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Centre for Islamisation (CENTRIS)

Level 3 Administration Building
International Islamic University Malaysia,
Jalan Gombak 53100 Kuala Lumpur
Email: zahidzamri@iium.edu.my/
centris_reception@iium.edu.my
Phone: (+603) 6421 6797

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EDITORIAL



Director: Dato' Hamidon Abd Hamid
Editor: Dr. Zahid Zamri
Co-editor: Dr. Nur Jannah Hassan
Graphic Designer:
Sr. Saidatunnisa' Zainuddin
Sr. Aisyah Natasya Mohd Zaharami

Reclaiming the Muslim Narrative: TikTok's Disruption of Islamophobia and the Urgency of Media Sovereignty

DR. MAI JIANJUN
AHAS KIRKHS



INTRODUCTION

In the age of digital globalisation, narrative control is power. For decades, Western media empires from CNN and BBC to digital monopolies like Google, Meta, and Twitter, or known as X, have weaponized information to institutionalize Islamophobia. Muslims have been reduced to caricatures, which are threats to be feared, problems to be solved, or voices to be silenced. This hegemony distorts realities, justifies wars, and erases Muslim humanity.

Yet a disruption emerged. TikTok, a non-Western platform, momentarily shattered this monopoly. During the Gaza genocide, its algorithm bypassed censors, forcing raw Palestinian testimonies into global consciousness. Hashtags like #GazaGenocide trended as TikTok exposed what corporate media suppressed: Muslim pain, resilience, and truth.

But this window proved fragile. Under Western pressure, TikTok throttled Gaza content, proving even alternative platforms cannot be trusted. This article argues that TikTok's brief triumph holds one urgent lesson like combating Islamophobia demands more than hashtag activism. Muslims must reclaim narrative sovereignty by building an independent media infrastructure and platforms owned by the *ummah*, governed by its ethics, and freed from geopolitical blackmail. Until we own our algorithms, servers, and stories, the Muslim voice remains a whisper in a storm of lies.

DEFINITION ISLAMOPHOBIA

Islamophobia is more than just prejudice against Muslims it is a systematic and institutionalized fear, hatred, or hostility towards Islam as a religion and Muslims as a people. It appears in discriminatory laws, hate speech, media bias, physical violence, and political policies that marginalize Muslim communities. Islamophobia is not only a social attitude but also a strategic political tool used by certain powers to dehumanize Muslims, justify wars, restrict civil liberties, and silence Muslim voices both domestically and internationally.

Scholars have pointed out that Islamophobia is sustained through narratives that portray Islam as inherently violent, misogynistic, or incompatible with modernity and liberal values. The risk of this framing lies in its cumulative impact on public perception, policy-making, and inter-community relations, particularly in multicultural societies. Central to upholding this narrative is the role of the media.

The Role of Western Media in Promoting Islamophobia

Western media, especially after the 9/11 attacks, has played a dominant role in associating Islam with violence and Muslims with extremism. From news coverage to movies, from television dramas to political commentary, Islam and Muslims are overwhelmingly portrayed through a negative lens. These portrayals rarely reflect the diversity, intellectual richness, and ethical foundations of the Muslim world.

What makes this dangerous is not only the misinformation itself but also the monopolistic nature of global media power. For decades, the Western world has maintained hegemonic control over information dissemination channels. News agencies like CNN, BBC, Fox News, Reuters, and others have shaped global perceptions of Islam, often with little or no input from Muslim voices. Even more concerning, this bias is systematised across social media monopolies. Google's search algorithms and YouTube policies systematically favour Israeli state narratives while shadow-banning Palestinian documentation. Facebook and Instagram, owned by Meta, routinely censor pro-Palestine content as "incitement," removing posts about Israeli airstrikes or Palestinian funerals under vague "community standards." During the Gaza crisis, Instagram restricted the hashtag #PalestinianLivesMatter, while Facebook's AI labelled images of wounded Palestinian children as violent content.

Similarly, Twitter or X amplified verified Israeli accounts spreading debunked claims that Hamas beheaded babies through algorithmic promotion, while suspending Palestinian journalists like Motaz Azaiza under "sensitive media" policies. Elon Musk's reinstatement of banned far-right accounts further normalised anti-Muslim hate speech, with posts calling for the annihilation and self-cleansing trending globally.

Together, these platforms form an architecture of digital suppression that Google buries truth, Meta erases evidence, and Twitter or X weaponises disinformation. Their neutrality is a myth that each is embedded in Western geopolitical interests, reducing Muslim suffering to algorithmic noise.

This informational imbalance denies Muslims the right to speak for themselves. Their experiences, grievances, histories, and aspirations are filtered through hostile or ignorant lenses. Yet new opportunities emerge with non-Western platforms.

TikTok and the Gaza War

The 2023–2024 Gaza War provided a striking example of TikTok's potential in challenging Western media narratives. As traditional media outlets and Western tech giants such as Google, Meta, and X either ignored or distorted the reality on the ground, TikTok became a major platform for firsthand documentation and reporting. Palestinian youth, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens used TikTok to upload real-time videos of destruction, displacement, and human tragedy inflicted by Israeli attacks. These videos, often raw, emotional, and brutally honest, bypassed traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and reached a global audience.

For the first time in recent history, millions around the world were exposed to the suffering of Palestinians not through the lens of Western social media or digital platforms, but through Palestinian eyes. TikTok became a platform where the humanity of Muslims, routinely erased in mainstream media, was powerfully affirmed. The hashtag #FreePalestine trended globally, igniting many young people in the West, including non-Muslims, who began questioning the official narratives presented by their governments and media outlets.

Western powers quickly recognized this threat. In response, attempts were made to restrict or ban TikTok, especially in the United States, citing “national security concerns.” In truth, it was about narrative control, such as a Western hegemony over global storytelling was being challenged by a platform it neither owned nor fully controlled.

Yet TikTok's resistance proved fragile. Under intense pressure from the U.S. and Israel, the platform will downgrade Gaza content by late 2023. Hashtags like #GazaGenocide were throttled, creators exposing war crimes saw their reach plummet, and sensitive content warnings censored evidence. This capitulation reveals a harsh truth that even non-Western platforms bow to geopolitical power. When TikTok silences Palestinians, it confirms Muslims cannot entrust their stories to any foreign-owned platform, including this one.

Lessons from TikTok: Reclaiming the Muslim Narrative

The case of TikTok teaches several important lessons for the Muslim world in its long battle against Islamophobia:

1. Media Power is Narrative Power

The ability to tell one's own story is fundamental to dignity, identity, and political agency. For too long, Muslims have been spoken *about* rather than *spoken to*, and their realities have been defined by others. TikTok shows that when alternative platforms are available, suppressed voices can rise and influence global consciousness. To effectively combat Islamophobia, Muslims must prioritize building and supporting their own global media infrastructure.

2. Authenticity Resonates

The virality of Gaza-related content on TikTok was due not only to its graphic content but to its authenticity. Real stories, told by real people, evoke empathy and action. Muslims do not need to invent counter-narratives; they need to tell the truth of their lives. Islam is not a problem to be explained, it is a civilization to be understood. The global public, especially younger generations, is hungry for unfiltered truths and morally grounded perspectives.

3. Youth Engagement is Crucial

TikTok is dominated by youth, and it is among youth that ideological battles are most intense. Muslim youth around the world are both the victims of Islamophobia and its potential remedy. Empowering them to speak, share, create, and represent their faith in the digital realm is essential. This requires investment in digital literacy, content creation, and platform development that targets young audiences.

4. Innovation Breaks Hegemony

TikTok disruption proves that technological innovation and creative strategy can dismantle Western media hegemony. Muslims must master cutting-edge algorithms, data sovereignty, and user-centric design to build world-class platforms. Confidence in our capacity for excellence, not mere imitation, is essential. When Muslim engineers, designers, and strategists lead, we can create tools that amplify truth globally.

5. Ownership is Non-Negotiable

TikTok's forced retreat on Gaza content proves that platforms we don't control will never prioritize our truth. Muslims must build their digital infrastructure, a Muslim TikTok free from Western or Eastern political pressure. This isn't about isolation, it's about digital sovereignty. We need algorithms designed by Muslim engineers, servers hosted in Muslim-majority nations, and policies written by Muslim jurists and ethicists protecting *our* narratives from deletion. If platforms like Google, Meta, and Twitter or X can erase our stories, and even TikTok bends to censorship, owning our infrastructure is existential. If 2 billion Muslims can't own a global platform, we concede the information war by default.

The Way Forward: Building a Global Muslim Media Infrastructure

The Muslim world, with its vast population, rich intellectual heritage, and shared spiritual values, has the potential to establish media platforms that not only serve Muslims but also contribute positively to global dialogue. Such platforms should be committed to truth, justice, diversity, and excellence. They must be multilingual, technologically advanced, and accessible to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Establishing independent, multilingual news agencies with global reach and rigorous journalistic standards

Encouraging and training Muslim youth to become skilled digital influencers, content creators, data scientists, platform engineers, and ethical storytellers.

Creating and developing globally influential digital platforms that host Islamic content, scholarly discussions, community narratives, and creative expression.

Initiatives could include:

Building strategic alliances with other marginalized communities and ethical technologists globally to challenge misinformation systems and share technological expertise.

Investing heavily in R&D and innovation hubs focused on cutting-edge media technology by developing world-class algorithms, secure decentralized infrastructure, AI tools for multilingual content and moderation, and user-centric design all guided by Islamic ethics.

Developing think tanks and research centers focused on digital media strategy, combating Islamophobia, and analyzing the evolving global information landscape.

These efforts should not be fragmented or reactionary. A coordinated, visionary, and long-term approach is necessary one that understands the media not just as a tool of defense, but as a platform for da'wah, education, cultural renewal, and technological leadership.

Conclusion

TikTok has provided a glimpse into a possible future where Muslims can tell their own stories and challenge Islamophobia not through protest alone, but through powerful storytelling, visual authenticity, technological innovation, and digital creativity. The lessons from TikTok are clear: media power must be reclaimed, and Muslims must invest in building their sovereign platforms of global influence, not as imitators, but as pioneers capable of world-class breakthroughs in technology and narrative strategy. Islamophobia is not inevitable. It is constructed, and therefore, it can be deconstructed. But this will only happen when Muslims realize that in the battle of narratives, silence is surrender, and technological dependence is complicity. TikTok broke the silence. The next step is to build a media infrastructure engineered by our minds, governed by our ethics, and amplified by our creativity, where the Muslim voice is no longer an exception, but a norm, a force, and a truth the world cannot ignore.



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