islam\*' and 'Muslim\*', though it only appears three times. Upon examining concordances with 'Muslim\*' and 'cancer', we find a few particularly disturbing comments:

*"I despise muslims .they are a cancer and should be burned"*

*"all the non muslim world armies should rise up and rid the Muslims of this cancer on their religion"*

*"Islam is cancer"*

These commenters understand the actions of the reprehensible criminals in Rotherham as representative of Islam and Muslims as a whole. This is not surprising considering that Britain First's posts *directly* implicate Muslims as the problem, fostering an environment that enables hate to continue by rationalising it from the top down. The photograph below (Figure 1, posted on the Britain First page) is illustrative of how the organisation frames Muslims.

The banner specifically implicates Muslims in grooming, allowing Britain First to exploit the crimes of Asian men in Rotherham to further a broader anti-Muslim agenda. If we look more closely at the collocates of 'Muslim\*' and 'Islam\*', we note that this framing is highly successful and is mostly goes unchallenged, blindly accepted.



**Figure 1: Britain First in Rotherham (29<sup>th</sup> August)**



An interesting occurrence in a few comments was the attempt to cast Muslims as separate from Asians, fitting with broader movements on the far right to incorporate Sikhs, Hindus and other non-Muslim Asian minorities into their political movements. A number of common collocates between 'Asian\*', and 'Muslim\*' are 'Indians, Hindus, Not,' and 'Calling.' Concordance demonstrates that this area of overlap between 'Asian\*' and 'Muslim\*' is part of a complex anti-Muslim agenda that seeks to identify *Muslims* as objects of hate and objects of suspicion. While Prof. Jay's report focused on 'Asian' gangs as do the right-leaning broadsheets, a number of commenters sought to criticise this and cast out Muslims as a separate problem, offering a 'non-racist' veneer.

*"not Asian...but Muslim"*

*"It should not say asian gang because they are all muslim men so it should be saying muslim gang"*

*"THEY ARE NOT ASIANS , they are Arabs...or Muslims"*

*"I noticed on the BBC News they said Pakistani Asian men, they wouldn't say MUSLIMS"*

The relatively frequent collocation of the term 'them' across almost all of the search terms across the three categories further demonstrates the framing of Islam and Muslims as a monolith to be eviscerated from British society.

*"Its happening every ware these fkr's are monsters and its islam that is teaching them....."*

*"Even indians also want to action against islam.... So mr. Camron u need to action against them"*

By locating Muslims as 'them' Britain First is successful in organising a group of people who think that Muslims as a whole are responsible for the 1,400 cases of sexual exploitation of young girls. This is underscored with the use of adjectives, like 'dirty' and 'filthy' that serve to further demonise all Muslims, singularising them as a fundamental problem. Again, this is precisely part of Britain First's anti-immigrant, xenophobic, racist and anti-Muslim agenda.

### **Denigration**

Use of derogatory and abusive language toward Muslims is very common. 'Scum' and 'scumbag' are terms that appeared quite frequently in the corpus. This is not particularly surprising given that many people would use the term to describe these heinous criminals. However, the term is deployed more frequently to describe the nature of Muslims. Further, considering that Muslim is often equated with



**Table 3: Word collocation of 'scum' (top 20 lexical words)**

Word	Count	MI
dirty	22	7.8399
muslim	19	6.64977
filthy	12	8.05289
deport	10	6.78986
earth	8	7.56104
vile	7	6.75172
asians	5	7.46793
low	4	7.88296
england	4	7.146
flogged	3	9.05289
sickening	3	8.46793
scummy	3	8.46793
lesson	3	8.05289
moslem	3	7.73096
hanging	3	6.73096
excuses	3	6.59346
typical	2	9.46793
peadophiles	2	9.46793
utter	2	8.46793
firstly	2	8.46793

Again, the term scum, though it appears in over 200 points in the corpus, is not a direct indication of hate. However, 'scum\*' is collocated with one of the words used in the identity section above in 20% of cases. Collocation is an imperfect measure and some cases in which Muslims are implied as the target of scum are missed in this metric, but not mentioned as such, so do not appear in the search (e.g. "They done this in the name of Allah !! Sick retarded scum."). However, 20% (of mentions of scum) is an alarming number and shows how effectively Britain First has managed to frame the discussion around Muslims. A large majority reference 'scum' in general, but we see how the term is applied implicitly towards Muslims by looking at Table 3—the same adjectives (dirty, filthy) that are elsewhere used against 'Muslims' is also used against 'scum'. A further proportion references politicians and Rotherham Council, as well as the police.

*"Kick all scumbags out off our town goverment should never off let them in our town"*

*"The council and police should be outed they are as big scum as the child groomers"*

*"And you will still vote for this scum. The police and the council must be replaced."*



The Labour Party in particular has been identified as complicit by many of the commenters. As such, the term 'scum' has been directed to the Labour politicians as well as to Muslims. However, we should view this as part of an extension of an anti-Muslim agenda as it is Labour's alleged sympathy with the Muslim community that motivates the abuse:

"Labour candidate, so it is no surprise there was a cover up, labour pander to the islamic community. The last thing labour want is Pakistani muslims looking bad"

"the mulims worship the great paedophile mohammed who stated its ok to marry 9 year old girls, still remember to vote labour with there muslim flags flying over numerous town halls"

Further instances of derogatory language are present. The terms 'dirty' and 'filthy' have relevant levels of collocation with the term 'Muslim' or other identifier of Muslimness as has been evident in other parts of the corpus. What is key to understand is that while frequency of collocation may actually be quantitatively low (for example, collocation with identity words and Muslim), concordance and word clusters reveal that much of the derogatory language used in the corpus *implies* Muslims as the subject of the statement.

*"blanket bomb the whole bloody place rid the world of this scum pedo religion."*

*"And yet we keep letting this scum into the country."*

*"Get the dirty terrorist scum out now"*

*"Stop lettin the dirty fuckas in this country then!!!! SIMPLE"*

"its time the uk government got a grip and started looking after its own people, brought in a death penalty, and got rid of the dirty trash."

Given the nature of the offences of the criminals being discussed, references to paedophilia are frequent and expected. Again, these references are often made in relation to all Muslims rather than the specific criminals that organised the sex trafficking. One quote above described the Prophet as such, and it was a recurring theme. In fact, 7 of 11 references to the Prophet related him to paedophilia or some form of sexual perversity:

*"Pedophilic religion even Mohammed the prophet had a 6 yr old wife"*

*"they are MUslims 2/3 Generation Pakistanis....who follow. their irleader Mohammed the paedo to his law..."*

*"this is long over due for the media to tell why Muslims accept paedophilia because of their prophet Mohammed, biggest paedophiles of the lot, our country is a disgrace"*

These references are not intended as a critique of Islam but rather to denigrate the Muslim community as a whole, to suggest that the criminal behaviour of the men in Rotherham is in fact a part of Muslim nature. Thus far, we have explored how the discourses used by Britain First and its Facebook followers identify Islam and Muslims as a monolith, a common practice on the far-right. Once they have established the interchangeability of Muslim, Islam, Asian, Pakistani and *criminal*, the abuse entrenches these frames and further positions Muslims as the subjects of abuse. The language and discussion makes action imperative—if they are 'paedo scum' it is the next logical step to figure out how to 'get rid' of them.

### **Action**

Britain First, like the English Defence League, operates its communications and outreach online, however, it is also involved in [street-level confrontation and protests](#).<sup>3</sup> The photo above, for example, was from a demonstration by Britain First activists in the Rotherham council. While framing Muslims as all the same in order to denigrate them is evidence of anti-Muslim hate, as far as the law is

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<sup>3</sup> Tell MAMA. (2014) "Britain First, Mosque, Worshippers and Imams Intimidation Map". Available at [tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Britain-first-mosque-timeline.pdf](http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Britain-first-mosque-timeline.pdf). Accessed 01 September 2014.

concerned, it does not count as incitement to religious hatred or violence. However, we have seen that far-right activists are never far off from action and the potential of violence is present.

The most violent of these terms are 'bomb', 'hang\*' and 'death'. The term 'hang\*', with its clear connotations to the death penalty, is not surprising. As we should expect at this point, unfortunately, the subject of hanging is more often a generic Muslim rather than the criminals. It should be noted that approximately 12% of the use of the word 'hang' is in the context of hanging one's head in shame. However, a number of references to hanging are directed at Muslims (implied or explicit):

*"Political correctness has done more harm than good - scum need to be hanged"*

*"I'm disgusted our government treats its own people like second class citizens dirty Muslims they need hanging Britain First all the way send them home"*

*"hang these vermin, but time to ban islamashit and start mass deportations"*

*"MUSLIMS!!!! did this look pedophiles that need hanging don't be scared to call them Muslims it's a false religion anyway"*

While the above are certainly disturbing quotes, they do not constitute incitement to religious hatred or a form of violence. However, much of the 'action' language perpetuate a notion of a global war with Islam, in Britain as well as in Iraq. Rotherham is seen as a frontline in the same battle. Looking at concordances of 'bomb' we find that Muslims across the world are seen as an equal threat and Britain First members want them gone from Britain and are deeply supportive of domestic and foreign offensives. The following series of consecutive comments is particularly revealing:

- (1) "Clear the UK first then blanket bomb the lot"
- (2) "Maybe Britain should concentrate on ridding the Islamic cancer at home first"
- (3) "Flatten the lot. While the Quran is on this earth there will never be peace"
- (4) "I would rather he [Cameron] concentrated on this country for once"
- (5) "all of islam should be eradicated"

'Death' is seen by many commenters as an adequate punishment for the perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham. This is the only point at which we see the criminals pointed out in their specificity. This term generally indexes support for the death penalty. The terms 'bomb' and 'death' refer to government actions that Britain First members would like to be seen taken. Deportation and 'sending' are two other themes that refer to government actions that Britain First commenters would like seen taken against Muslims, with references to 'deporting' all Muslims and 'sending' them home. Deportation and being 'sent' somewhere is seen as a punishment for the criminals, however, frequent reference is made to *deportation of all Muslims*:

*"about time the government takes action and deports all these muslim peados"*

*"all muslims should be deported from this country i hate muslims"*

*"we need to stop immigration from certain countries and start arresting & deporting or giving these beasts proper sentences , enough is enough."*

Again, until this point this does not count as incitement to religious hatred (if the term Asian was replaced, a prosecution could be made as the standards of conviction are different for racial hatred as opposed to religious hatred).<sup>4</sup> If we take another look at the collocation network graph, we find that one of our identity terms, mosque, has a strong relationship between 'every', 'down' and share collocates with action words such as 'bomb' and 'deport'. With concordances, we see why the term mosque is associated with action:

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<sup>4</sup> Crown Prosecution Service. (2010) *Racist and religious crime – CPS prosecution policy*. London: CPS Communication Division.

*"We are Christians ...they are scum, boot them all out and knock down the mosques we don't need them"*

*"Yes, close mosques and demolish them and set up internment camps like WWII"*

*"Keep them out. And deport the rest or exile them. Get rid of all the mosques"*

*"Islam=scum !! Bomb all the mosques on pray day"*

*"Drown the muzy scum pig blood. Paint their Mosque in pig blood."*

*"i was thinking demolish mosques and replace with pig farms"*

Mosques, more than Muslims themselves, are seen as the primary target of action; it appears that many commenters (almost all of the comments about mosques in the corpus read as above) believe that striking at mosques is an ideal strategy. It makes sense—in their minds, Islam is an inherently other religion, it presents a significant threat to the UK on multiple fronts and it allegedly produces criminals and paedophiles. This is the point at which hate online flows into hate that affects Muslim communities as actual violence. Britain First has confronted a number of mosques in the last year. In 2013, [multiple bomb and arson threats](#) were plotted against mosques and mosque vandalism has been on the rise in the last few years.<sup>5</sup> A number of these quotes also suggest a possibility that these people may actually execute attacks on Muslim institutions. Further, they do have the potential to incite anti-Muslim hate and could be punishable offences if taken to court.

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<sup>5</sup> Tell MAMA. (2013) "Timeline of Mosque Incidents & Attacks Between 2012-2013". Available at <http://tellmamauk.org/timeline-map-of-mosque-incidents-attacks-between-2012-2013/>. Accessed 01 September 2014.

## 4. Conclusion

This report has detailed a discursive environment that allows anti-Muslim hate to fester on the Facebook platform. This environment (around the Rotherham incident) activates and rationalises language that positions Muslims as irretrievably not-British, making them into an enemy. Derogatory language comes in place to paint all Muslims as criminals and action words turn this denigration into concrete demands for political action. Most disturbing is that this action targets Muslims and Muslim institutions as a whole and approaches the limits of protected speech. While it is not directly Facebook's responsibility that far-right organisations use its platform to create an environment of hate, this hate presents a concern for organisations attempting to understand, monitor, document and challenge hate, absorbing a huge amount of resources. Britain First's Facebook page opens a site in which extreme anti-Muslim attitudes circulate and continue largely unchallenged. Of course, the open-ended nature of Facebook does make it possible to challenge Britain First, but more needs to be done:

*"there is never any excuse for Abuse.. Don't get fooled or drawn in.... That sort of talk will start trouble... It will force others to take sides.. There are plenty of Muslims shocked and horrified at the action of these Gangs... Its just like British yobs that burnt and smashed our shops in London a few years back... Was that all British people no it was a certain background possibly but even that is prejudice.. Find them name them put them in prison don't get caught with labels that help no one and encourage hatred of others.... Limited vision, limits action and limits ability to protect. Think beyond small mindedness look to the individual beneath the clothes and skin and religion well religious people shouldn't be harming others... So its nothing to do with any of that stuff... Its excuses..."*





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