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The 50 most tweeted words
under #M103 tell a story
about contemporary
Islamophobia in Canada

By Cory Funk

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About the Author

Cory Funk is a writer, researcher, and graduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland who studies the internet's effect on how Islam, secularism, and diversity are lived and understood in the Canadian public sphere. He has also worked as a research intern for Mennonite Central Committee in Ottawa and holds a BA in History and Religion and Culture from the University of Winnipeg.

While scrolling my Twitter feed recently, I came across a tweet by Kady O'Mally, a reporter for *The Ottawa Citizen*. She tweeted, "Gotta say some opponents of #M103 are making a pretty compelling case for why a committee study of Islamophobia might be a good idea." As a graduate student who studies what hashtags might reveal about responses to Islam and society, this tweet piqued my interest.

Twitter has quickly become a primary source for news, commentary, and political expression in Canada's public sphere, and in turn, hashtags have become powerful communicative tools for facilitating such expression, providing a helpful window into understanding public sentiment.

#M103, in this case, offers a window into understanding how some Canadians are framing the issue of hate speech and Islamophobia.

Parliamentary motion M-103 is the inspiration for the hashtag. Introduced on February 12, 2017, it seeks to, in short, "(a) recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear; (b) condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination," and "(c) request that the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage undertake a study [on hate crimes, religious discrimination, and Islamophobia in particular]."

Using quantitative research software I was able to compile just over 14,500 tweets (including retweets) containing #M103 from February 12 to the evening of February 15, and identified the 50 most used words in those tweets. When I looked closer at how those words were used, what I found was alarming. Many of the tweets communicated an irrational, fearful, and unsubstantiated suspicion towards Muslims and the place of Islam in Canadian society; painting Islam as monolithic, violent, ideological, and as a threat to western values. The very definition of Islamophobia.

The word "Islamophobia" comes in at #3, which is to be expected in a hashtag about a motion that condemns the act. However, a closer look at how it is used and who is using it shows how the discursive space created by the hashtag is heavily occupied by critics of M-103.

In other words, at the core of tweets that critique M-103's use of the term "Islamophobia," lies Islamophobia itself (i.e. unsubstantiated suspicion towards Muslims who are seen as a threat to Canadian values).

Iqra Khalid (#48) is the Muslim Liberal MP who introduced the motion to the House of Commons. Since introducing the motion she received a barrage of hateful and Islamophobic e-mails personally threatening and attacking her for her sponsorship of the motion. The Islamophobia expressed in tweets under #M103, however, takes on a different form.

Tweets like, "If you don't think #M103 will be the first step to Islamic blasphemy laws and outlawing 'Islamophobia' you're being naive #cdnpoli," which received 78 retweets and 133 likes, were common in #M103. Often these tweets sought to justify their condemnation of the motion by framing the term Islamophobia as an inhibitor of free speech.

Anthony Furey is a *Toronto Sun* columnist whose Twitter handle occupies the #15 spot on the list. Recently, Furey claimed that the term "Islamophobia," as it is presented in Khaled's motion, has run its course.

In a recent article critiquing M-103, Furey claimed that Islamophobia has “morphed into a catch-all phrase to silence anyone critical of the religion” and that, “the term has been rendered meaningless and anyone serious about tackling genuine religious discrimination should toss it aside.”

In a similar vein is #19 on the list, Tarek Fatah, a self-described liberal activist and Muslim who has long advocated in the press for a secular Islam, and who views many Islamic values as antithetical to Canadian values. He also recently wrote in *The Toronto Sun* that, “Muslim critics of the so-called ‘Motion 103’, which mentions only Islamophobia by name and not any other form of religious persecution, are in disbelief that so few members of parliament have objected to this giant step backward and the watering down of our freedom of expression.” He goes on to suggest that “Perhaps, since the motion is being put before the Commons by Liberal MP Iqra Khalid, a Muslim Canadian, MPs don’t want to be seen as insensitive to Muslim victimhood, or oppose the motion, lest they be labelled racist, misogynist and, of course, ‘Islamophobic’.”

The majority of the tweets that mention @AnthonyFurey and @tarekfatah seem to echo this trenchant critical sentiment, pointing to a team mentality that has taken hold in the online conversation around #M103. With the exception of a few critical tweets, when names are mentioned in a tweet with the “@” symbol in #M103, like @AnthonyFurey or @iamIqraKhalid, they often show support for that person’s thoughts or ideas.

The fact that that Anthony Furey, Tarek Fatah, and Conservative party leadership candidates Maxime Bernier (#18), and Kellie Leitch(#23), are #M103’s four most mentioned/retweeted people, shows that, in spite of the fact that supporters of M-103 have emphasised that the motion is not to curtail freedom of speech, there are many people who insist on framing it as such.

Using #M103, Leitch tweeted about a controversial online petition (#12) that she created, which states “No religion should be singled out for special consideration,” while Bernier publicly asked, “Is this motion a first step towards restricting our right to criticize Islam?”

Both are considered frontrunners in the current Conservative leadership race.

Interestingly, and thankfully, no such critiques appeared about anti-Semitism in 2013 when motion M-188 was introduced to address the issue specifically. This fact illustrates the Islamophobic double standard embedded in the tweets of those who use #M103 to criticize the motion’s use of the term “Islamophobia,” and how it is being leveraged for political gain.

Of course, rhetorical efforts to undermine words like anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny and homophobia, all imbued by centuries of discrimination and bigotry, are nothing new. Whether tacitly or explicitly, pejorative usage of hashtags like #AllLivesMatter and #NotAllMen, are modern manifestations of this effort.

Hashtags can often become powerful tools for social and political movements by helping not only to communicate a central message, but to discuss, debate, and organize around it. #AllLivesMatter, for example, was created for those who believe the #BlackLivesMatter movement’s attempt to address institutionalized violence and racism against Black citizens was a means for Black people to gain

special treatment over others, often claiming that the use of the term ‘racism’ was nothing more than a means to stifle dissent. For #NotAllMen, women are framed as seeking special treatment and ‘feminism’ is the term that is believed to stifle free speech.

For those who use #M103 to critique motion M-103, the motion represents Muslims using ‘Islamophobia’ to silence opposition and gain special legal treatment, relying heavily on an unsubstantiated caricaturization of Islam and Muslims as nefarious, backward, and theocratic to justify this claim.

Related words such as “blasphemy” and “sharia” came in at #13 and #45 respectively in tweets using #M103. A typical tweet with these words often looked something like, “Say NO to creeping sharia and blasphemy law #M103 #cdnpoli.”

Besides the fact that motions, if passed, are not law, there are a number of issues with the facile association of “sharia” and “blasphemy” with discussion of M-103.

The “creeping sharia” phrase parallels pervasive discourse during Ontario’s 2004-2006 “Sharia debate” regarding faith-based arbitration (FBA), which, following the parameters of the 1991 Arbitration Act, allowed for certain aspects of family law, like a divorce, to be performed by an agreed-upon arbitrator, who could be a religious leader, like a rabbi, priest or imam. As now, over the course of that debate, which garnered international attention, these terms overshadow the subject at hand. Indeed, in the previous Ontario debate, fear of Islam and international pressures ultimately led then Premier Dalton McGuinty to amend the act formally to disallow FBA in 2005.

Common usage of the term “blasphemy” is similarly indicative of the conspiratorial form of Islamophobia that underlies the opposition to M-103 on Twitter, here reading a condemnation of Islamophobia as limiting the freedom of speech and ushering a medieval and oppressive form of Islamic norms into Canadian society.

While it is uncertain whether M-103 will pass, the online Twitter debate surrounding it has demonstrated that Islamophobia is alive and well in Canada, and that fear and misunderstanding informs its very use.

Twitter has become a powerful platform for empowering and amplifying the voices of those who or are commonly misunderstood and would not otherwise be heard. Muslims, for example, commonly, cleverly, and effectively use hashtags on Twitter to subvert stereotypes of Islam and insert their voices into public discourse.

This, however, goes both ways.

Online and offline public spheres are merging more and more each day, and the Islamophobic views that were once confined to the darker corners of the internet, are seeping into mainstream public discourse. Maxime Bernier, Kellie Leitch and others, with modern communicative tools like #M103, are weaving together the tattered threads of fear and misunderstanding that exist online to crudely dress Islamophobia up in the language of free speech and walk it through the halls of parliament.

Nevertheless, as I hope to have demonstrated in this brief qualitative overview of #M103, there are many loose threads, and a quick pull by those who know of the deep respect that Canadian Muslims have for Canadian law and free speech reveals that Islamophobia, in fact, has no clothes.