Estimating network size and tracking information dissemination amongst Islamic blogs

March 2010

(Research completed April 2008)

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CONTEST, the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, aims to reduce the risk to the UK and its interests from international terrorism, so that people can go about their daily lives freely and with confidence. It details the terrorist threat we face and how it has evolved, and sets out the principles that govern our response to this threat, our achievements to date, the challenges, and what we intend to do next.

CONTEST comprises four principal workstreams, each with a clear objective:

- *Pursue* – To stop terrorist attacks.
- *Prevent* – To stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism.
- *Protect* – To strengthen our protection against terrorist attacks.
- *Prepare* – Where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact.

A copy of the *CONTEST* strategy is available on the Home Office website:
http://security.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-publications/publication-search/general/HO_Contest_strategy/HO_
Contest_strategy22835.pdf?view=Binary

The Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) was established in June 2007 and is staffed and directed by CLG, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office. The unit forms part of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism in the Home Office and supports the delivery of *CONTEST*.

The purpose of RICU is to ensure that the UK Government communicates effectively to reduce the risk of terrorism, by:

- advising *CONTEST* partners on their counter-terrorism-related communications
- using communications to expose the weaknesses of violent extremist ideologies and brands, and
- using communications to support credible alternatives to violent extremism.

Fundamental to achieving RICU's objectives is the commissioning of communications research which provides Government with an evidence base upon which it can effectively communicate all aspects of its CT strategy to a variety of audiences.

The overarching objectives of RICU's research programme are to: understand the audiences that Government is talking to; understand the impact of the message content, and the language used by Government when discussing CT-related issues; identify which channels are most effective in helping Government to reach audiences and to ensure that messages resonant effectively; and evaluate the impact of Government's CT communications.

Disclaimer

This research was carried out by David Stevens (Nottingham University). The views expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Home Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office or Department for Communities and Local Government (nor do they represent Government policy).

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Purpose

The purpose of this project is to study the link patterns and discussions of Islamic bloggers with particular reference to the UK. Weblogs have, over recent years, evolved into an often complex social web. As blog authors discover and republish information, it is possible to use the linking structure of the blogsphere to estimate the size of network activity, to track information flow and estimate patterns of infection and hierarchy. In terms of Islamic blogs, this provides a greater understanding of the size of the blogging community, as well as some sense of the hierarchical importance of different blogs.

Introduction

The aims of this project are first, to establish whether a weblog (blog for short) community of Islamic political authors exists, and (if so) second, to track the flow of information into and amongst them.

Why blogs? The rapid adoption of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as blogs and wikis is transforming the World Wide Web (WWW). The use of earlier ICTs by religious groups for the purposes of information dissemination, recruitment and organisation is well known and documented. Websites dedicated to furthering religious aims – even violent religious aims – were evident as early as the mid-1990s. For example, the Army of God's 1997 website in the US sought to inspire the killing of abortion doctors by publishing their personal details online and striking them through with thick red lines once they were killed.[1] Islamic sects have also been frequent users of websites to inform, discuss, recruit and organise adherents.

The rise of blogs – literally online diaries and personal reflections on daily matters – have been seized upon by political commentators as a method of discussing, informing, and ultimately attempting to influence the political process. For instance, in the US Presidential Election of 2004 blogging by both Democratic and Republican authors played an important role. According to a report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (January, 2005), 32 million US citizens claimed to read blogs. The report also showed that Americans were increasingly turning towards the Internet for political information, with a level of 63 million in 2004 compared with 30 million in 2000.

In clear-cut cases such as the US election of 2004, blogs have had a noticeable impact. Candidates established their own blogs as a route for publishing daily dispatches to the faithful. This has been mirrored elsewhere since. For example, David Cameron's 'WebCam' blog. Moreover, although the actual blogs may have only been read by a minority of Americans, their influence extends well beyond their readership. This influence exists via their interaction with national mainstream media. In the US several cases existed where blogs complemented mainstream media either by breaking stories first, or by checking and corroborating stories. A recent example of such activity is the Jawa Report's (mypetjawa.mu.nu) identification of Al Qa'ida's financial guru in London as Mohammad Al Ghabra after a gagging order was placed on the release of his name by the British High Court.[2]

With many mainstream newspapers and journalists now maintaining their own blogs, the mainstreamers keep a close eye on the best-known political blogs. Indeed, many play host to blog sites, with the *Guardian's* 'Comment is Free' being amongst the best known.

Bearing these two background features – the use of the Internet by (radical) religious groups and blogging for political purposes – in mind, the question arises as to whether blogging has begun to appear in any systematic fashion with regard to radical religious messages, in particular Islamic messages. An explosion in the use of blogs has already begun to occur amongst Christian sects and individuals in the US – the so-called 'Blogging for Jesus' trend.

One of the crucial, and most relevant, differences between blogs and other ICTs such as websites, is that blogs can often form a social network. Whilst blogs often act simply as online diaries where individuals record their own thoughts and experiences (both real-world and web-based), they often comment on the experiences of others. Bloggers read and comment on the content of other blogs. Newly discovered information can filter or cascade through these online communities. A simple example should serve to illustrate this cascading of information. In May 2003 a

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1. See also, godhatesfags.com and godhatessweden.com as examples of the Westboro Baptist Church's use of multiple websites to propagate its radical and violent message.
2. http://mypetjawa.mu.nu/archives/192476.php

company called Giant Microbes began producing and selling cuddly toys modelled upon common viruses (for example the influenza virus). Influential humourist Dave Barry posted an entry about the cuddly toys on his blog. This was picked up and republished or commented on by the readers of Dave Barry's blog in their own blogs. Readers of these other blogs carried the story of the toys further in their blogs, and so on. Here we have the movement of information cascading across the blogosphere, and the ability to track its dissemination back to the original source.

The aim here is to analyse the pattern and dynamic of information spread amongst Islamic blogs. In particular, the interest is in determining the path information takes through the blog network. This uses link inference and link classification as well as non-traditional features that are unique to blog data that allows some measure of link inference. The difficulty

is that frequently blogs do not cite the source of their information and often appear somewhat disconnected from their original source, hence the need for inference. The goal, therefore, is to estimate the size of the blogging community and to track information flow through it in order to identify the more widely read sources or blogs.

Terminology and data

Some elucidation of the various terms used in this research is useful in order to narrow the subject matter and exclude certain variables.

For the purposes of this study, a blog is a single webpage containing temporally ordered entries. The blog data used consist primarily of daily Blogpulse (blogpulse.com) differential crawls for March 2008, as well as Technorati (technorati.com) searches and Google Blog Search (blogsearch.google.com) searches to identify relevant blogs and, subsequently, to search particular keywords, phrases and items. It should be noted that the analysis is based upon weblinks (i.e. well-defined hyperlinks to other blogs and external websites) rather than individual stories or entries, as the latter can take many forms and are particularly difficult to disentangle. Hyperlinks are easier to identify and track. The appearance and propagation of links – URLs – will be the subject of the tracking process, and, following popular terminology, any blogs containing the URL in question are said to be *infected*.

More problematic is the framing of the community of blogs (should one exist) to be studied. The research project was primarily concerned with radical Islamic messages as they enter and disseminate within the UK. Yet, many blogs are not overtly or mainly political in this sense, but contain occasional such messages or reference to them. Similarly, a large anti-jihadist and anti-Islamic blogging community also exists which is far larger and more cohesive than the pro-Islamic blogging community, and many of the links appear on such sites.

Calling all Islamic blogs…

The task of gathering a set of broadly pro-Islamic-leaning political blog URLs was achieved by downloading listings from several online directories, including BlogCatalog, Blogorama, (the now defunct) BritBlog, eTalkingHead, and Technorati. The directories displayed very little overlap, indicating that bloggers are not registering their pages with a range of directories, and that, consequently, many blogs may exist that are not listed at all. To attempt to gather as many blog URLs as possible, and to be able to infer the size of the blogging community, in-depth keyword searches were performed over an extended period using Google Blog Search in order to fill in the gaps.

The URLs of anti-Islamic blogs were not deliberately gathered, despite their existence in much larger numbers. However, some of these reappeared during link counting, though largely because they cite pro-Islamic blog posts (rather than the other way around).

The number of blog URLs collected throughout February and March was 140. Compared with other political blogging communities this is not terribly high. As suspected, any pro-Islamic blogging community is likely to be still in its early stages of development in quantitative terms. However, the existence of Islamic blog-feed sites (sites that list recent posts across Islamic blogs in one place) indicates that the community is reaching something of a critical mass.

Retrieving a single 'front page' for each blog on a chosen day (25 March) was undertaken, and from this set of pages, all the in-text citations were counted to blogs that were not on the original list. These new blogs were added to the list of blogs. Pages for these additional blogs were retrieved at the same time, and the onward counting of hyperlinks was continued. Neither the labelling of blogs by blog directories,

which are often self-reported or automated categorisations, nor the assignation of labels manually, are 100 per cent accurate. However, given a community of at least 140 blogs, a few mislabelled or omitted blogs is unlikely to affect the results in any significant manner.

One important factor in the gathering of pro-Islamic URLs is that some are likely to be unstable. Those with a radical, perhaps violent, message are caught on the horns of a dilemma. Unlike criminal gangs who come together purely for self-interested purposes and can work in almost total secrecy through ICTs, part of the recruitment, dissemination and indoctrination process of religiously motivated groups requires the existence of a public face. This, however, must be balanced with the need to maintain immunity from detection, arrest, etc. by those antithetical to their message. Coupled with the fact that blogging is likely to be seen purely in instrumental terms by such users (rather than having intrinsic ends of its own as per the original blogging communities), many blogs are subject to change, rehosting, removal, and often lack of updating. Some of the blogs on the original list (Winds of Knowledge; al-Siraat al-Mustaqeen; A Safe Haven for Strangers; Some Wisdom; Radical Muslim; Inshallahshaheed; Join the Caravan; Sawtul Islam) were removed during the period of study. The reasons for this are unknown, though one site (Jawa Report) claimed responsibility for lobbying government to have hosting companies remove offensive blogs. Similarly, some blogs were not regularly updated, indicating only a passing interest in the blogging process as a tool for other ends. Those engaged in serious criminal activities are unlikely to post their efforts in the form of blog entries.

Existing research

Research on blogs is very limited. This is mostly due to their relative newness. Nevertheless, work has been done in a number of areas that is relevant to this project, if only for indicating broad methodological issues and parameters. Several are worthy of mention.

First, the existence of online tools for tracking blogging trends, such as BlogPulse (Blogdex and Daypop are now defunct). BlogPulse lists the topics and URLs currently being discussed in the blogosphere. Research using trend trackers has been conducted in order to identify communities of blogs citing the same URLs (though not to track the routes the information was taking).[3]

Second, various attempts at measuring the size of the blogosphere and the activity within it have been undertaken.[4]

Third, much research exists on the spread of true epidemics which has some relevance to the project in hand. However, the goals are often different, as the emphasis in epidemiological research is normally to track how far and how quickly infection will spread, as opposed to tracking its spread through the population.[5]

Fourth, of major use for large-scale tracking is recent research on inferring links between blogs where no overt hyperlinking exists.[6] However, with a small blog community, the tracking of infection is largely achievable by hand rather than employing similarity metrics and classifiers.

Fifth, research into the size and interconnectedness of Democratic and Republican bloggers during the 2004 US Presidential Election is of much relevance in terms of method.[7] However, two major differences exist between such research and this project. First, the classification of Republican and Democratic blogs is relatively straightforward. Second, the size of the blogging community is vastly superior (running at around 1,500 blogs). Similarly, single-issue tracking has been performed, such as the infection routes of discussion on political blogs of Australian Guantanamo detainee David Hicks.[8]

3. See Marlow, C., 'Classifying Emergent Communities through Diffusion', Sunbelt Social Network Conference XXIII, Cancun, Mexico, February 2003.
4. See, for instance, NILTE's www.blogcensus.net which reports 2,869,632 weblogs on the WWW (1.970.366 in English), and a further 3.373.662 weblogs to be explored.
5. See Pastor-Satorras, R. and Vespignani, A., 'Epidemic Spreading in Scale-Free Networks', *Physical Review Letters*, 86, 2001, pp.3200-3203.
6. Adar, E. and Adamic, L.A., 'Tracking Information Epidemics in Blogspace', Web Intelligence Proceedings, 2005, pp.207-214.
7. Adamic L. and Glance, N. ,'The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. Election: Divided They Blog', WWW 2005 Second Annual Workshop on the Weblogging Ecosystem: Aggregation, Analysis and Dynamics, Chiba, Japan, May 2005.
8. Bruns, A., 'Methodologies for Mapping the Political Blogosphere: An Exploration Using the IssueCrawler Research Tool', *First Monday*, 12, 5, May 2007. www.firstmonday.org/issues/issues12_5/bruns/index.html

Tracking URLs

The most straightforward method for tracking the spread of information across blogs is via the counting of URL links in order to construct a citation network. Tracing URLs back to the original source would give a useful picture of the spread of information.

In tracking URLs an important distinction needs to be made. This is between URLs cited in individual posts, and those listed on blogrolls. Blog-hosting sites often provide blogrolls – a list of links to other blogs and also to webpages. Bloggers use this to list their favourite sites, indicating readership, and perhaps virtual (or even real) friendships. Blogrolls are a constant bar at the side of the screen frame rather than being changed on a daily or by post basis. Often coupled with blogrolls is the trackback feature of many blog-hosting sites. Trackback allows automated reciprocal linking. So, for example, if Alice posts a link to Bert's blog, trackback will automatically inform Bert's blog of the link, and Bert's software will add a new link back to Alice. Blogroll and trackback have an important function for our purposes: they can illuminate the popularity and centrality of different participants within the given community.

However, for the purpose of trying to establish the lineage of blog content, and making judgements about who is drawing information from whom, and in what order, blogrolls are unhelpful. It should not be assumed that all publishers of the same information get their information from the same source. Infection is not necessarily linear. Therefore, for the purpose of tracking specific spreads or plumes of information, only links displayed in individual posts are counted. Moreover, given the relatively small community of pro-Islamic political blogs, it was decided to count in-post links over the period of January to April rather than simply on a specific day as is the norm in research such as that undertaken on the US Presidential Election of 2004. To do otherwise would give a linkage reading of virtually zero.

Similarly, the origin of some information will remain unexplained because of various factors that do not admit of simple tracking. Uncrawled or partially crawled blogs, information originating from external channels such as email, sms, or mass media; different URLs for the same page; and also deliberate removal of source information by authors (so as to retain traffic, for instance) all add to the complexity of tracking information spread.

Blog selection

To provide depth to the analysis it was decided to focus on the top 20 pro-leaning Islamic blogs from the list generated via the earlier searches. BlogPulse's index of blog posts was used to count up citations to the blogs on the list from 1 January 2008 to 30 April 2008. Other mechanisms and tools exist for ranking, such as Technorati and TheTruthLaidBear (which rely on link counts) and SiteMeter (which uses site traffic to rank blogs). All the available tools have virtues and drawbacks. Monitoring traffic does not differentiate unique visitors, only the total number of visits. Similarly, link counting relies on the freshness of links and can be manipulated by blog authors. The strength of BlogPulse for data harvesting is that it crawls blog pages and segments them into individual posts (rather than treating all posts on a page as a single whole). BlogPulse monitors a massive 78,703,197 blogs. Coverage is less than other tools because of its segmentation feature. Segmentation is a straightforward task where a blog has a full-content feed, but less straightforward where there exist only partial feeds or no feed at all. To overcome this BlogPulse uses a model-based wrapper to extract individual posts.[9]

Table 1 shows the citation count and overall rank among all blogs for the top 20 list. Also included for each blog in the top 20 cited is the number of posts within the period January–April, and the number of times the blog is listed within the blogroll of other blogs within the wider community of blogs.

Table 1: Citation count and overall rank of top 20 blogs

Rank	Cites	# Posts	Blog name	Roll
1	121	179	Ali Eteraz	4
2	114	730	Islam in Europe	0
3	88	1961	Angry Arab News Service	2
4	60	66	Indigo Jo Blogs/Blogistan	8
5	33	-	Daily Terror	1
6	32	9	Yahya Birt	13
7	22	89	Mujahideen Ryder's Blog	4
8	21	27	Rolled up Trousers	5
9	20	-	Itjema	2
10	16	49	Saifudin	0
= 11	15	36	The White Path	1
= 11	15	62	Gardens of Paradise	3
13	13	20	Ahmed's World of Islam	4
14	12	28	Unique Muslimah	2
15	11	33	AE	1
16	10	53	Knowledge Seeker	0
17	9	22	Imam Johari	0
18	8	67	Sheikhy Notes	1
= 19	7	1	Islamic Thinkers Society	2
= 19	7	39	MAQASID	2

9. See Adamic and Glance., op. cit., p.7; and, www.blogpulse.com

It should be noted that the rankings generated by BlogPulse are from overall citations, and not from other blogs within the list. Consequently, many of the citations are by more general or opposing blogs. It should also be noted that the number of citations is small. As a comparison, the Jawa Report blog which monitors political Islam had 1,150 citations for the same period. Clearly, the community of Islamic bloggers who post on political matters is small, interacts a little within itself, and is not listened to by bloggers external to it as much as the external bloggers listen to themselves.

Some blogs, despite having a higher citation rate on BlogPulse, were omitted because of their emphasis on specific issues – for example, the Israeli-Arab conflict, but which made little or no reference to matters outside of that arena.

The community of bloggers is relatively small, though there is clearly overlapping activity and interrelations amongst them. A social network of Islamic-leaning blogs that post on political networks exists, though

how much credence should be placed upon this network is an open question.

Within the review period there were a total of 3,499 posts by the top 20 sites (though over half of these were by the prolific Angry Arab News Service), and they were cited across the blogosphere 641 times. This is not a massive number compared with some blogging communities (compare with the Jawa Report's 1,150 citations for the same period), though it is clearly at a sufficient level to describe it as a community or social network without stretching either of those terms too far. It should also be remembered that only English-language blogs have been listed. The incorporation of blogs in other languages is likely to increase the size of this community. Some filtration from Arabic blogs is evident in the English-language blogs.[10]

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10. See Roy, O., *Globalised Islam: In Search of the Ummah*, for an increasing trend in Arabic texts being translated in Saudi Arabia and exported rather than being translated in the West.
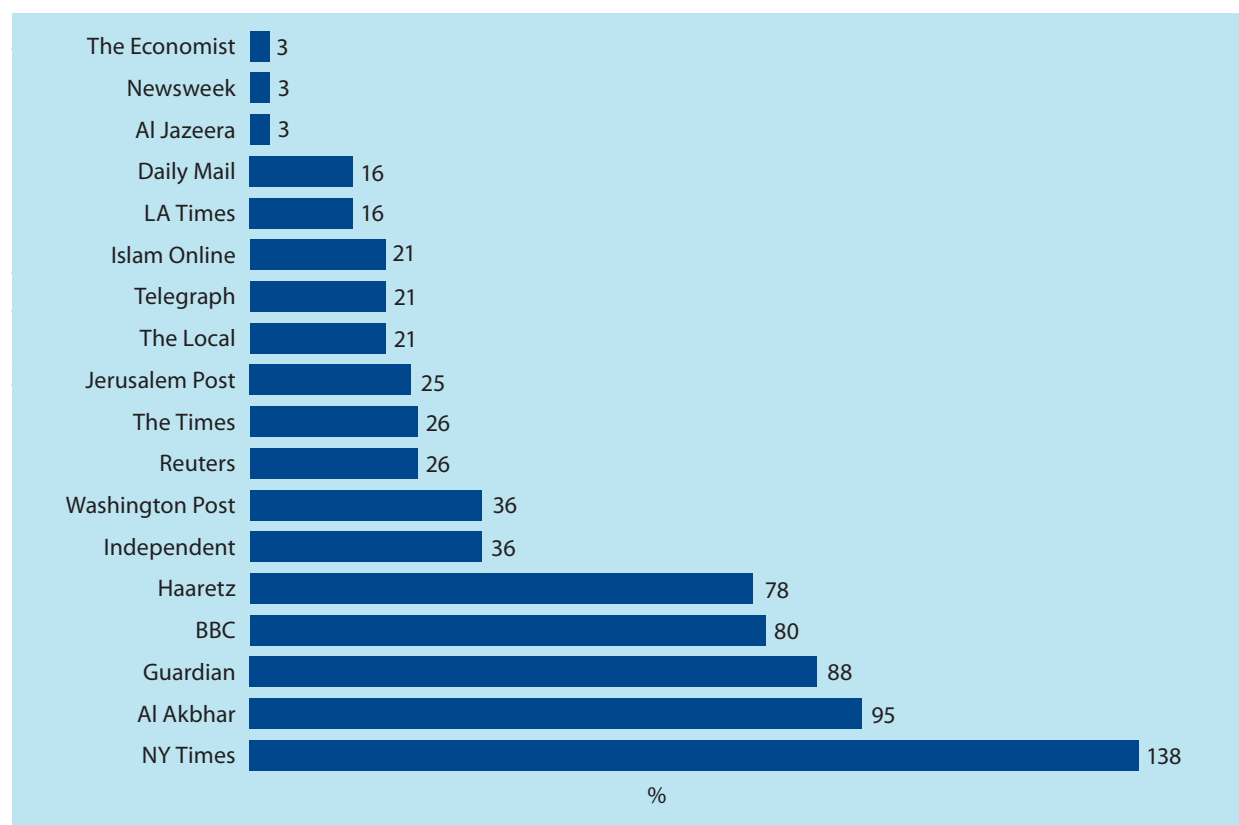
Interaction with other media

So far the emphasis has been on measuring blog-to-blog (b-2-b) activity (citations). However, even more common than links to other blogs are links to news articles and other websites (blog-to-webpage). This is interesting in terms of where the blogging community in question turns in order to find its reports and material.

Often blogs reproduce entire news stories (literally cut-n-paste) with little or no commentary (and often no citation). Nevertheless, sufficient citations exist to give a coarse-grained picture of where information is being drawn from. Figure 1 illustrates the use of the wider online media for material.

The blogging community in question draws most of its material from typical mainstream media. The results are skewed slightly by the presence of replication-type blogs that tend to publish news articles in full from a variety of sources, and are often US in focus or location (e.g. Angry Arab). For example, Angry Arab has a heavy emphasis on the *New York Times*, *Al Akbhar*, and *Haaretz*. Excluding these from the picture gives a sense of much UK-focused material being drawn from *The Guardian*, the BBC, *The Times* and *The Independent*. Very little material is drawn (within the English-language blogs) from Islamic-focused media such as Al Jazeera, or Islam Online. Most of the bloggers, it would seem (so far as it is possible to tell) are BBC watchers/readers and *Guardian* readers.

Figure 1: *Online sources of material*

Source	%
The Economist	3
Newsweek	3
Al Jazeera	3
Daily Mail	16
LA Times	16
Islam Online	21
Telegraph	21
The Local	21
Jerusalem Post	25
The Times	26
Reuters	26
Washington Post	36
Independent	36
Haaretz	78
BBC	80
Guardian	88
Al Akbhar	95
NY Times	138

BlogPulse's own 'Conversation Tracker' tool

One virtue of blogs is the ability to track conversations on particular subjects as they are picked up and republished or elaborated upon by other blogs. From this it is possible to gain a sense of the relative hierarchy of blogs within a community (who reads who). Much of this can be measured by hand – counting entries, comparing posting times and dates, and using trackback to assemble a plume tree. However, of particular use is BlogPulse's Conversation Tracker. Entry of a conversation seed allows BlogPulse to look for all blog entries across the blogoshpere. BlogPulse tracks conversations by indexing the full content of weblog posts. First, BlogPulse technology crawls the blog, and then it segments the blog into individual posts and identifies permalinks. The Archbishop of Canterbury's lecture on Sharia law in the UK caused a large ripple across the entire political blogosphere. The following BlogPulse Conversation Tracker lists the blogs where it was reported, and the chain of debate that resulted from it. Several blogs (mainly opposed to Sharia) can be seen to be consistently dominant in reporting the story and commenting upon it (Jawa Report; Little Green Footballs; Volokh Conspiracy).

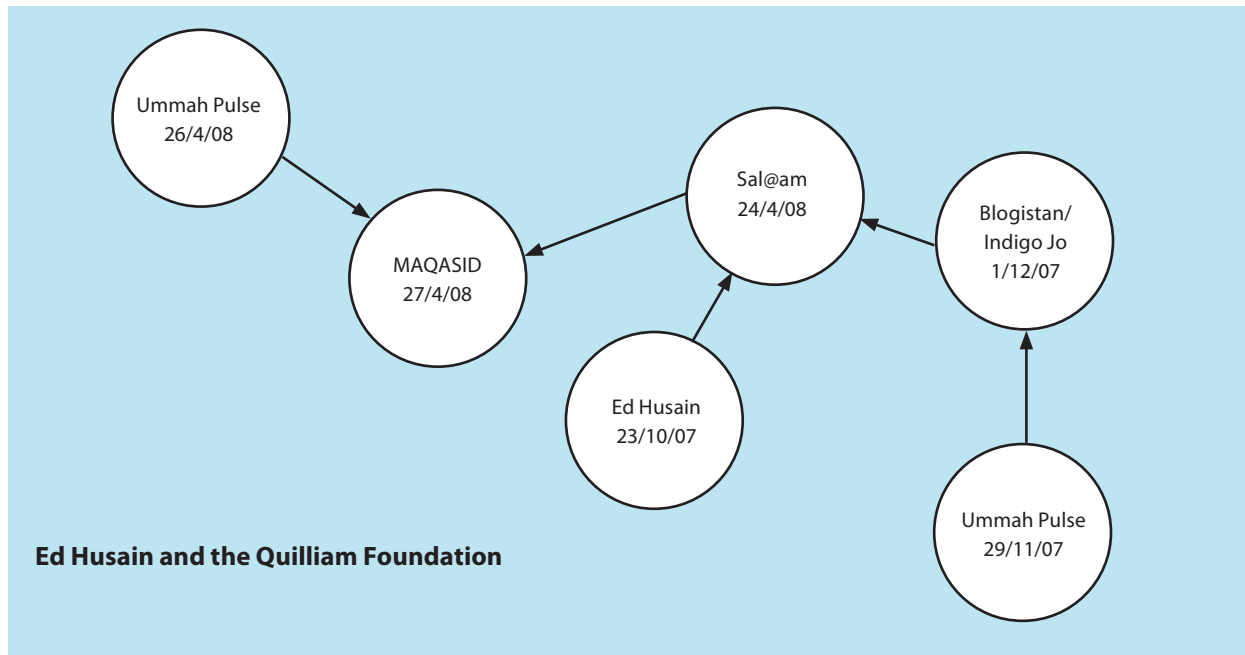### *Table 2:   Blogs reporting the Archbishop of Canterbury's lecture on Sharia law*

- 07/02/2008   Archbishop of Canterbury: Sharia in UK is 'Unavoidable' (from: Little Green Footballs)
- 07/02/2008   Anglican Dhimmi: Time for Sharia in Britain (from: The Jawa Report)
    - 07/02/2008   Prince Purveyor of P.C. Pounced by Pun (from: snapped shot)
- 08/02/2008   Calls for Archbishop to Resign Over 'Sharia' Remark (from: Little Green Footballs)
    - 09/02/2008   Críticas y apoyos al arzobispo de Canterbury (Act.) (from: Spanish Pundit)
- 08/02/2008   The Archbishop of Canterbury and Sharia Law: (from: The Volokh Conspiracy)
    - 08/02/2008   You're Doing it Wrong. Again. (from: The Line is Here)
    - 09/02/2008   Rowan Williams Steps in It Again (from: Silly Little Country)
    - 14/02/2008   The Archbishop of Cant (from: The Cloakroom)
- 08/02/2008   Sharia Law Enforced in Texas! (from: The Volokh Conspiracy)
    - 08/02/2008   Friday, February 08, 2008 (from: miss_o_hara's Xanga)
    - 08/02/2008   I read Redoubt's (from: redneckin)
    - 08/02/2008   US Enforcement of Sharia Law (from: Esoteric Appeal)
    - 08/02/2008   Saudi Law Applied in Texas, Minnesota Courts (from: Crossroads Arabia)
        - 08/02/2008   Saudi, Sharia Laws Applied in US Courts (from: OTB Logo)
        - 08/02/2008   Interesting News - 8 February 2008 (from: Wolf Howling)
    - 09/02/2008   US top law officer rules out adoption of Sharia... (from: My Weblog)
    - 19/02/2008   Press coverage of a Texas case involving an Islamic tribunal chosen through an arbitration clause (from: the Supreme Court of Texas blog)
- 08/02/2008   Shari'a: The Borg Of Jurisprudence (from: Captain's Quarters)
    - 11/02/2008   Daily Blog Buzz: Sharia in the UK? (from: WorldwideStandard.com)
        - 11/02/2008   The British Are Special (from: WorldwideStandard.com)
    - 11/03/2008   Slouching toward Constantinople (from: Pro Cynic)
- 08/02/2008   —Purple Avenger (from: Ace of Spades HQ)
- 08/02/2008   British Sharia Courts (from: The Jawa Report)
    - 08/02/2008   Sharia Fearmongering (from: The Newshoggers)
- 09/02/2008   British Journalists Dig Sharia (from: Little Green Footballs)
- 09/02/2008   British Journalist Admires Sharia (from: The Jawa Report)
    - 09/02/2008   Bearded Cleric Wants Equality Between Sharia and Common Law in Britain (from: Snake Oil Baron)

- 10/02/2008   Sorta Blogless Sunday Pinup (from: Pirate's Cove)
- 09/02/2008   Archbishop Williams roundup (from: Dean's World)
- 09/02/2008   Rebel without a clause (from: The Belmont Club)
- 17/02/2008   A Holy Fool (from: Auspundits)
- 10/02/2008   The United Kingdom Used To Be A Free Country , Right …. (from: Ace of Spades HQ)
- 10/02/2008   "My sentence was reduced to beheading" (from: The Belmont Club)
- 10/02/2008   Sharia for Britain (from: Yourish.com)
- 11/02/2008   Hitchens: To Hell With the Archbishop of Canterbury (from: Little Green Footballs)
- 14/02/2008   Spencer: No Valentines For You! (from: Jihad Watch)
- 14/02/2008   a-w-w-w (from: DogfightAtBankstown)
- 14/02/2008   OBAMA: The shallowness below the soaring rhetoric (from: A scratch area)
- 15/02/2008   Dissecting Leftism (from: Dissecting Leftism)
- 16/02/2008   OBAMA: The shallowness below the soaring rhetoric (from: Astuteblogger)
- 16/02/2008   O amor é blasfemo (from: BLASFÉMIAS)
- 18/02/2008   No Valentines for you! (from: anchorite)
- 16/102/2008   UK Muslims to protest "bias, prejudice, xenophobia and even borderline racism" – that is, anti-jihad efforts (from: Jihad Watch)
- 16/02/2008   UK Muslims To Protest (from: The Iconoclast - New English Review)
- 08/03/2008   Agents of Intolerant Tolerance (from: JudgeBob)
- 17/02/2008   Britain's 'Islamic Bonds' (from: Little Green Footballs)
- 19/02/2008   Newsweek-WaPo: Archbishop of Canterbury Was Right (from: Little Green Footballs)
- 17/03/2008   Spencer: Complicity in Iran's Anti-Gay Jihad (from: Jihad Watch)
- 14/04/2008   Catholic churches coming to Saudi Arabia? (from: Winds of Change.NET)

Tracking various stories is fairly straightforward, especially within a given community of bloggers. A further example is the recent activity concerning the newly founded Quilliam Foundation by former Islamist Ed Husain. This has been the subject of a degree of conversation and debate amongst Islamic bloggers, some of whom refer to each other. This provides a nice case-study example of the conversation amongst bloggers. UmmahPulse wrote a commentary on the newly announced Quilliam Foundation and Ed Husain, entitled 'The Transferable Egos of Ed Husain, Maajid Nawaz and Ziauddin Sardar' on 26 April. The piece was republished on MAQASID

on the 27 April and followed by a further commentary entitled 'A Call to Shaykh Babikr Ahmed Babikr to dissociate himself from the Quilliam Foundation.' This referenced entries on the noticeboard at the Sal@am discussion board dated from 24 April. Sal@am, in turn, lists further commentaries from other blogs, including Indigo Jo Blogs/Blogistan on Ed Husain from 1/12/07 and TraditionalIslamism from 9/3/08. Sal@am also references Ed Husain's own blog entry on gender from 23/10/07. Indigo Jo's post also refers to an earlier discussion post about Ed Husain on UmmahPulse from 29/11/07. Represented pictorially, the infection tree looks something like Figure 2.

Figure 2: **Example of blogging activity concerning the Quilliam Foundation**

Ed Husain and the Quilliam Foundation

Conclusions and further work

The purpose of this study has been to measure the size of the community of Islamic (pro-leaning) bloggers who post, in English, on topics pertaining to politics in and about the UK. Second, to gain an indicative understanding of the level of social networking amongst that community and to provide some form of hierarchical structure to it.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this. A network of Islamic bloggers who post on UK-related politics does exist; it shows evidence of inter-member communication – via infection routes, citations, and blogrolling; and it draws overwhelmingly for its information from mainstream media sources. By comparative standards these levels are still relatively small. If this community follows the pattern of other blogging communities, then it is likely to increase in size over the coming years. The hierarchy of blog sites

indicates some very prolific posters at the upper end and some less prolific ones at the bottom end – there is a large spread between the top 20. Also of note is the fact that the blogs within the top 20 include some that post on UK politics in English from outside the UK. The community, such as it is, is not fully hemmed in by geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, some of the interlocutors within various blog conversations do not figure highly on the top 20 list. For example, UmmahPulse and Yahya Birt are influential blogs which are likely to include perceptions of current events, but which do not score highly on many of the measures used. Similarly, Muslims in the UK publishes some interesting material by radical authors, but is hardly referred to.