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A study of discourses and cyber activism of the far-right British nationalist party Britain First

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This paper combines corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis methodologies in order to investigate the discourses and cyber activism of the British right-wing nationalist party, Britain First. A study of a corpus of texts produced by elite members of the group reveals a racist, xenophobic stance which constructs Islam and Muslims as the radical, dangerous 'Other'. This creates a discourse of fear that threatens the way of life of the indigenous in-group of the British people. An investigation of the cyber activity of the group demonstrates that Britain First is able to achieve a significant amount of following on social media by publishing populist material that veils their true nature or ideological stance.

Keywords: Britain First, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, Islamophobia, cyber activism

1. Introduction

Matthew Collins writes that Britain First is a far-right British nationalist organisation founded in 2011 by former members of the British National Party (BNP) (*The Guardian*, Feb. 25, 2015); thus, in light of its origins and ideological foundation, the group could be considered as a fascist organisation rather than a right-wing populist party. Willard Foxton writes that Britain First campaigns principally against mass immigration and what it believes to be the Islamisation of the United Kingdom, and it promotes the safeguarding of traditional British culture (*The Telegraph*, Nov. 04, 2014). It has attracted attention by holding demonstrations such as protests outside homes of individuals labelled as Islamists by Britain First, and what it describes as Christian patrols in urban areas of predominately Muslim citizens. Furthermore, Dominic Gover writes the group has entered British mosques

to confront and film Muslims they encounter (*International Business Times*, Nov. 20, 2014). Britain First was founded by Jim Dowson, an anti-abortion campaigner associated with Ulster loyalist militants. Its present chairman is Paul Golding, a former BNP councillor in the UK, who also held the position of Communications Officer within the BNP's hierarchy.¹

According to the mission statement of Britain First, found on their official website,² the aims of the group include:

Britain First is a patriotic political party and street defence organisation that opposes and fights the many injustices that are routinely inflicted on the British people. We love our people, our nation, our heritage and culture and will defend them at all times and no matter what odds we face. We want our people to come first, before foreigners, asylum seekers or migrants and we are overtly proud of this stance. We want British jobs for British workers and will make sure that our workers come first. Britain First has a proven track record of opposing Islamic militants and hate preachers and this fightback will continue.

Among the policies of Britain First, which can also be found on their website are the following: Concerning immigration, they wish to deport all illegal immigrants and foreign criminals as well as to offer grants to foreign descent nationals to encourage them to leave the UK. They wish to halt all immigration, and reject and deport all asylum seekers. They wish to end all foreign aid spending, and make all state benefits, housing and welfare available to British nationals only. They state they will restore capital punishment for paedophiles, terrorists and murderers.

Britain First states that it is not a racist party, and claims that many ethnic minorities are among its supporters, but it aims to protect British and Christian morality, and to preserve the ancestral ethnic and cultural heritage of the UK while supporting the indigenous British people as the demographic majority. It also campaigns against Islamism and the supposed spread of Islam in the UK, although it claims not to be against individual Muslims, but specifically against the doctrine and religion of Islam itself as an ideology. According to Britain First leadership, Islamic doctrine promotes hatred, violence and intolerance against non-Muslims, women are oppressed in Islam, as are homosexuals, and marriage to children is allowed; thus the group construct themselves as the defenders of these groups. Furthermore, Britain First states that Sharia Law and the custom of halal meat are incompatible with British culture, and that Muslims are the only community unable to integrate into British society.³

1. <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/hate-groups/bf/>

2. <http://www.britainfirst.org/>

3. <http://www.britainfirst.org/policies/> (accessed 09/10/2015)

Britain First has gained a degree of prominence in the media by sending groups of uniformed supporters wearing paramilitary green jackets and flat caps, to stage what the group refers to as ‘mosque invasions’, in which uniformed activists enter mosques in an attempt to confront Muslim worshippers.⁴ Other activities include ‘Christian Patrols’, whereby groups of uniformed Britain First members, with the use of an armoured jeep, stage patrols in areas with large Muslim populations. Paul Gallagher writes that such confrontational activities are filmed and uploaded onto social media websites, primarily Facebook, but also YouTube and Twitter (*The Independent*, May 28, 2015).

The Internet has changed the face of activism (Juris, 2012). Gerbaudo (2012) examined forms of protest in which social media played a prominent role and argued that online activity was closely related to physical reality rather than online and offline activity being unrelated entities. Britain First has embraced Internet technologies in using social media in order to propagate its ideology. The group’s leadership operate a well-designed website and engage in the creative use of mainstream platforms, predominately Facebook, but also Twitter and YouTube. Although the group has no democratically elected representatives, it has succeeded in receiving almost 1,500,000 ‘likes’ by August, 2016, thus making it by far the most popular political party on Facebook in the UK (see Figure 1), and ensuring that the texts the group produce reach a large audience.

It may be argued that the far-right in Britain has weakened in recent years with the steady decline of both the British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL), which may be due to the rise of the more moderate United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (Goodwin, 2013). However, the Internet has provided the far-right with multiple opportunities, which Britain First appear to have exploited. They are able to create an online community of like-minded individuals who have anonymous access to their far-right propaganda that inspires and propagates their ideology. The Internet promotes the identity formation of online community members and is used by far-right groups to promote their cyber community, recruit new members, generate wider contacts and augment online and offline mobilisation. Although the number of members of such groups may be small, their messages may be amplified to global audiences because of the Internet, which allows their message to become more vocal and prominent. This is of concern as there appears to be a correlation between the increasing publishing of far-right beliefs through the Internet and the rise of acts of political violence (Simpson and Druxes 2015). Furthermore, a study of British First literature may reveal what discursive techniques the group employs and how their language may have been

4. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/britain-first-battalion-invades-mosque-demanding-removal-of-sexist-entrance-signs-9607978.html> (accessed 09/10/2015)

adapted to appeal to a wider audience, as Edwards (2012) discusses how the BNP adopted moderate public discourse in order to attract voters while maintaining a core ideology of racial prejudice.

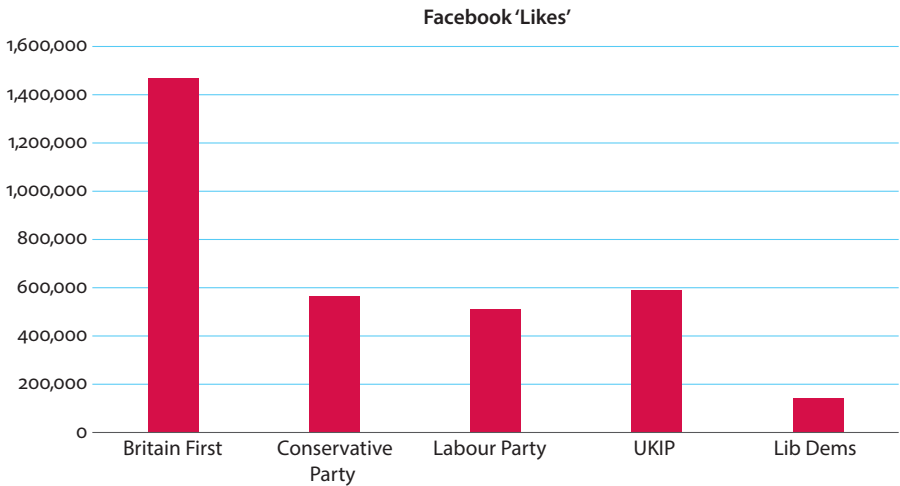


Figure 1. Facebook data (collected 09/08/2016)

The objective of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, we wish to analyse the discourses produced by Britain First, and secondly, research the social media activism of the group in order to comprehend how Britain First is able to achieve such a significant online following.

2. Data

The corpus data for this study were collected from the news section of the Britain First website. The website contains news articles and videos related to the group's ideology and activities; it is also used as a location to sell merchandise and obtain donations from visitors, as well as to provide the means for a visitor to become a group member. Each page offers options to follow the group on Facebook or Twitter. The policies and statements of principles can be found on the website, as can information related to their current campaigns. The linguistic and typographical features enhance text readability as the texts are brief with a bold typeface; the setting is uncluttered and contains a large image with each article. Hart (2014, 76) argues that images can label social actors and reflect ideological discourses when actors are depicted in certain types of activities and roles. This is evident on the Britain First website, where images of Muslims and immigrants are regularly published portraying them as a threat. Other aspects encourage interactivity, such as

'like' and 'share' prompts, social media links, site activity statistics, and centrally-placed popups containing yes/no poll-type questions. Fundraising reminders are also present. On most days, the Britain First leadership upload between three and five news articles; most contain a short text with a picture or video. As these articles were related to issues of interest to Britain First or the group's activities, we consider them to be a significant source to comprehend the group's ideological stance. The articles are also shared on the group's Facebook page and posted on Twitter. All of the texts which were available at the time of collection were compiled into a corpus. Approximately 1,200 articles published between September 2014 and September 2015 were collected, which produced a corpus of 343,964 words. As this study is also interested in analysing how Britain First has achieved such a level of prominence on social media, data from the group's website stating the number of 'shares' each article had received were also collected in order to analyse the strategies employed by the group to disseminate their ideology to such a large audience. Once the most shared articles were identified, an in-depth analysis of the most shared article, together with the comments posted by Facebook readers on the article thread, was undertaken in order to comprehend more fully not only the strategies employed by the Britain First hierarchy, but also the responses and interactions produced by the article readers. In the final phase of the study, we observed the group's cyber activity on Facebook over a 24-hour-period, and recorded all the posting made by Britain First, in addition to the numbers of likes, shares and responses each post received.

3. Methodology

This study combines methodologies of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, a relationship which, according to Baker and McEnery (2015) has been developing for the past 25 years. Influential to the study were works such as Baker et al. (2008) which discussed the combining of corpus linguistics and the discourse historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to undertake a study of the construction of refugees in the British media, which was followed by a more recent study (Baker et al, 2013), examining the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British press. Another study of relevance for this research was Prentice et al. (2012), which utilised corpus methodologies to investigate the language of Islamic extremism.

In order to carry out the analysis of the corpus data, the online Corpus Query System, Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) was used. Firstly, keywords were identified and investigated. Words that are considerably more frequent in one corpus when compared against another (often a much larger reference corpus) are

known as ‘keywords.’ The keyword procedure can therefore be used to identify the significantly different lexis between the Britain First corpus and a larger general corpus.⁵ A keyword list is a more useful approach in signifying lexical items that possibly will merit additional investigation than a raw frequency list as a keyword list provides a degree of prominence, instead of frequency alone (Baker 2014). The first one hundred most salient keywords were collected and manually grouped into themes. Concordance lines were referenced in order to categorise the keywords as accurately as possible. Certain keywords within each theme which were most frequent were selected and investigated further by undertaking a study of collocation. A feature of Sketch Engine is able to not only identify collocates, but also label the grammatical relationship between collocates. Collocates of a word under investigation within a certain grammatical structure are grouped together, this is referred to as a Word Sketch. To gain a more comprehensive insight into the data, the keywords, and their collocates, were then observed in context by undertaking a concordance analysis. A concordance analysis combines quantitative and qualitative analysis and therefore may be considered as more productive than relying on quantitative analysis alone.

Throughout the study, the discourse historical approach (Wodak 2015) has informed the qualitative analysis of the concordance data, and the second and third phases of the research when texts and Facebook data were qualitatively analysed. Such an approach focuses on discourse topics, discursive strategies and argumentation schemes (Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

4. Findings

4.1 Findings: Corpus data

When the keywords are ordered by keyness, it can be seen that the words with the greatest strength of saliency include proper nouns related to locations prominent in discourses associated with immigration, such as Calais, or where antisocial behaviour or acts of violence have taken place in which Muslim individuals were supposedly involved that were highlighted by the media, such as Rotherham. The list contains several principal social actors and there is also a focus on Muslim extremism and British identity. The word *fightback* is also present, which will be discussed later.

5. In this study the reference corpus enTenTen (2012), available on the Sketch Engine website, was used. This is a 12-billion word corpus of English texts collected from the Internet.

Table 1. Top 20 keywords in Britain First corpus

Rank	Keyword	Keyness score	Frequency
1	Calais	408.25	258
2	ISIS	383.66	386
3	migrants	361.30	625
4	Golding	308.38	156
5	Rotherham	296.71	153
6	Choudary	287.50	118
7	leftwing	272.30	126
8	Corbyn	271.33	112
9	Anjem	191.95	77
10	Britain	177.62	1,760
11	jihadi	154.84	84
12	UKIP	138.31	114
13	Jayda	137.64	55
14	ihadists	133.79	84
15	Rigby	122.54	66
16	Britons	116.63	92
17	Celts	111.26	70
18	Fransen	110.51	44
19	extremists	108.06	141
20	fightback	101.73	145

Table 2 presents the top 100 keywords categorised into six themes; this was done manually and may be considered subjective, although concordance lines were carefully considered by both researchers before a keyword was allocated a certain theme.

The theme containing the most keywords is that of Islam; the majority of these focus on aspects of radicalism: *ISIS,ihadists, jihadi, extremists, extremist, jihadist, jihadist, jihad, militants, Daesh, Boko, extremism, radicalised, radicalisation*. By focusing on discourses of radicalism within Islam, Britain First's hierarchy appear to problematise the religion by discursively constructing radical elements within the religion as being a dominant force and stereotyping all Muslims as extremists. Other keywords include: *Sharia, caliphate, kuffar, mosque, burka, halal, mosques*. Such words are utilised to construct Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Western culture and values, and therefore, the UK's Muslim communities are depicted as being unable to integrate with Western society. Keywords such as

Table 2. Top 100 keywords classified by theme

Theme	Keyword
Islam	ISIS, jihadists, jihadi, extremists, extremist, jihadist, Islamic, jihadist, Mohammed, Islamist, Sharia, caliphate, kuffar, Muslim, mosque, jihad, Daesh militants, Boko, Koran, extremism, radicalised, burka, halal, Islam, mosques, radicalisation, paedophiles, paedophile, gangs, beheading, beheaded, grooming, hardline, jailed
locations	Calais, Rotherham, Britain, Eurotunnel, Syria, Ulster, Raqqa, Isles, Woolwich, Folkstone, Kent, Hungary, midlands,
social actors	Golding, Anjem Choudary, Corbyn, Jayda Fransen, Rigby, Dowson, Rahman, Adebolajo, Bouchart, Mikael, Izzadeen, Farage, fusilier
immigration	migrants, asylum, migrant, refugees, smugglers, lorry, lorries, invasions
politics	leftwing, UKIP, BNP, activists, EDL, Sinn Fein, UAF, leaflets, leafleting, fightback
heritage	Celts, Britons, Halley, Monfort, Normans, Picts, Hereward, Jutes, Saxons, Brunel, Cayley, Germanic, Stephenson, Nightingale, patriots, armada, Vortigern, British

paedophiles, paedophile, gangs, beheading, beheaded, grooming, hardline and jailed construct Muslims as a threat and danger to society. Due to the constraints of space, only the three most frequent keywords will be analysed further, these are *Islamic* (566), *Muslim* (479) and *Islam* (306).

Islamic modifies the following words: *State* (40), *extremism* (22), *extremist* (26), *scripture* (10), *preacher* (10), *militant* (10), *fighter* (8), *country* (11), *group* (10), *law* (6), *source* (5), *terrorist* (5), and *movement* (5). It can be seen how Islam is constructed as either radical or as a source of danger. One strategy by which this is achieved is by focusing on ISIS, or the Islamic State, which is a high frequency keyword in the corpus. By doing so, Britain First associates British Muslims with ISIS in order to associate the negative attributes of this group with British Muslims. The following extended concordance lines demonstrates this:⁶

1. Recently, the brutal “**Islamic State**” more commonly known as ISIS ordered 4 million women in Mosel, northern Iraq, to undergo FGM.
2. there are now almost three times as many British Muslims fighting for **Islamic State** than there are serving in the UK military.

The Islamic State is constructed as *brutal* and as victimising women by demanding that the female population of the newly occupied Mosel area undergo FGM. By depicting and highlighting that certain Muslims mistreat women, Britain First positions itself as a party which defends the rights of women. The second concordance line demonstrates how British Muslims are associated with oppression

6. Throughout the study, the concordance lines presented are representative of those found in the data.

as described in the first concordance line. British Muslims are seen as not only sympathising with the Islamic State, but joining the group in its military conflict. In doing so, British Muslims are constructed as unpatriotic towards Britain, and as they prefer to fight for the Islamic State in preference to the British military, it is clearly indicated where their loyalties lie. By fighting for such an enemy as ISIS, British Muslims are constructed as a danger and a threat to British society.

The second most frequent collocate of *Islamic* is *extremists* (26). Concordance line 3 demonstrates how the Britain First hierarchy construct the UK as being a country in which Muslim radicals are not only able to reside, but are aided in doing so by the political establishment. The use of the word *appeasement* by the Britain First hierarchy depicts the political establishment as weak in the face of tyranny, and unwilling or unable to act when a response is called for. *Appeasement* may also be understood as an intertextual reference to Nazism, which implicitly invokes the British Prime Minister Chamberlain's appeasement with Germany, which some considered to be an act of treason and weakness that resulted in the Second World War.

3. Britain is becoming a "safe haven" for **Islamic extremists**, attracted by an official policy of appeasement and a soft touch benefits system.

Furthermore, the British welfare system is criticised as being too generous, which acts as a further incentive for Muslim radicals to immigrate to the UK and live off government handouts at the expense of the indigenous British population. The use of the phrase *safe haven*, inside quotes to question the validity of such a notion, appears to indicate that Islamic extremists are beyond the reach of the law once they are in the UK, regardless of their actions or intentions; because the government is either unwilling or unable to act due to the fact that they are Muslim, extremists are able to receive preferential treatment in Britain.

The second most frequent keyword related to the theme of Islam is *Muslim* (479), which modifies: *Man* (21), *extremist* (14), *gang* (12), *woman* (13), *convert* (10), *community* (9), *patrol* (7), *paedophiles* (7), *group* (13), *area* (8), *leader* (7), *scholar* (5), *fanatic* (5), *country* (8). Again, there is the notion of radicalism associated with Islam, that the two concepts are inseparable. There is a further construction of so-called *Muslim areas*, regions which, according to Britain First, have been dominated by Muslims where indigenous British are forced out. This is also associated with *Muslim patrols*; groups of Muslim men patrol the streets of these *Muslim areas* in order to enforce Muslim social and religious standards upon citizens within that area. Collocates such as *gang*, *community*, and *group* depict Muslims as remaining within their own ethnic group and not integrating in the

wider society. In addition, the collocate *gang* may construct a notion of threat, as can be seen in the following extended concordance line. It may also be noted that the threat in example 4 is non-political; this makes it more pervasive in terms of people's everyday lives.

4. In many cases it's dozens of girls being exploited, and yet for over a decade the police and authorities have done nothing to stop it. Fear of being accused of 'racism', and an obsession with maintaining an illusion of 'community cohesion' came before protecting our children. The victims are mainly young, white British girls - although the Sikh community has also been targeted. The offenders are primarily **Muslim men**, often of Pakistani origin, spanning all age groups. Many cases feature married men with children of their own abusing countless young girls, in many instances girls have fallen victim to dozens, if not hundreds of men.

Muslim men are accused of paedophilia and of being members of grooming gangs which preyed on *young white British girls*. Thus the indigenous whites of Britain are constructed as victims of Muslim men who are depicted as sexual predators. Again, the political and law enforcement authorities are criticised for their inaction, the reason for which was their unwillingness to hold the perpetrators accountable for fear of the negative reaction this may have caused. Thus, the *Muslim men* were allowed to continue their activities of targeting and abusing children from the indigenous population. The problem is constructed as a widespread and long term phenomenon: *Dozens of girls were victims and hundreds of men involved*. However, it is ignored that grooming gangs do not consist solely of Muslim men, but of individuals from a wide range of ethnic, and social backgrounds.

The third most frequent keyword within the theme of Islam is *Islam* (306). When collocates of this are investigated, it can be seen that the most frequent pattern is of *Islam* as the subject of the verb *be* (37), which may be used to define or attribute characteristics to the religion, as concordance lines 5 and 6 indicate:

5. The rapid growth of militant **Islam is** leading to the suppression of women, freedom of speech and racist attacks.

6. The biggest and most obstinate anti-homosexual force in the world today is not Christianity, but Islam. "Homophobia" in **Islam is** chronic, institutional, widespread and total.

Often Britain First leadership make no distinction between the two forms of the religion and consider all forms of Islam to have similar characteristics to that of the

radicalised version. Islam is constructed as an ideology which oppresses women, and gay men and lesbians, as well as the freedom of speech, and it is constructed as racist, due to its supposed level of racial intolerance and inability to assimilate with other cultures. As Britain First positions itself in dichotomy with Islam, by opposing all Islamic ideology, they construct themselves as anti-racist, as defenders of women, gay rights, and the freedom of speech.

When the keywords grouped in the theme of immigration were investigated, the most frequent keywords were: *Migrants* (428), *refugees* (117), *migrant* (101), *asylum* (153), and *smugglers* (23). By studying collocates of the keyword *migrants* further, it was found to be the subject of *try* (15), *storm* (7), *die* (7), *cross* (6), *reach* (5), *enter* (5), *arrive* (5), *have* (28) and *be* (45). Other less frequent collocates included *attempt* (3), *clamber* (3), *flood* (3), *target* (3), *flee* (3), *smuggle* (2), and *sneak* (2). While some of these collocates express the movement of migrants and the journeys such migrants undertake, there is also a discourse of danger and threat present. This can be seen further when the modifiers of *migrants* are studied, which include: *Desperate* (12), *economic* (8), *illegal* (4), *angry* (2). Numbers are used to hyperbolically construct the situation:

7. we are allowing untold thousands of undeserving **migrants** into our country

It can be seen how the number of migrants is hyperbolically constructed as being *untold thousands*,⁷ and that they are stereotypically labelled as *undeserving* regardless of any information being provided concerning the individuals wishing to enter the UK.

When the collocate *be* (45) is analysed, the construction of migrants by Britain First is more clearly depicted:

8. The influx of **migrants** is putting Britain's primary schools under unprecedented pressure, a study reveals. Nearly 38,000 children under 10 arrived here last year alone.

By allowing migrants into the UK in such large numbers, (*influx*) the authorities are putting an *unprecedented* strain on the country, in this instance the educational system is given as an example. Again, numbers are used to hyperbolically construct the notion that the indigenous children of the UK are the victims of a governmental policy which allows such large numbers of people to settle.

9. Hungary's Prime Minister warned the influx of Muslim **migrants** was

7. The reported numbers of migrants are vague and imprecise.

threatening ‘Christian roots’ and would leave Europeans a ‘minority on their own continent’

Another major concern of Britain First is the protection of the indigenous culture of the UK, which they consider is under threat due to governmental immigration policies. Again, the word *influx* is employed to construct a large-scale movement of people. In concordance line 9, the migrants are labelled as *Muslim*; their presence in Europe is depicted as being a danger to the continued existence of Christian culture. By constructing Muslims as such, Islam is depicted as a religion of conquest, which will spread throughout a country and leave the indigenous Christians as a minority religion and culture.

10. The city’s mayor Natacha Bouchart has said illegal migrants are prepared to die to cross the Channel, believing it to be like the mythical lost city of gold, El Dorado.

In concordance line 10, migrants are labelled as *illegal* and willing to go to extreme lengths to enter the UK, *prepared to die*. However, the reason for doing so is for economic reasons alone, which according to Britain First, invalidates the legitimacy of a migrant’s right to reside and work in the country. This also obscures the fact that most of these people are fleeing war, abject poverty, disease or political persecution.

When the keywords grouped in the theme of location were considered, there appeared to be two main concepts which linked the words together; they were either associated with focal points of the refugee crisis: *Calais* (215), *Eurotunnel* (30), *Folkestone* (16), *Kent* (119) and *Hungary* (63), or related to scenes of conflict or criminality related to Muslims: *Rotherham*⁸ (148), *Syria* (284), *Raqqa* (14) and *Woolwich*⁹ (16). The most frequent of these keywords in the corpus is *Syria*; *Iraq* (58) was a frequent collocate of *Syria* as the regional conflict was constructed in terms of an armed conflict between ISIS and other military groups. Collocates of *Syria* include: *Fight* (9), *ISIS* (5), *war* (5) *Jihadists* (4), *conflict* (3), *fighter* (3), *wartorn* (3), *hostage* (2), *terrorist* (2) and *kill* (2).

11. ISIS and Al Qaeda are slaughtering their way through **Syria**, Iraq and Libya. They are already murdering untold numbers of Christians and boast openly of their intention to bring their Jihad to the streets of Europe too.

8. Location of widespread organised child sexual abuse between 1997 and 2013, where five men of Pakistani heritage were found guilty of sexual offences against minors.

9. Location where Lee Rigby, a British soldier, was murdered by two Islamic extremists.

Thus, the conflict taking place in Syria is constructed as a religious struggle between Christianity and Islam, which will affect European nations, if the members of ISIS and Al Qaeda are able to achieve their intention of extending the battle in Europe. Other collocates of Syria include *travel* (14) and *go* (12).

12. On Tuesday, Richard Walton, the head of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command, said that children as young as sixteen were **travelling** to **Syria** to fight. There are hundreds of British-born battle-hardened Islamic fighters in Syria. Once they have succeeded, they will return to Britain!

It can be seen how the Britain First elite associate British Muslims with the conflict in Syria. Certain Islamic combatants are labelled as *British-born*, implicating British Muslim communities; furthermore, the fighters are constructed as *battle-hardened*, which implies a threat and danger to the UK, particularly as these individuals are expected to return to the UK, where it is implied, they will continue their fight, but this time against the indigenous Christian population of Britain. Numbers are once again employed to add hyperbole to the statement. The writer also remarks that some of the Islamic fighters are *children as young as sixteen*, which further implicates the Muslim community in the UK as an extremist group which has not assimilated into UK society, but rather has elements that wish to destroy it.

When the keywords of social actors are investigated, the most frequent keyword was *Golding* (156). At the time of writing, Paul Golding is the Chairman of Britain First, with Jayda Franson, another pair of frequent keywords in the data, as deputy. Collocates of *Golding* included modifiers such as *leader* (60), *Chairman* (23) indicating his position within the party. *Golding* was the subject of *give* (5), *film* (2), *attend* (2), *announce* (2), *join* (2), *appear* (2), describing his activities as party leader. However, *Golding* was also the object of *interview* (2), *prosecute* (2) and *arrest* (5), which appears to indicate a discourse related to prosecution as the following concordance line indicates:

13. Recently, Mr **Golding** was arrested and charged for exposing an Al Qaeda terrorist living anonymously in Essex.

Thus the leader of Britain First is constructed as a victim at the hands of the political and law enforcement authorities of the UK; moreover, he is persecuted for his stance against *an Al Qaeda terrorist* residing in Britain, which constructs the UK authorities as supporting and protecting a terrorist while prosecuting an indigenous British citizen opposed to that person's presence in Britain.

Another principal social actor in the corpus is *Choudary*¹⁰ (118).

14. Operation Fightback continues as Britain First takes it right to the doorstep of the 'Islamic Sharia Council' in the search for vile hate preacher Anjem **Choudary**. Disgusting benefits parasite **Choudary**, who always seems to have links to Muslims carrying out terror atrocities both here and abroad, makes no secret of his hatred and contempt for all we hold dear.

Britain First label their activity as *Operation Fightback*, which may imply that their aim is to respond to a situation in which an act or campaign of resistance is necessary, or an act to resist an attack. In this instance, it is described how they visited the *Islamic Sharia Council* in search of Anjem Choudary, who is labelled as *vile* and *disgusting*, as a *hate preacher* and a *benefits parasite*.

This individual is constructed in binary opposition to the aims and beliefs of Britain First, and linked with *terror atrocities*. Thus, he is constructed as a Muslim radical associated with Sharia law and terror attacks against both the British population in the UK and abroad. Britain First focuses on such individuals as they protest the presence of a Muslim extremist, who is opposed to Western society and yet claims social welfare benefits while remaining in the country. Britain First make their stance transparent, they wish to see such people as Choudary either imprisoned or deported. As neither take place, Britain First criticises the government for its unwillingness or inability to act. Choudary is labelled as a *disgusting benefits parasite*. Baker et al. (2013: 177) describe how the British press construct Muslims as being work-shy or 'scroungers' who claim benefits from the British government and are depicted as being underserving of the benefits they supposedly claim. It can be seen from this extract that Britain First also disseminate this stereotype.

When the keywords associated with politics were investigated, it could be seen that the Britain First hierarchy attempt to distance themselves from the two major far-right groups in the UK, the EDL (English Defence League) and the BNP (British National Party). Paul Goulding had close connections with the BNP and used to be its press officer as well as a BNP councilor in Seven Oaks, Kent between 2009 and 2011. Furthermore, the street protests which Britain First organises are not dissimilar to those held by the EDL, although the hierarchy of Britain First attempt to position themselves as less extreme than both these parties and closer to the more moderate UKIP.

15. since the utter collapse of the **EDL** and **BNP** it is Britain First

10. Anjem Choudary is a radical Muslim activist in the UK, who supports Sharia law and has organised several anti-Western demonstrations in the UK.

these young men and woman are looking to for direction...WE MUST BE ABLE TO PROVIDE THIS!

16. While no great fans of **UKIP**, Britain First has hundreds of ex-British Forces street activists and several armoured ex-army Land Rovers and we now put our men and our resources at UKIP's disposal during the period of election campaigning

Concordance line 15 demonstrates how Britain First constructs both the BNP and the EDL as having collapsed and that they are the party to whom the supporters of those two parties can now turn. Concordance line 16 illustrates how the hierarchy of Britain First attempt to strengthen ties with the more moderate and larger political party UKIP by offering to provide security services to UKIP members in the run up to the national elections in the UK.

Another keyword of significance in this group is *Fightback*. Fightback is the 20th ranked keyword, it occurs 145 times in the corpus, and is used as either a noun or a verb, or as a noun as part of the phrase *Operation Fightback*, and appears in the mission statement of the group. It may be seen as an attempt by the group to be a response to the 'Muslim aggression' or threat and may act as a link between the official ideology of the group and the activism of the group's Internet followers. The term may represent the group's vigilantism strategy of protecting 'our people' against the aggressive representatives of Islam, or other groups and individuals, such as migrants. It could also be seen as reflecting the official slogan of the group: 'Taking our country back'. As will be seen later in the paper, this element of Britain First ideology is embraced by the group's social media users as the 'most shared' articles are related to a form of anti-Muslim retaliation; furthermore such activities are often highly violent in context.

The final group of keywords was grouped according to the theme of heritage. The group contained words related to historical figures or events in the UK, although primarily it contains words which were related to the formation of the indigenous population of Britain. Such keywords included: *Celts*, *Britons*, *Normans*, *Picts*, *Jutes*, *Saxons*, and *Germanic*. The most frequent of these was *Celts* (70); when collocates were investigated, it was observed that the Celts were constructed as a warrior-like people: *Fierce* (4), *warriors* (4), *fight* (4), *fighting* (4), *ferocious* (3), as were the *Picts* (26) as the following concordance line demonstrates:

17. The ferocity of the northern British **Celts**, the **Picts**, soon forced the Romans to retreat further to the south, into northern England.

By depicting the ancient British as ferocious combatants in a struggle against an invading force which intended to take over their land and destroy their way of life,

the hierarchy of Britain First may be drawing parallels with what they consider to be their struggle against immigrants and the supposed spread of Islam.

4.2 Findings: Social media activism

In the next phase of the analysis, all the articles of the corpus were observed again in order to note the number of shares each article had received on Facebook. Table 3 presents the twenty most shared articles in the 12-month period in which the texts were produced. A notable finding was that none of the most shared articles made any reference to Britain First, nor to the group leaders or their activities. There was no mention of street protests or mosque invasions, neither was xenophobic rhetoric evident; thus, texts which were shared by a large number of readers did not include many of the discourses which were prominent in the corpus data analysis. Themes of the most shared articles centred on the armed conflict with ISIS and the ongoing military operations in Afghanistan. The second major theme of the articles was related to the notion of the Islamification of the UK and the consequences of this on the indigenous population there. The second most shared article was related to Anjem Choudary; articles concerning Lee Rigby also featured prominently.

At this point in the study, we will focus on the most shared article in the corpus and the comments posted by Britain First supporters in response. The article *Gurkha Who Returned To Base With Taliban Commanders Head Cleared For Duty* was shared 43,600 times and received 484 comments. The story had been reported in the tabloid British press in October 2011,¹¹ and was posted in October 2014 by Britain First. The article, which is headed by a large photograph of a Gurkha soldier in an aggressive pose with a Kukri knife, is as follows:

The Nepalese soldier with 1st Battalion, Royal Gurkha Rifles who was removed from Afghanistan after beheading a Taliban commander, has now been cleared for duty after a four year investigation. In July of 2010 Gurkha soldiers conducted a raid in Helmand province to kill or capture a high value individual. The troops killed their man, but the mission had very specific instructions to bring back proof that they had got the right guy. Initially, the Gurkhas attempted to retrieve the entire body for identification, but soon found themselves engaged in an intense Taliban counter attack. The Gurkhas needed to break contact, but they also needed to complete their mission. The soldier made the heat-of-the-moment decision to pull out his traditional Kukri knife and take only the Taliban commander's head, allowing his men to remain mobile and complete their objective. Rather

11. The Daily Mail <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2049987/Gurkha-beheaded-Taliban-soldier-Afghanistan-battle-cleared-return-duty.html> (accessed: 18/10/2015)

Table 3. Most shared articles in the Britain First corpus

Rank	Post title	Shares
1	Gurkha Who Returned To Base With Taliban Commanders Head Cleared For Duty	43,600
2	Anjem Choudary Suffers Beating While In Prison	42,100
3	English School Bans English Speaking Children From School Trip	20,600
4	Syrian Boy Drowned Because His Father Wanted New Teeth	20,500
5	Brave Female Fighters Killing Ten ISIS Jihadis A Day	19,000
6	Queen Receives Applause For Braving Islamic Terrorist Threat	18,600
7	Lee Rigby to finally get memorial in Woolwich	17,600
8	Putin prepares to attack ISIS	17,600
9	European Court Of Human Rights Rules In Favour Of French Burka Ban	15,300
10	Putin goes to war against ISIS	12,200
11	Couple Thrown Off Bus and Called 'Racist' For Singing Peppa Pig	12,200
12	Breaking News! Britain Declares War On Islamic State	11,100
13	Creeping Islamification! Muslim Student 'Shocked' After Buying Packet Of Cheese And Onion Roll That Contained Pork	11,000
14	Paedophiles In Australia To Face Chemical Castration	10,600
15	Eastern Europe erupts into protests against migrants	10,000
16	Asian Grooming Gangs: Don't Lump Sikhs & Hindus In With Muslims	9,600
17	Morrisons Forced 89-Year-Old Poppy Seller To Stand Outside	9,400
18	Victory! Greenwich Council Agree To Memorial For Lee Rigby	9,100
19	Russia Builds Airbase In Syria To Pound Islamic State	8,800
20	German Bikers Join Dutch Bikers To Fight Islamic State	8,400

than acknowledging the soldier for placing the mission first and his quick initiative under hostile fire, POG commanders, who place public relations in a higher priority bracket than mission, went on a campaign of shaming the individual to the media as they rushed him out of country. Eventually, common sense won out, and now the soldier is finally being commended for his dedication to duty.

Britain First stands shoulder to shoulder with our Gurkha allies and soldiers.

The text is critical of the military hierarchy¹² for allowing an investigation of the soldier to take place, while praising the soldier for his actions. The last line of the text is the only mention of Britain First, who express their solidarity with both the Gurkhas and British soldiers.

12. POG is an acronym for Personnel Other than Grunts, pejorative military slang.

As the comments posted on Facebook are moderated by Britain First, any dissenting comments can be deleted, leaving only postings which reflect the ideological position of the group's hierarchy. It can be seen that the posts which remained on the thread expressed positive opinions of the soldier and his actions, while being critical of the actions of the military hierarchy.

The most common responses on the thread were short posts which praised the soldier for his actions while remaining uncritical of the military hierarchy for placing him under investigation, as the following representative post indicates: *Give that man a medal*. Other posters expressed disapproval of the military hierarchy and compared them unfavourably in comparison to the actions and integrity of the soldier: *Those that sought to investigate and punish are no more than kippers Two faced and gutless*. Certain posters were critical of the military commanders who place the Gurkha under investigation, while others expressed criticism of the political establishment for their lack of support of the soldiers in combat: *This man should be honoured.... Where's his medal of honour???... Politicians should be ashamed of themselves...* Another theme within the thread expressed the notion that the enemy, in this particular instance, the Taliban, should have been treated more harshly, conveying regret that he decapitated the enemy once he had been killed: *Shame he waited until he was dead to cut his head off...* Other posters, while acknowledging and endorsing the actions of the soldier, conveyed gratitude for his actions as it was considered that such actions which took place in Afghanistan would contribute to maintaining a degree of safety in the UK by preventing acts of terrorism from taking place there: *Keep reaping those heads, well done and thank you for keeping the rest of us safe!* Other posters compared the event to the actions of ISIS in Syria and Iraq: *There will be no one joining up shortly, for fear of being court marshalled and jailed for firing your weapon at the enemy, because of DO GOODERS, different for these ISIS ba@tards beheading our guys*. It can be seen again how the establishment is constructed negatively, as being unsupportive of the soldiers who are faced with a brutal enemy.

Throughout the thread, posters expressed support for the soldier and his action while voicing criticism of the military and political establishments. However, there were instances when posters were critical of the soldier by stating that it was unnecessary to go to such lengths as decapitating the corpse in order to provide evidence that the target had been killed: *A finger would have sufficed?* One poster expressed criticism of Britain First for posting an article which praised a foreigner. Although the group state that they are pro-military, they also declare that, if in power, they would deport all non-indigenous citizens from the UK. Thus, it appears a contradiction to the core values of the party that they would construct a foreign soldier in such a positive manner: *So this foreign person is okay with you all then? But all the ones that live in England need to get out? I'm confused! Tell me what*

to believe!!! This may indicate that Britain First may be depicting foreigners in a positive light only when they 'defect' and become allies of the British. Furthermore, as Britain First hierarchy monitor and moderate their Facebook wall, it is of interest that such a comment was not removed. It does appear that most contradictory opinions are deleted from threads on the Facebook page, thereby creating an 'echo chamber' whereby only the ideology of the group's hierarchy remains.

In the final phase of the analysis investigating social activism, we will consider a 24-hour timeline¹³ of all the articles posted on the Britain First Facebook wall in order to comprehend the degree of activity on social media by the group's elite. As group elite members are constantly uploading, and later deleting, new material on the Internet in order to attract the attention of a global audience, not merely UK Internet users, the wall is in a constant state of fluidity and it is therefore of interest to study not only what is being uploaded, but also what is the level of response from the readership. Accordingly, the number of likes, shares and comments each post received was taken into consideration. It must be noted that the readership response data is for the instance at which the timeline data was recorded. For example, an image with a black background and white lettering with the words *Refugees not welcome. Share if you agree* had received 3,719 likes, 3,125 shares, and 145 comments nine hours after it had been posted on the Facebook wall. Three days after the post had been made, those numbers had risen to 5,897 likes, 6,510 shares, and 234 comments.

During a 24-hour period on October 17, 2015, members of the Britain First hierarchy uploaded 52 unique posts on their Facebook wall. The most frequent topic found was that concerning ISIS, primarily related to the military campaign against the Islamic group, or detailing atrocities committed by them. A second prominent theme of posts was related to the Britain First party, both detailing events and activities, or by asking for donations to support the group. Christianity was another key subject on the Facebook wall, however, when the posts were observed, it could be seen that Christians were constructed as victims, persecuted by Muslims. Less frequent topics included Muslims in the UK and the US, articles related to heritage or significant individuals from the past such as Churchill, issues related to immigration, anti-establishment posts and articles related to crime and racism.

However, the posts did not receive the same amount of attention from the Facebook audience. Even though articles had been posted for varying lengths of time, and therefore had a longer time in which to receive likes, shares, and comments, it could be seen that there were clear indications as to which topics received a greater amount of social media activity, and which did not.

13. The data was collected 17/10/2015

Table 4. Articles which received most social media activity

Rank	Time since post	Title	Likes	Shares	Comments	Total interactions
1	9 hrs.	Refugees not Welcome: Share if you agree	3,719	3,125	145	6989
2	4 hrs.	Justice for the victims of Muslim grooming gangs	2,336	1,147	128	3611
3	22 hrs.	British mother flew to Syria with 5 children, says ISIS not my cup of tea	2,227	479	772	3478
4	1 hr.	Putin sends flamethrower missile system to wipe out ISIS	2,376	537	201	3114
5	21 hrs.	Putin: 7,000 people from ex-Soviet republics estimated to fight alongside ISIS	2,692	267	146	3105

The two posts which received the most social media activity were directly related to the UK. The first post is concerned with the refugee crisis in Europe 2015, and as previously stated, was a simple black and white image asking the readership to share the image if they agreed that the refugees were unwelcome in the UK. The post which received the second-most social media activity was related to the so called Muslim grooming gangs. Again, the post was an image with a brief message. The image consisted of a background of photographic portraits of ethnic Asian men, in the foreground was an image of a broom being used to sweep dust under a carpet. Superimposed on this were the words: *Stop sweeping child abuse by Muslim gangs under the carpet!* The next three high social media activity posts were all related to ISIS, it was of interest that it was the actions of the Russian president Putin, a Christian, which were reported and not those of the Western coalition, which, at the time of the data collection, was also involved in a military conflict with the Islamic group.

When the posts which received the least amount of activity were observed, it could be seen that the majority of these posts were related to activities directly associated to Britain First, either signing up for a newsletter, asking for a donation, or providing information concerning an upcoming party conference. Another post which received little attention was a link to an informational video of the Yazidis ethnic group and the post which received the fifth least amount of activity was concerned with the notion that Christians were victimised by Muslims.

The most shared titles appear to reflect the existence of a self-defensive community intensely circulating information on anti-Islam opposition, or vindicating when anti-Muslim activity is officially recompensed, ridiculing the Muslim culture.

Table 5. Articles which received the least social media activity in a 24-hour period

Rank	Time since post	Title	Likes	Shares	Comments	Total interactions
1	1 hr.	Sign up for Britain First Action Bulletins!	22	1	5	28
2	2 hrs.	Join Britain First for only £2 per month and help take our country back	19	4	9	32
3	6 hrs.	Video: Who are the Yazidis and why is ISIS targeting them?	23	5	8	36
4	22 hrs.	Britain First conference (Nov. 14)	28	4	6	38
5	22 hrs.	Christian boy killed by Muslim classmates	39	0	8	47

The high level of traffic of Britain First posts exposing Muslim non-political crime or instances of allegedly anti-British acts by local authorities demonstrate the sharing by Britain First site users of a sense of injustice against the in-group.

5. Discussion

Analysis of the corpus data demonstrates that the goal of Britain First is an ethnically and culturally homogenous society that promises to solve social and individual problems by excluding 'the Other'. There is an ethno-national aspect to the construction of the national identity of the in-group. This notion does not include all British people. Britain First is anti-cosmopolitan, anti-government and anti-integration; it possesses a strong opposition to immigration and anyone who supports such a stance. Britain First positions itself as defender of the values of Britain and in doing so is in opposition to all that is foreign, and thus focuses on Islam and Muslims as being in opposition to the British people. Britain First constructs a shared British heritage to define what it means to be British, using not only recent history, but also the ancient past of the Celts and the Picts in order to define the shared characteristics of what it means to be British and to exclude all those who do not share such a heritage. Among the qualities of 'the people' is the notion that all British people are Christian. Britain First appears to use Christianity as a vehicle to construct a cultural conflict against Islam. Furthermore, Christians are constructed as the victims of Muslim aggression, both in the UK and globally. All that is alien is identified and ruled out in order to ensure the nation's survival. Thus, inclusion to the in-group is based on shared historical, national, religious, and socio-political factors, although it must be noted that racial factors are also involved,

although not explicitly stated as such by the group. Exclusion from this group creates an Us-Them dichotomy, the boundaries of which are continually reaffirmed by the group elite. Such boundaries are reinforced utilising multiple discourses of fear related to a continuum of threats to the in-group's society and culture that are blamed on a constructed scapegoat, 'the Other', primarily Muslims, Islam and immigrants. Islam is seen as fundamentally incompatible with Western values and the Western way of life, and so Muslim communities are therefore deemed to be unassimilable in the UK. Such findings reflect those of Atton (2006), who studied the BNP's website and found that discourses and identities produced there draw on the post-colonial Other, and the oppression practiced by the Other, which positioned the indigenous white population as victims.

Britain First constructs discourses of fear related to various issues and dangers, and finds scapegoats to blame for those threats. The group focuses on the narrative of the threat of Islam as 'the Other' to blame for the in-group's problems. To do this they construct stereotypes for both the in-group and the out-group. Muslims are stereotyped as radical, with a focus on radical Muslim preachers, and as sexual predators preying on white women and children. Threats to the British and Christian way of life are constructed as Islam is depicted as spreading throughout the UK, and as establishing Muslim-only areas, which are challenged by Britain First. Christians are constructed as victims of the encroaching Islam, but so too are British people whose lifestyle and culture are being challenged. Muslims are also seen as a military threat with a focus on ISIS and the danger posed by this group to the safety and security of the UK. As Kassimeris & Jackson (2015) deconstruct the EDL's claim that Islamophobia is a rational reaction to a deviant Muslim presence in the UK, this paper has highlighted how and which aspects of its propaganda are embraced by Internet users.

As the data has shown, Britain First posts new material approximately 50 times a day, therefore, a wide variety of content is made available to the Internet audience, covering a broad range of topics from articles displaying extreme Islamophobia to articles supporting the British royal family and the armed forces; thus a wide audience of readers may find material that is of interest or which they support. A certain amount of material posted by the group may be considered as inflammatory and controversial in order to elicit an immediate response. An example of this is an article with the title: *Illegal immigrant who molested woman dodges deportation*. Such an approach may be seen as encouraging instinctual emotional responses rather than considered opinion. In addition to this, a considerable amount of material encourages readers to like and share posts, which may make no mention to Britain First, Islam, or immigration. An example of this is an image which was posted of British soldiers marching in a street with the following message: *Like and share if you are proud of our troops*. It may be possible that certain Facebook users,

on seeing such a post, like and share this genre of material with no knowledge of its origins. It is this form of postings which generate the most cyber activity for Britain First. Articles related to an appeal to tradition, armed forces and the royal family may be viewed sympathetically by more people than those who agree with extreme Islamophobic texts and racist rhetoric. Other strategies include creating simple yes/no surveys, which also create considerable cyber activity. Moreover, articles which recount the activities of the group create little cyber activity and those which ask for donations or for individuals to participate in one of their street demonstrations, even less.

This study has demonstrated that Britain First is able to generate more cyber activity on Facebook than any other political party in the UK by posting populist material, which may be a strategy employed by the group to expose and influence the reader in favour of their stance. It appears that a principle strategy of the group is to reach as large an audience as possible, even though the material posted has little association to their core ideology, as they often share their Facebook data, particularly the number of likes they have received, with their followers in order to demonstrate the amount of popular support they construct themselves as having. By continually attempting to increase their audience reach and the amount of cyber activity they generate, Britain First endeavours to manipulate the algorithms of Facebook, the more hits and likes it gets, the more Facebook will prioritise the group, thus the more likely their content is to appear on a person's feed or wall. It must be noted that a content analysis of the social media activity of Britain First may only reveal the surface of their ideological position, which may only be fully understood by a historic, contextualised and intertextual analysis. As Daniels (2009) describes, certain far-right groups have taken advantage of the Internet by creating sites in which it is difficult to separate fact from propaganda, and thus, such groups are able to hide their true agenda.

By maintaining such a strategy, the group has been able to generate almost 1,500,000 likes as of August, 2016, thereby creating an aura of popular support. However, online popularity does not necessarily equate to offline support. At a protest organised by Britain First against the building of a mosque in Burton-on-Trent in the UK in October, 2015, according to the British broadsheet, *The Independent*, only 210 supporters attended.¹⁴ Britain First has also contested elections, but has received little support from the electorate. At a by-election in Rotherham and Strood, 2014, Britain First's deputy leader, Jayda Fransen, obtained 56 votes.¹⁵

14. <http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/britain-firsts-antimosque-rally-in-burtonontrent-backfired-in-a-brilliantly-british-way--bJxwyZ9IAP1> (accessed 27/10/2015)

15. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/live/2014/nov/20/rochester-and-strood-byelection-results-live-coverage> (accessed 27/10/2015)

When Golding participated in the elections for Mayor of London in 2016, he received 1.2% of the vote.¹⁶ However, using such examples to argue that creating a large amount of cyber activity may have little influence on offline popularity and support may be over simplistic, as online activity may eventually expand offline support. One indication of the possible increasing popularity offline of Britain First is that the group received the largest amount of financial donations according to the Electoral Commission's donations league table for smaller parties.¹⁷ Britain First received a total income of £159,516 in 2014 – three times the amount which it raised the previous year, which may indicate a growing awareness and support for the party. It remains to be seen if offline support of the group continues to grow.

6. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the discourses produced by the elite members of Britain First and emphasised the xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic rhetoric of the group. The type of aggression discursively promoted by Britain First, the organised online and offline vigilantism against a methodologically constructed Islamist enemy is internalised, prioritised and reproduced or mirrored by the supporters of Britain First on social media. Our investigation has demonstrated how the group utilise fear and threat of 'the Other' as a main approach to attract support, stereotyping the out-group as radical and a danger. Our analysis of the cyber activism of Britain First has revealed that although the group elite emphasise the amount of Facebook activity they are able to generate, a large proportion of this is related to themes of little or no relevance to their extreme ideological stance. However, the fact remains that at the time of writing, Britain First is able to reach a large Internet audience, and thus research such as this may facilitate revealing the rhetorical strategies and recruiting tactics of such right-wing populist groups.

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