

The EDL: moving right-wing populism online in the UK

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CASS

Corpus Approaches
to Social Science

CASS: Briefings

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About CASS...

The ESRC funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) is a research centre based at Lancaster University which aims to bring the methods and benefits of the corpus approach to other disciplines.

From the Centre Director

The corpus approach harnesses the power of computers to allow analysts to work to produce machine aided analyses of large bodies of language data - so-called *corpora*. Computers allow us to do this on a scale and with a depth that would typically defy analysis by hand and eye alone.

In doing so, we gain unprecedented insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. The centre's work is generating such insights into a range of important social issues like climate change, hate crime and education. This series of briefings aims to spread the social impact and benefits of the work being done by the centre and, in so doing, encourage others to use our methods in future.

Prof. Tony McEnergy



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Right-wing populist political movements espouse a political ideology which rejects existing political consensus and appeals to 'the common people' as opposed to the elite. Such groups, variously referred to as 'radical right', 'far right', 'extreme right', 'anti-immigrant', 'neo-nazi', 'national populist', etc., have been growing in strength across Europe in recent years.

In the UK, the English Defence League (EDL) is a far-right street protest movement opposing what it considers to be a spread of (extreme) Islamism and Sharia law in the UK. The EDL evolved out of football hooliganism, styles itself as a pseudo-paramilitary organisation, and has been described as Islamophobic.

The EDL is mainly active online, relying on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter as platforms for political activism, dissemination, organising demonstrations, and recruiting new members. The group's leader, Tommy Robinson, stood down in October 2013 but the organisation remains active still, with 165,000 Facebook supporters.

The aim of this research is to analyse the discourses that the EDL hierarchy construct on their official website and to study how those discourses differ from those produced by supporters on social media.

Data were collected between February 2011 and August 2013 from two sources: the official website of the EDL and the EDL's official Facebook page. A separate corpus was constructed from each source in order to contrast discourses of the group's hierarchy (official website) and the group's supporters (Facebook page). Data from the official website was drawn from 340 general 'news' articles and amounted to a corpus of 326,216 words. This was called the EDL-Elite corpus. Data from the Facebook page was taken from 56 'comment threads' where users are invited to discuss a particular topic which was used to create a corpus 326,188 words in size. This was called the EDL-Facebook corpus.

Frequency lists

By observing word frequency lists, it is possible to see what themes or patterns frequently reoccur in the corpora.

Table 1 shows the top 20 most frequent words in both the EDL-Elite and EDL-Facebook corpora. The EDL-Elite data appears to reveal a focus on Islamic extremism, Britain, Tommy Robinson (former EDL leader), and the government. In contrast, the EDL-Facebook data has no focus on extremism or Tommy Robinson.

EDL-Elite				EDL-Facebook			
#	Word	#	Word	#	Word	#	Word
1	EDL	11	British	1	people	11	edl
2	Islam	12	right	2	Islam	12	islam
3	People	13	country	3	Muslims	13	hate
4	Islamic	14	government	4	country	14	man
5	Muslim	15	time	5	Muslim	15	woman
6	Muslims	16	radical	6	muslims	16	British
7	extremism	17	extremists	7	EDL	17	English
8	Tommy	18	Britain	8	religion	18	scum
9	police	19	threat	9	muslim	19	white
10	community	20	demonstration	10	racist	20	government

Table 1. 20 most frequent words in EDL-Elite and EDL-Facebook

A number of similarities exist between the corpora. Words pertaining to religion and religious identity (*muslim, muslims, and islam*) and nation (*British, country*), as well the words *people* and *government* are frequent in both corpora.

Extremism, radical, and extremists are all frequent in the EDL-Elite corpus, suggesting the EDL hierarchy focuses on radical forms of Islam, whereas supporters on Facebook do not distinguish between radical and non-radical forms.

Other differences are evident when the EDL-Facebook frequency list is observed. Words such as *racist*, *hate*, *man*, *woman*, *white*, *scum* and *religion* appear on the list while being absent from the EDL-Elite column. This may indicate that supporters of the EDL discuss issues related to race, while the hierarchy do not. Discourse on gender may also be present. Furthermore, words such as *hate* and *scum* may indicate the language is less guarded and more derogatory than that used by the hierarchy.

The EDL's mission statement declares that they are opposed to radical Islam. However, by problematising Islam and Muslims, the supporters make no distinction between moderate and extremist forms of Islam; consequently xenophobic discourses of the hierarchy influences and generates racist and bigoted discourses by the supporters.

Keyword lists

Keywords - statistically salient words found by comparing a word frequency list from one corpus against a frequency list from another (Sketch Engine's enTenTen (2012) was used to compare) - were also examined (see Tables 2 and 3).

The hierarchy appear to focus on Islamic radicalism and Muslim extremists, as well as discussing street protests and the opposition they encounter at such events.

Theme	Word
Religion	<i>halal, ideology, Islam, Islamic, mosque, mosques, Muslim, Muslims, non-Muslim, religion, Sharia</i>
Extremism and threat	<i>extremism, extremists, fascism, hatred, radical, terrorist, terrorists, threat, violence</i>
Society	<i>Britain, British, communities, community, demonstration, demonstrations, EDL, freedom, freedoms, Luton, peaceful, police</i>
People	<i>Cameron, Tommy Robinson</i>

Table 2. Keywords in the EDL-Elite corpus

Although the hierarchy claim not to be against Islam, it is problematised, as in the following corpus extracts:

- The government needs to change the way in which the police treat radical Muslims.*
- None of this implies that we should start treating all Muslims as extremists.*
- Not every Muslim is a terrorist, just as not every critic of Islam is an 'Islamophobe'.*
- Our quarrel is with extremism, with those who encourage it and with those who refuse to stand against it – not with ordinary Muslims.*
- I don't think it's fair to say that we're simply 'anti-Islam' - we're opposed to the terrible things that Islam has brought with it - the support for terrorism, the oppression of women, the intolerance of other religions and other lifestyles, the self-imposed isolation and rejection of the most basic British values.*

The hierarchy simultaneously appear to label Islam negatively and claim not to be anti-Muslim. Supporters, however, produce more overtly discriminatory rhetoric in reaction to elite posts.

Theme	Word
Religion	<i>Allah, Christian, Christianity, Christians, cult, Islam, Islamic, Mohammed, Muhammed, Muslim, Muslims, quran, Religion, Sharia,</i>
Derogatory terms and threat	<i>barbaric, brainwashed, dirty, fight, hate, hell, kill, pig, piss, racist, scum, sick, twat, vile</i>
Society	<i>Britain, British, Cameron, country, EDL, England, English, girls, street, UAF</i>
Food	<i>bacon, eat, halal, meat, pig, pork</i>

Table 3. Keywords in the EDL-Facebook corpus

The EDL supporters appear to focus on creating a Christian/Islam dichotomy. A large number of derogatory terms are salient, as are words associated with halal food, as the Facebook posters construct an in-group and out-group, focusing on differences. The following Facebook posts demonstrate that they make little distinction between radical and non-radical Muslims:

- *The image I see is that our great heroes who fought for our freedom would be discusted at what is happening to our beautiful country, and islam is worse than cancer and wants irradicating asap as it only brings suffering and sadness.*
- *I'm not racist. Never will be. Just hate the way Muslims are taking over our country.*
- *The muslim grooming gangs are epidemic.*
- *if you think the moderate Muslims in Britain are the real Muslims then you are wrong , the real Muslims are the radical ones*
- *The difference being that when a white man is jailed for it we all applaud, when a muslim man is jailed, we just get the victimhood and race card*

EDL hierarchy construct ideological discourse wherein Western culture is deemed tolerant and progressive and Islam is constructed as intolerant and backward. Accordingly, the EDL supporters construct themselves as protectors of Western society against what is considered to be the barbaric primitive culture of Islam. Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as acceptable as Muslims are associated with rape, paedophilia, incest, terrorism, the oppression of women and a threat to the existence of traditional British culture.

Media representations

The EDL hierarchy claim to oppose radical Islam; however, their rhetoric quickly descends into Islamophobia and racial hatred in the discussions had by supporters. The EDL promotes exclusion, division and racism while thriving on confrontation and social tensions.

In the wake of 9-11 and 7-7, anti-Muslim prejudice has also been strong within British media and the EDL hierarchy has drawn on articles featuring negative representations in the mainstream media in order to fuel the hatred of supporters on social media, who articulate a more extreme form of racial hatred. For example, a link to an article in The Guardian, 'Extremist Religion is at root of 21st-century wars, says Tony Blair', was posted on the EDL's Facebook page. The 169 comments can be summarised as:

- Blair (and all politicians) blamed for ruining country/illegal wars/mass immigration
- Extremist left-wing ideology blamed for third-world immigration
- British working class suffer as a result of mass immigration
- Immigration to the UK must be stopped
- Islam is a medieval religion
- Sharia Law is a foreign legal code which persecutes women and children, is cruel to animals and a crime against humanity
- Islam must be eradicated from the UK

Thus it can be seen how mainstream media is used to initiate multiple discourses which propagate central ideological themes of the EDL and its supporters.

Conclusions

- Islam is constructed as an intolerant religion, incompatible with western values, hostile to human rights and democracy, and as a religion of conquest.
- Discourses of ethno-nationalism, cultural racism, anti-politicisation are established.
- There is a feeling that common (working class) people are ignored. Scapegoats used to explain national decline.
- Prejudiced construction of Muslims in mainstream media is used by EDL's hierarchy to fuel hatred among supporters who dehumanise Muslims.
- EDL hierarchy focus on radical Muslims, supporters do not. There is a lack of management, therefore politics and discourses less controlled.

EDL supporters construct a continuum of discourses ranging from demanding that minorities be protected against the injustices of Sharia Law courts to hate-filled Islamophobes. There also exists pessimism about the UK's future, worries about immigration, and high levels of joblessness. This is tied together with a proactive pride in Britain, British history and values, which they see as being under attack from Islam.

Various forms of right-wing populism are likely to continue due to the socio-economic environment of Europe and North America. The future of the English Defence League is less certain. Since the departure of the founder, there have been leadership changes and a splintering of the group by certain more extremist elements.

Furthermore, the growth of the UKIP and Britain First Party - who use similar methods of outreach and activism as the EDL - may encourage members of the EDL to shift their support to other populist groups which attempt to position themselves as more mainstream. Regardless of the status of the EDL, racist, extremist elements are likely to remain in society, and it is the hope that studies such as this are able to contribute towards challenging such groups and the rhetoric they wish to propagate.

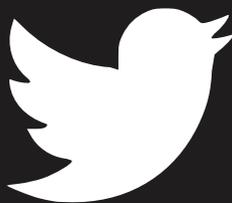
Part of our aim at CASS is to make Corpus Linguistics accessible, which is why we have created our **free online FutureLearn course**. With the course, we aim to demonstrate that corpus approaches can offer researchers from all disciplines unique, valuable insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. We provide all you need to start 'doing' Corpus Linguistics yourself.

This briefing should act as an introduction and companion to the course where you will begin to apply the concepts and methods mentioned here in a practical way relevant to your field of interest.

The course is free, can be done from home, and comes with a whole range of content and support from world-leading scholars in the field of Corpus Linguistics. For more, visit:

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