

# Exceptional and banal constructions of British muslims in Grenfell: Social boundaries, twitter, superdiversity and online vernacular memory

Joseph Downing 

Department of Politics, History and International Relations, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

## Correspondence

Joseph Downing, Senior lecturer in international relations and politics, Department of Politics, History and International Relations, Aston University, Birmingham, UK.  
Email: [j.s.downing@aston.ac.uk](mailto:j.s.downing@aston.ac.uk)

## Funding information

H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, Grant/Award Number: 703613

## Abstract

The Grenfell fire catapulted North Kensington into the spotlight, an area both synonymous with immigration and social policy innovation for over a century. However, it remains under examined how this extraordinary event re-defined the discursive landscape around British Muslims and how they have been situated in the national landscape. To do this it analyses the twitter activity in the 96 hours after the fire and also the victim profiles published in the Guardian Newspaper. It finds that the narratives that emerge blur British Muslim social boundaries through narratives both around the exceptional and banal narratives which emerged during and after the fire. This constructs British Muslims as both saviours during Grenfell, and also as a super-diverse population that resists topologizing as predominantly South Asian. This article also raises broader questions about the not only the role that social media has in the creation of vernacular memory, and also that in this case twitter was importantly not a conduit for the fake news and hate speech created against British Muslims during Grenfell.

## KEYWORDS

British Muslims, Discourse Analysis, Grenfell, Twitter

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Author. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* published by Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

## INTRODUCING GRENFELL AS A LENS INTO CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MUSLIMNESS

The early hours of the 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017 would shake British politics and its guiding doctrines of austerity and public services for profit to their core. Rooted in a doctrine of austerity since the 2008 financial crisis, atrophied by the Thatcher government right to buy legislation enacted as part of the Housing Act of 1980, the Grenfell tragedy laid bare failings of generations of politicians to improve the lot of social housing tenants across the country. These key themes emerged in both public and political discourse in the aftermath of the fire as country as a whole was forced to reflect on how a ‘*vertical village*’ in the wealthiest borough of Europe’s richest city, which has received a six-million-pound refit, had now become a social housing death-trap.

However, aside from the more obvious social policy and political economy implications of the disaster, Grenfell has far more-wide ranging social and political consequences. It has become a rallying cry for a new generation of activism both in North Kensington and beyond. Additionally, and somewhat neglected thus far are the implications that Grenfell has for notions of lived multiculturalism and superdiversity in contemporary Britain. As global attention would focus on the tower, North Kensington and the social and political context of the UK, light would be shone on the everyday British multiculturalism. However, the particularities of Grenfell would mean that this focus would be particularly sharp on one community, already so central to ongoing discussion about British nationhood; British Muslims. This is where this paper seeks to intervene within the context of Grenfell to argue that the fire paradoxically constructed British Muslims both through narratives of the ‘exceptional’ in the unique context of a major disaster, and also through the ‘banal’ aspects of their daily lives and biographies.

While the fire occurred in an area of ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec, 2007) owing to generations of inward migration to the area, British Muslims would feature most prominently in discourses created in the wake of the fire. The North Kensington area has an established history for both poverty and diversity since its urbanisation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; caused by an influx of Irish and West Indian migrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, further arrivals of those from Mediterranean countries such as Morocco, Spain and Portugal in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (de Haas et al., 2011) with asylum seekers and refugees arriving from across the world in more recent years. The later waves of migration involved significant numbers of Muslims from a range of national, religious and political contexts. However, it is the Moroccans who are most associated with the area, coming mainly from the “*Larache region*” of northern Morocco (de Haas et al., 2011, p.7) which in turn explains how the tower itself became colloquially known as the ‘*Moroccan tower*’ shortly after its construction (Graham-Harrison, 2017). This association of the area with a large Muslim population quickly appeared in the broader public discourse on the subject;

‘if it wasn’t for all these young Muslim boys round here, helping us, coming from Mosque, people would have dead, nuff more people would have dead. Nuff more people there, they want to talk about them when they are doing wrong, and all this kind of things, when they doing bad, when they doing good they were the first people with bags of water giving to people, helping people, running and telling people’  
(The Sun, 2017)

Here, this woman’s dramatic testimony from the kerbside of North Kensington in the immediate aftermath of the fire directly reference a) not only that the area has an established Muslim population and Muslim institutions (a Mosque in this case) but b) she engages directly with, and contests, the dominant political discussions of the time which have framed British Muslims as a threat to national identity and security which requires regulation, surveillance and control. As the both the fire, and relief effort in the coming days and weeks, unfolded, both traditional global media and social media alike would consistently reference the local areas



Muslim population and their contribution to relief both during and after the fire. It is in this context that this paper seeks to intervene to investigate how the narratives created by Grenfell in both traditional and social media contribute to contemporary constructions of British Muslims.

This is an important intervention because of several interrelated reasons. Grenfell as an event was heavily 'editorialised' even before the fire was extinguished (Joseph Watson, 2017). However, this means that as well as Grenfell becoming a key ideological battleground for contending vision of the political economy of welfare in the UK, it also became an ideological battleground for those on the far right who sought to use the fire to further stigmatise British Muslims. For example the conspiracy theory website 'infowars' was quick to publish an article that spread on twitter detailing how Muslims celebrated the fire as revenge for British foreign policy in Iraq and blamed the fire on the chickens of colonialism coming home to roost (Joseph Watson, 2017). This is rendered even more relevant when considering the dominant conceptions of social media as a vector for creating and spreading narratives that enable the far right. It has been argued that social media has been central in 'meming' into existence Donald Trump (Nussbaum, 2017) in an election where significant numbers of individuals believed fake news stories spread on social media platforms (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This poses the important question what kinds of discourse would social media facilitate in creating and spreading in such an ideologically charged situation as the Grenfell fire when discussing such a politicised and securitized population as British Muslims?

Thus, here insights can be gleaned about British Muslims from the perspective of not only their social roles in British society, but also how their social boundaries are constructed. This stems from the specifics of the situation on the ground, occurring in June 2017 during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month. This actually meant many Muslim residents of the tower were awake when the fire broke out and were first on the scene at around 01:00 in the morning as this fell between the nightly opening and closing of the fast before sunrise. Furthermore, this meant these residents, as a function of the fire occurring at that time of day in that particular month were pushed into roles as the first responders who went through the building, waking up many other residents, and being rightly credited as saving lives because of their actions.

Additionally, driven by horrific ineptitude of the local authority and national government and the specific geographical position of North Kensington, the relief effort in the following days became dominated by spontaneous efforts and work of transnational aid agencies such as Islamic Relief. Furthermore, important in this were the local sites that provided space both for displaced residents to sleep and aid activities to be coordinated, giving local mosques and Muslim organisations - as well as churches and leisure centres - prime position in media narratives about the fire's aftermath. This was in significant contrast to the usual 'securitised' (Cesari, 2013; Downing et al., 2015; Eroukhmanoff, 2015; Mavelli, 2013) forms of media attention given to British Muslims, which has been found to overwhelmingly focus on security, terror, extremism and debates about best policy response to these issues (Moore et al., 2008).

Social media was not the only important site of discourse that comes out of the Grenfell fire. More established media outlets such as the Guardian newspaper heavily publicised the victims of the fire (Guardian, 2017) and their biographical information. This is important because 44 of the victims were British Muslims, with origins in 10 countries outside of the UK with only one family have roots in South Asia. Thus, this victimhood offers important insights into the contemporary 'superdiversity' of the British Muslim population, something that is underexplored both conceptually and empirically. It is well established that in the sociological and political literature 'British Muslim' is conflated with the numerically dominant communities from South Asia, namely Pakistan and Bangladesh (Modood, 2006; Moore et al., 2008). Yet, the Grenfell tragedy, by placing a focus on an area such as North Kensington nuances notions of *British-Muslimness* by offering a lens on British Muslims that is not associated with the dominant



media coverage of them as security concerns and vectors of religious extremism (Moore et al., 2008).

Rather, Grenfell occurring June 2017 render this moment all the more important as the disaster occurred during Ramadan, the holy month. This actually meant many Muslim residents of the tower were awake when the fire broke out and were first on the scene at around 01:00 in the morning as this fell between the nightly opening and closing of the fast before sunrise. Furthermore, this meant these residents, as a function of the fire occurring at that time of day in that particular month were pushed into roles as the first responders who went through the building, waking up many other residents, and being rightly credited as saving lives because of their actions.

## CONCEPTUALISING BRITISH MUSLIMS, GRENFELL AND VERNACULAR MEMORY

It is clear from the outset that in bringing an inter-disciplinary approach to bear on an emerging and complex feature of the social-political landscape that this paper requires utilization of a number of literatures. This is also in part because this paper seeks to answer both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ questions regarding the creation of narratives about British Muslims on social media. In this regard it is important to understand both what is said, in terms of discourses and narratives that are created, and also how these messages spread across social networks. The first step on this road is to understand the current context of the dominant discourses around British Muslims and how as a group they are constructed. This draws on literature about both the specifics of the British Muslim experience and how it is covered, but also the more theoretical literature on social boundaries and the mechanisms through which they are constructed. Secondly, it is also important to understand how online platforms are important sites for the creation of forms of vernacular and how current accounts lack the ability to account for the means by which social media platforms are accounted for here. This is important because online vernacular memory has entered its 2.0 phase with the increased use of social media platforms – it is no longer limited to two-dimensional website online memorials, but its construction now occurs interactively, from the bottom up, across large social networks.

The very discussion of a ‘Muslim’ group raises the spectre of essentialism – it is important to argue that neither ‘Muslim’ nor ‘British Muslim’ are deployed here unproblematically. The very use of these terms opens a conceptual ‘*can of worms*’. The word ‘Muslim’ should not be used to reinforce unitary and homogenous understandings of social, economic, cultural and political realities of over a billion individuals, where some are religiously devout and others entirely secular. Here ‘Islam’ is often used in both scholarship and popular discourse as an explanatory framework that overrides all other social, political and economic factors in a very deterministic manor (Semanti, 2011). Furthermore, in a more defined, narrow political sense, the idea of being ‘Muslim’ is deployed with diverse meanings within the central state in Europe (Adamson, 2011). This paper must remain open to a diversity of expressions of notions of British Muslims and their positions vis-à-vis social boundaries in British society. While this is easier said than done, this task is helped by well-developed body of literature on the formation of social boundaries in relation to minority communities (Alba, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Bhabha, 2006). The relational concept of the brightening and blurring of social boundaries (Alba, 2005) best suites a discussion centred on British Muslims and Grenfell; in its original conception it highlights ways in which Muslims are constructed as religious, but also ethnic and racial minorities and how their relations with broader notions of national identity are structured, which can occur as the ‘brightening’ of boundaries. For Alba, a ‘bright’ boundary is where there is “*no ambiguity in the location of individuals with respect to it*” (Alba, 2005;24) and as such, through processes of social construction, a boundary that is sharp, concrete and

difficult for individuals to transgress. This contains a clear sentiment that “*they are not like us because ...*” (Alba, 2005;22) which is clearly seen in the context of extremism where Islamist terrorists do a great deal to differentiate themselves from broader society and repeatedly echoed in European political discourse that links Islam and political violence (Cesari, 2013; Eroukhmanoff, 2015).

It is clearly not contentious to argue that in a multitude of ways the social boundaries for British Muslims have been significantly brightened. However, to fully grasp how this has happened, and thus in what context this study sits, it is essential to examine how boundaries have been brightened. The constructivist origin of the category ‘*British Muslim*’ did not emerge solely because of migration into the UK, but instead has occurred through successive political and social developments indivisibly linked to security. Muslims in the UK were subsumed into the ‘*black*’ category in the early race relations era; the British Muslim category began to take on salience politically and in media discourse in the era after the Iranian revolution and Satanic verses episode (Modood, 2006) where Islam and Muslims become situated as existential threats to the liberal political and social order of the UK. This is something that has accelerated post-9/11, an event which rapidly increases the coverage of British Muslim related issues in the UK press (Moore et al., 2008; Poole, 2002). Specifically, this coverage has also been dominated by specific sub-themes; the recurring principle concerns are terror, religious and cultural differences between Muslims and the rest of UK society and Islamic extremism (Moore et al., 2008). In fact, two thirds of coverage during this period situates Muslims as a threat and/or problem (Moore et al., 2008). To a large degree this coverage strips British Muslims of their agency – they are reported on, written about yet rarely given a voice (Ahmed, 2009). That said, this is perhaps misleading, because as a group they have not lacked agency in the forging of instrumental and political dimensions to the representation of what it means to be a British Muslim; therefore, ‘British Muslims’ do also express agency and are not solely constructed by the media (Adamson, 2011; Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2010). Furthermore, Abbas (2004) finds that the bringing together of the processes of media and political manufactured Islamophobia, including increases in radical Islamist political activity, means Muslims are proverbially now caught between a ‘rock and a hard place’; here these two processes intersect to form a powerful discursive dynamic of negative marginalization.

This curious normative position not only means that boundaries are brightened, but also that there exist nuanced sub-categories of Muslims – specifically the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’. This has important ramifications here because as well as boundaries being brightened, they can be blurred, i.e. that the boundary between an individual and society can become more ambiguous where “*individuals are seen as simultaneously members of the groups on both sides of the boundary*” (Alba, 2005;25). However, many examples of the blurring and/or brightening of Muslim social boundaries have resulted in the creation of a dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims (inter alia Maira, 2009; Mamdani, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2007). This is important because even if social boundaries between British Muslims and British society become blurred as a product of their coverage during Grenfell, this may not apply to all British Muslims equally. This has been expressed repeatedly in many different contexts 9/11, for example in gendered discourses where women in Muslim societies or in the diaspora in the west require liberation from ‘*bad*’ oppressive Muslim men (Maira, 2009; Mamdani, 2008). In the diaspora context, Sirin and Fine (2007) uncover a dynamic where Muslims are encouraged to be ‘*good*’ Muslims to differentiate themselves from ‘*bad*’ Muslims that commit acts of terror.

In examining how online forms of vernacular memory creation around Grenfell intersect with these diverse ideas of British Muslimness, it is also important to understand the current state of play vis-à-vis online vernacular memory. It is important here to contrast vernacular memory, which originates ‘from below’ regarding events which immediately affect them, with official representations of events which seek to stabilize the dominant social, political and ideological status quo (Bodnar, 1994). The ability of this to occur online has been enabled the

internet to be a place where memories are made, remade and stored (Robertson, 2017). Within such literature, online memorials and responses have been mainly theorized in terms of memorials to terror events and as such those online form important sites of 'vernacular' memory about terror events (Haskins, 2007; Jarvis, 2011). Furthermore, it has been argued they offer important opportunities to broaden understanding of how events are constructed beyond 'official' state accounts (Jarvis, 2011). An example such as online commemorations of spontaneous ground zero memorials to 9/11 demonstrate a tendency to attempt to codify events into permanent or semi-permanent online memorials (Haskins, 2007), an example of such being that created by The Guardian Newspaper (Guardian, 2017) listing victims of Grenfell. Absent in these discussions of online memorials is analysis of the opportunities created by social media communication; online user generated content created and disseminated about events has been found to construct, subvert or reinforce notions of social boundaries (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). This is important because the creation of vernacular memory online has developed into its '2.0' iteration where it is no longer the case that it is created on 'flat' websites where the editorial control rests with the webmaster. Rather, social media platforms enable a '3D' creation of vernacular memory where the twitter events that occur in the wake of major events enable individuals to form, shape, share and/or contest narratives of vernacular memory from below outside of editorial control.

This has particular importance within the Grenfell context because here user generated content constructed major aspects of the unfolding event. This crossed over into mainstream media coverage where much of the now iconic images of the outside of the building on fire and the harrowing videos of those trapped inside who would die were broadcast in the mainstream media. This was user generated and sent via social media platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat. This was something of a novel situation, because previously even if those inside had been able to film, without sharing platforms footage would have perished with the victims; this connectivity provided important insights into the disaster as it unfolded in real time from the victim's perspective. Additionally, and importantly for this analysis, uncertainty reigning both during the disaster and in the days that followed about causes and the inadequacy of the government and local authorities in the relief effort were significant subjects of debate on social media platforms such as twitter. They key aspect of this massive discussion which this paper picks up on and uses to analysis the constructions of social boundaries for British Muslims behaviour of narratives and networks during this event is the construction of Muslims during the disaster. This brings this question of vernacular memory to bear not just on discussions of the ongoing definition of British Muslims in broader discourses, but also offers broader insight into the ability of social media, due to its lack of editorial control, to act as a conduit of fake news during such situations of uncertainty. Thus, the social media data analysed here directly discusses Muslim residents of the tower in terms of being victims, providers of relief and worryingly, potentially protagonists in starting the fire as a terror attack. Therefore, as well as the more 'traditional' constructions of vernacular memory such as that created by the Guardian in terms of victim profiles after the fire, social media was one of the prime means by which memory was created during the fire and in the days after.

## MIXED METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO BRITISH MUSLIMS

This study applies a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to narratives produced about British Muslims during the Grenfell fire using two data sets – the discourses created on the social media platform Twitter, and victim profiles published in the Guardian Newspaper. These data sources have been selected because they offer two different kinds of insights into the construction of social boundaries for British Muslims with the twitter data (44,007 tweets) offering a 'bottom up' look into the spontaneous creation of narratives by social media users. The

Guardian victim profiles (44 Muslim victim profiles) provide the kinds of in-depth biographical information about Muslim victims that provide details about their countries of origins and lifestyles which are often all to absent from media coverage which disproportionately covers them as ethnically 'South Asian' and extremists/security threats.

CDA offers insights into how texts can be analysed critically, examining text for narratives and the power relations contained within (Kress, 2012; van Dijk, 1993; Weiss & Wodak, 2003). To adapt this approach to the specifics of the data analysed here, the paper uses a common framework of thematic analysis to enable the coding of both data sets for themes, using a six-step process (Braun, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This begins with familiarisation with the data to create thematic coding categories which are then employed in a reflexive processes where they are constantly evaluation as a research codes the data. However, while a similar thematic CDA approach can be applied to the two sets of data, both have very different access requirements. While the Guardian victim biographies can be easily found online under the title 'The lives of Grenfell' (Guardian, 2017), twitter data requires either a) capture during an event or b) purchasing after the event.

Here the data was purchased post-facto from a third-party supplier, Texifter. This was because it was not clear during the initial unfolding of the fire that Muslims would receive such attention in the discourse, which only became clear in the days following the fire. Additionally, the purchasing of the data in this way also guaranteed not only a full data set of every undeleted tweet, they also come with a number of useful metrics, such as influence score, which can be helpful in their analysis. As preliminary research using twitters advanced search feature demonstrated that no central hashtag (#) emerged during discussions of Muslims during the fire, it was decided that the data would be collected using a keyword search (Grenfell and Muslim) in a time series (96 hours or 4 days, from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> June 2017 inclusive), giving a total of 44,007 tweets. Discovertext was then used to analyse the tweets as the software enables a use to generate both samples based upon a random percentage of the total sample, and to conduct the thematic coding with its online text analytics platform. A key advantage of Discovertext, as well as its intuitive user-friendly design, is its powerful machine learning capabilities. This means that the platform contains a classifier which can be trained using a small sample to classify the rest of a data set. This is extremely important for researchers that are seeking to thematically analysis a data set such as this who are working alone and do not have the resources of research assistants or teams to aid in the coding process. Here, 5% samples were chosen (2,200) for the final analysis. This allowed 10% of the sample (220) to be manually coded to train the classifier to classify the full 2,000 tweets. These classifications were then checked manually with any necessary alterations made, which saved significant time and effort.

## **ANALYSING NARRATIVES ABOUT BRITISH MUSLIMS THROUGH GRENFELL: NUANCING AND RECONSTRUCTING WITH BOTH THE BANAL AND THE EXTRAORDINARY**

The two different data sets enabled insight to be gained into two different ways that the social boundaries of Muslims were constructed during the Grenfell fire. The twitter data provided insights into how social boundaries are constructed extra-ordinarily in the particularities in a one-off tragic event where Muslims spontaneously acted as first responders during the fire and aid givers in the days after. The particularities of the fire present a unique and tragic moment where the Muslim residents of the fire, through being up for Ramadan, are the 'first responders' seeking to alert, evaluate and shelter neighbours as the fire unfolded and again became care givers in the coming days due the incompetence of both the national and local British state. However, as with any major social or political event, social media was also quick to circulate 'fake news', conspiracy theories and hate narratives that situated Muslims as celebrating the

fire, even causing it, and using it as an excuse to convert people to Islam. Given the established knowledge of social media platforms as conduits for such information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017) it is not a foregone conclusion that the positive narratives would be spread on social media.

The paper also seeks to analyse how social boundaries for British Muslims are constructed through Grenfell in the 'banal' aspects of Muslim lives and biographies which emerged after the fire in the Guardian newspaper in the feature 'The Lives of Grenfell' (Guardian, 2017). Here these provide important narratives which nuance discourses of British Muslimhood by shining a light onto the regional, ethnic and professional composition of the community. Thus, these are the 'banal' aspects and unrelated to the fire – however they only come to light through the fire taking place and thus the media shines a light onto a poorly examined and understood feature of the British Muslims experience, albeit through the specifics of a neglected tower block in West London.

## Saviours or Protagonists? British Muslims and Discourse During Grenfell

Referring back to the conceptualization of Grenfell as a highly 'editorialised' event (Rustin, 2018), analysing the discourse of the tweets involved in the fire is an important step in understanding what kinds of narratives were created and shared on twitter. This is important because this paper has also demonstrated the paradoxical nature of events which *could* be spread about the role of Muslims during the fire, both positively as first responders during the fire, but also negatively as celebrating the fire (Joseph Watson, 2017). This is made all the more relevant by the significant uncertainty which rained during and after the fire where objective, reliable facts about any aspect of the fire and the response to it were hard to come by. Thus, it is important to pose the question how these objective occurrences translated into subjective social constructions on social media. To answer this question discourses created on twitter about Muslims and Grenfell are measured in two different ways which give two different kinds on insights into the how discourse is created and shared on social media. The first, and broadest, insights are gained from coding a 5% random sample taken from the total mass of tweets. This gives a broad picture of all discourses created on the subject and thus provides an insight, if partial, into the big picture of total discourse created. However interesting these insights are, there is a limitation to this approach because all discourse on social media is not 'created equal'. This is because not all discourse is engaged with or spread, with the most extreme case being an individual tweeting something about Muslims and Grenfell and it receiving no engagements at all by other users – i.e. no retweets, likes or responses – and thus just sits isolated in the twitter ether. This does beg a question as to how we account for discourses that are more important and spread with vigour through the social network, are liked, retweeted and responded to and thus are not only likely to reach a much wider audience, through retweets and likes making them show up in more peoples feeds, but also demonstrate engagement from individuals. Fortunately, the full 'fire hose' data supplied by Texifter comes with many metrics attached, one of which is an 'influence score' that is a metric of how much is a tweet is engaged with thus it is possible to rank the entire data set by this influence score and thus get a snapshot of what are the most influential discourses. This is somewhat limited as this remains a crude metric – it does not provide a) a factored of whether engagements are positive, negative or neutral and b) cannot account for the motivation that the audience has for engaging with the tweet, nor whether they take the information contained in the tweet seriously. Thus, will the sample ranked by influence score adds something to the wide-angle picture provided by the random sample, it still comes with caveats. Here it is worth analysing the two discourses separately and contrasting how they construct Muslims during the fire differently. This is important because not only do



the proportions of tweets under certain categories change, but also categories disappear once the tweets are ranked by influence score.

The discourse which appears in the 5% of random tweets (table 1) overwhelmingly constructs Muslims in positive terms (69%) as providing support during the fire (61%) and aid in the days after (8%). This is important because in broad terms this blurs the social boundaries of British Muslims through their contribution to the humanitarian effort during and after the fire. In addition to this, a further 2% of the random sample of tweets directly promoted the Britishness reflected in the Muslim contribution to the relief effort, thus further strengthening this process of enabling individuals from this group to 'blur' the boundary and thus be both Muslims and British. Indeed, the tweets went further simply spreading positive stories, with the second most numerous category condemning a protest outside a mosque which was offering relief by the far-right group 'Britain First' who have been linked to spreading hate speech about Muslims in the UK. Interestingly, only 2% of the random sample reflect anti-Muslim sentiment and fake news stories about the fire. This is important because even in this sample, where engagement is not taken into account, fake news and hate speech do not play a significant role in the constructions of British Muslims during Grenfell thus the pre-disposition of twitter to spread fake news or right-wing narratives (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017) is not expressed in this sample.

To gain insights into how the total discourse expressed on twitter towards Muslims during Grenfell changes when considering engagements this paper also analysed the top 5% of tweets by influence score (table 2). This provides interesting results because it actually amplifies the proportion of tweets covering the positive actions of Muslims during and after the fire to a score of 74%. Again, despite the possibility of negative narratives to spread through the network, the overwhelming twitter coverage commented on Muslims as making a positive contribution to the relief effort during and after the fire. This accounts for 74% of the most influential tweets during the fire. As such, while social media responses to political events have received significant coverage in the for being conduits of 'fake news' (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017) and 'hate speech' this example actually presents a countervailing logic. Rather, here the stories that spread concentrated on Muslims raising the alarm and alerting neighbours to the fire, partially due to them being awake due to Ramadan. In line with the

TABLE 1 Proportion of tweets and their coding category for a 5% random sample of all tweets.

Coding Category:	% of random sample
Positive coverage of Muslim relief during and after fire	69%
Condemning far right protest outside mosque	21%
Parodies of fake news stories created about fire	5%
Anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Muslim fake news stories	2%
Promoting the Britishness of Muslims	2%
Disgust at the scale of the fire	1%

TABLE 2 Proportion of tweets in the top 5% of influence score and their narrative content.

Coding Category	% of sample ranked by influence score
Positive coverage of saving lives during fire and f	74%
Condemning far-right protest outside mosque	15%
Parodying conspiracy theories about the fire	3%
Tweets negative about Muslims i.e. using fire to convert Christians	1%
Un-codable (non-Latin characters/foreign languages)	7%

random sample above, tweets went further by also condemning the Britain First protest, but the proportion of this story as proportion of total narratives dropped from 21% to 15%. Again, some anti-Muslim tweets did appear, but once again were an extremely small number (1%) of the total tweets by influence, but here the narrative content did change, with the particular this small narrative clustering around a conspiracy theory that Muslims were using the fire and its aftermath to convert Christians in the area to Islam. Thus, the proportion of tweets does not change dramatically when one samples by influence score, with the only group of tweets disappearing relates to those tweets promoting the Britishness of those Muslims which took part in the relief effort once the tweets were ranked by influence score. However, both samples show that both anti-Muslims conspiracy theories and hate speech did not make any significant ground in the tweets analysed, which importantly demonstrates that social media platforms are not per se destined to be ripe for the spreading of such narratives.

However it would be unwise to cover the positive nature of such narratives without going deeper into examining how such positive depictions of Muslims relate to the 'good Muslim' 'Bad Muslim' dichotomy so prevalent since 9/11 and the war on terror (Mamdani, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2007). Here, a dichotomy is created both within the Muslim diaspora and within Muslim societies where 'good' Muslims should be protected from, or indeed armed to violently confront, 'bad' Muslims who violate human rights and/or take part in terror episodes. This was a key logic which justified the intervention in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 and the arming of proxy militias to confront the Taliban. Here, while not explicitly mentioned, the Muslims acting in interest of their neighbours during the Grenfell fire did so not to make a point of being 'good' Muslims but rather on humanitarian grounds. However, it is possible that this action could be used to contrast with other 'less good' or 'bad' Muslims who either are not presented with such a dramatic opportunity to aid in saving lives, or were physically unable to. The micro theatre of British Muslimness in which this operates is particularly relevant here, as the broader North Kensington/North Westminster area in which the tower sat has produced a large number of British Jihadis who committed atrocities for the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. This includes 'Jihadi John' (Mohammed Emwazi) and Abdel Majed Abdel Bary the so called 'hip-hop jihadist' (Herrman, 2014). Thus, although not prominent in the coverage of the fire, the micro-politics of the area produces both 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. However, turning the logic on its head somewhat, given the chronology of the narratives about British Muslims which emerge out of this micro WHAT the jihadis appeared before the Grenfell saviours, and as such by highlighting positive Muslim actions during an such an event, it greatly nuances the coverage of Muslims in the area as not simply security threats, ready to depart to the next jihadi theatre of war to commit heinous acts of violence. Thus, on balance this has clear implications for social boundary construction because in this particular case the dominant narratives to emerge in the discourse about British Muslims was positive, and constructed them as important humanitarian parts of British society, even stepping into the gulf left by the British state. Here, as Alba (2005; 25) points out 'individuals are seen as simultaneously members of the groups on both sides of the boundary' by being both Muslims, and also part of the relief effort in one of the most significant national disasters in British living memory.

## Examining Contemporary British Muslim Superdiversity through the lens of victimhood

Moving on from the discourse created on twitter about British Muslims during Grenfell, this paper also analyses a second data set in the victim biography's presented in the guardian newspaper as 'The Lives of Grenfell' (Guardian, 2017). The emergence of victim biographies in the guardian newspaper are powerful instances of public discourse about British Muslims and have the ability to shape social boundaries in important ways. In particular, they do this by

showcasing the heterogeneity of the British Muslims population. Sociologically, this is an important phenomena to observe when thinking about how this event nuanced constructions of British Muslims. This is because the discourse has been dominated by conceptions of 'British Muslims' as intrinsically linked to South Asia (Abbas, 2004). The Grenfell tragedy demonstrated something quite different. As Vertovec (2007) has argued, diffuse migrations from increasingly diverse locals have produced a situation where the post-World War II situation of clearly identifiable minority groups, mostly from a countries ex-colonies, dominated labour migration and policy debates, has broken down. Here, migrations from diverse locals, motivated by diverse concerns such as war, famine, political oppression in addition to economic migration have meant these structures have been supplanted by a 'super-diverse' picture of migrant communities being increasingly diverse, but also increasingly scattered. This notion has yet to be applied to specific sub-groups of migrants and minorities. Here, the fact that the victims of Grenfell tower were either born in, or had ancestry in, 10 Muslim countries with only one family having roots in South Asia (Bangladesh)<sup>1</sup>. This shows how the British Muslim population has become increasingly diverse in the past 50 years, driven by such diverse political events as the war in Afghanistan, revolution in Iran, oppression in Eritrea and even the recent conflict in Syria. This is important because it opens up the notion of being a British Muslim to far broader conceptions of diversity of cultures, customs, origins and indeed reasons for coming to Britain than has received mainstream coverage which has all too much focused on either Muslims as South Asian, and/or British Muslims as security concerns. Indeed, this diversity, while on the surface having very little to offer in terms of a broader discussion of the securitization of British Muslims, on deeper inspection offers some interesting insights. Roe () argues that one of the key ways to de-securitise minority groups is through moving discourse around them from homogeneity to heterogeneity. Thus, this exposure of the diversity of British Muslimness by Grenfell not only demonstrates the empirical reality of a highly dynamic, diverse and varied community, it also opens the door to de-securitising British Muslims through showing this diversity.

## CONCLUSIONS ON BRITISH MUSLIMHOOD AND GRENFELL

This paper has demonstrated that the Grenfell fire, as well as shining a light on the problematic nature of austerity and social housing policy in the UK, it also has far wider political and social implications as a lens through which to view the contemporary British Muslim experience. This is important because it is not only the exceptional circumstances of the fire that forced British Muslims into the heroic role of first responders that is important here, but also the banal narratives that emerge out of the victimhood of Muslims who died in the fire. This victimhood enabled details to emerge about the makeup of the British Muslim population that showed, at least in the North Kensington context, the population has become 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007) and defies the simplistic conceptions of British Muslims as being synonymous with being 'South Asian'. Rather, the significant world events that have driven inward migration into the UK in the decades since mass labour migration from South Asia have meant that British Muslims have roots across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Indeed adding to the nuancing of Muslims identities are the ways in which the banal details of everyday life which emerge in these victim profiles also blur social boundaries for British Muslims because they give depictions of British Muslims that do not confirm to the 'brightened' conceptions of Muslims as security threats or religious extremists which sit outside of notions of Britishness.

Analysing the twitter output in the 96 hours after the fire shows that the exceptional events of the fire, and the fact that British Muslims acted as first responders also had important blurring

<sup>1</sup>The countries were: Syria Morocco, Lebanon, Eritria, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Iran.

consequences for social boundaries because this concern for humanity goes far beyond specifically caring for other Muslims and shows how British Muslims are part of British society and not living separately from it. However, what is also significant are the broader observation this enables us to make about social media more generally – despite there being fake news narratives created in the context of Grenfell, it is noteworthy that in this instance twitter was not a conduit for their spread. Rather, both in a random 5% sample of tweets, and 5% ranked by influence score, such stories do not account for more than single digit percentage totals in each case.

Additionally, this paper contributes to a broader discussion of the role of social media platforms in acting as new ways of creating online vernacular memory. Previous conceptions of websites being important places where vernacular forms of memory require a greater compliment of work which also looks at the ways that social media platforms act in this way and also give a far broader dimension to the editorial and participatory possibilities in the creation of such memory. This is particularly important when it comes to vernacular memory given that it is the important site for the creation of accounts about events away from official, state lead accounts of events. Thus social media seems to be the ideal place to look when seeking to understand how individuals look to create narratives about specific events. This case study of Grenfell buttresses this idea because twitter here has been important in creating a site of vernacular memory that situates Muslims as having a positive role in what was an extremely negative situation. This does, however, not totally negate the roll of more static web-based forms of vernacular memory as the analysis of the guardian profiles demonstrate how such sites are still important. Additionally, further investigation is required to fully flesh out the relationships that form during such events between social and mainstream forms of media. This is because many of the narratives spread by twitter are not totally user generated but rather draw on media stories from mainstream outlets. The contemporary media landscape is rendered all the more complex by the fact that mainstream media also made extensive use of user generated content both inside and outside the tower during the fire. Thus in the field more generally, as well as within the specifics of the study of vernacular memory more specifically more thinking is required to fully understand this relationship. Thus, it is becoming ever more clear that discussing social media separately from established forms of media is unwise, and that any predictions that social media would totally eclipse traditional forms of media would be incorrect and rather what we are saying is every more interdependence between tradition and social forms of media.

## ORCID

Joseph Downing  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7173-8043>

## REFERENCES

- Abbas, T. (2004). After 9/11: British South Asian Muslims, Islamophobia, Multiculturalism and the State. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 21(3), 26–38. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajiss.v21i3.506>
- Adamson, F. (2011). Engaging or Contesting the Liberal State? ‘Muslim’ as a politicised identity category in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37, 6–915. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.576193>
- Ahmed, S. (Ed.). (2009). *Seen and Not Heard: Voices of Young British Muslims*. Policy Research Centre.
- Alba, R. (2005). Bright vs. Blurred boundaries: Second-generation assimilation and exclusion in France, Germany, and the United States Ethnic and racial. *Studies*, 28(1), 20–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000280003>
- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
- Anderson, B. (Ed.). (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2006). Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences. In B. Ashcroft, H. Griffiths, & F. Tiffin (Eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (pp. 155–157). Routledge.
- Bodnar, J. (1994). *America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton University Press.
- Braun, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Cesari, J. (2013). European Conundrum: Integration of Muslims or Securitisation of Islam? *World Review*. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/european-conundrum-integration-of-muslims-or-securitisation-of-islam>
- de Haas, H., Bakewell, O., & Kubal, A. (2011). *The evolution of Moroccan migration to the UK*. International Migration Institute.
- Downing, J., Jackson-Preece, J., & Werdine-Norris, M. (2015). The Security Threat posed by 'outsiders' is becoming a central theme of French politics in the aftermath of Charlie Hebdo.
- Eroukhanoff. (2015). The remote securitisation of Islam in the US post-9/11: Euphemisation, metaphors and the "logic of expected consequences" in counter-radicalisation discourse. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8, 246–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2015.1053747>
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107>
- Graham-Harrison, E. (2017). Grenfell fire: 'The community is close knit – they need to stay here to recover'. *The Observer*, 9 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/08/grenfell-fire-british-moroccans-hit-hard-rehousing-decisions>
- Guardian. (2017). The lives of Grenfell Tower: The 72 victims of the fire. [Online] Available. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/ng-interactive/2018/may/14/lives-of-grenfell-tower-victims-fire>
- Haskins, E. (2007). Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 37(4), 401–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940601086794>
- Herrman, J. (2014). 'It's a wake-up call... we need to do more': Why do so many. *Evening Standard*. <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/it-s-a-wake-up-call-we-need-to-do-more-why-do-so-many-jihadists-come-from-the-streets-of-north-9801125.html>
- Jarvis, L. (2011). 9/11 Digitally Remastered? Internet Archives, Vernacular Memories and WhereWereYou.org. *Journal of American Studies*, 45(4), 793–814. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187581100096X>
- Joseph Watson, P. (2017, June 14). *Muslims Celebrate London Tower Fire (Despite Many of the Victims Being Muslim)*. <https://www.infowars.com/muslims-celebrate-london-tower-fire-despite-many-of-the-victims-being-muslim/>
- Kahani-Hopkins, V., & Hopkins, N. (2010). 'Representing' British Muslims: The strategic dimension to identity construction. *Studies*, 25(2), 288–309.
- Kavakci, E., & Kraepelin, C. R. (2017). Religious beings in fashionable bodies: The online identity construction of hijabi social media personalities. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(6), 850–868. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716679031>
- Kress, G. (2012). Multimodal Discourse Analysis. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 34–49). Routledge.
- Maira, S. (2009). 'Good' and 'Bad' Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U. S Orientalisms. *Feminist Studies*, 35(3), 631–656.
- Mamdani, M. (2008). Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 766–775. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.766>
- Mavelli, L. (2013). Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitisation of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject. *Millennium*, 41(2), 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829812463655>
- Modood, T. (2006). *British Muslims and the politics of multiculturalism in Modood T, Triandafyllidou A and Zapata-Barrero R*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203001820-9>
- Moore, K., Mason, Paul and Lewis JMW (2008). *Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print news media 2000-2008 [working paper]*. Cardiff.
- Nussbaum, E. (2017, January 16). How Jokes Won the Election. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election>
- Poole, E. (2002). *Reporting Islam: Media Representation and British Muslims*, IB Tauras. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755604579>
- Robertson, M. A. (2017). *Networks of memory: Vernacular photography, (new) media, and meaning making (Doctoral dissertation, Communication, Art & Technology: School of Communication)*.
- Rustin, S. (2018, June 8). Don't bring fake news into the search for the truth about Grenfell|Susanna Rustin. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/08/fake-news-grenfell-fire-andrew-ohagan>
- Semanti, M. (2011). Communication, culture and the Essentialized Islam. *Communication Studies*, 62(1), 113–126.
- Sirin, S. R., & Fine, M. (2007). Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict. *Applied Developmental Science*, 11(3), 151–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690701454658>
- The Sun. (2017). Woman praises young Muslims for saving lives in Grenfell Tower fire. *The Sun*. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/video/news/woman-praises-young-muslims-for-saving-lives-in-grenfell-tower-fire/>
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Superdiversity and its Implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, 1024–1054. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701599465>

Weiss, G., & Wodak, R. (2003). Introduction: Theory, Interdisciplinarity and Critical Discourse Analysis. *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1–32. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230514560\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230514560_1)

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr **Joseph Downing** is author of *French Muslims in Perspective* (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-16103-3>) and *Social Media and Security* (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-20734-1>). He is senior lecturer in International Relations at Aston University where he teaches courses on security and the politics of technology. Previously, he was fellow in nationalism in the European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, and Marie-Curie fellow at the Laboratoire méditerranéen de sociologie, CNRS, Université Aix-Marseille Marseille, and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

**How to cite this article:** Downing, J. (2023). Exceptional and banal constructions of British muslims in Grenfell: Social boundaries, twitter, superdiversity and online vernacular memory. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 23(2), 232–245. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12398>