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Islamophobic Sentiment in the U.S. Population

My goal was to analyze U.S. public sentiment towards Muslim and Muslim Americans via Twitter and its effects on the inclusion of Muslim people in the religiously pluralistic society that the United States prides itself on. To conduct my research, I first began by writing a tweet sentiment analysis program that I lovingly named Tweetomatic.

Tweetomatic operates in five main stages. First, it requests a fixed number of tweets per day in a given time range containing certain words in the United States. For most of my data, I sampled 1,000 tweets per day for anywhere from 30 days to several years containing the words “Muslim” or “Islam”. Each tweet is then sanitized by removing links and trying to convert hashtags back into English. Then, the text of the tweet is analyzed using the Stanford Core Natural Language Processing library to assign a part of speech to each word, which is an important step for sentiment analysis as the meaning conveyed by a word can change greatly based on how it is used. The words along with their grammatical categorization are then associated with a sentiment score from SentiWordNet, a database of over 150,000 word sentiment ratings. Finally, the sentiments of each word in a tweet are summed to get the overall sentiment score. In total, I analyzed almost two million tweets.

Now, with the framework to do so, I wanted to follow two main threads. First, how sentiment has shifted over time especially in relation to the recent presidential election and travel

ban executive order? My data showed a steady, worrying declining trend in sentiment surrounding Islam for at least the past 4 years. Since December, 2015 the 15-day average sentiment has not risen above zero (neutral). This is reflective of the growing Islamophobia taking hold of many Americans and the fact that this trend has no signs of stopping. In my data from early 2017, there are clear and substantial drops (a delta of around 0.15) on the day that President Trump was elected in addition to the day the travel ban was announced. I also noted that there was a slow, but steady rise in sentiment prior to Trump's election; however, average sentiment has not returned to pre-Trump levels since his election.

Another facet I wanted to explore was the impact of terrorist attacks on public sentiment towards Muslims, specifically regarding the phenomena surrounding the unwarranted coupling of Islam to terrorist attacks by the news media before the facts are known, similar to those during the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing (Cainkar 108). Unfortunately, I could not study this specific event due to the non-existence of Twitter in 1995, but as Powell points out there have been many attacks in recent years in which unfounded accusations of Islamic motivations were spewed from the very outset of coverage (Powell 95-100). Surprisingly, I was unable to find a large drop in average sentiment correlated with any attacks unaffiliated with Islam-based motivations. It is possible, however, that dips in sentiment did occur, but not severely enough to impact the average. Regardless, this appears to indicate that the American public is not so easily tricked by media manipulation, however this does not mean that the well-documented hostility and discrimination that Muslim men and women that American citizens often face is not real (McCloud 57,58; Selod 9-13,15). On the other hand, attacks that were, according to terrorist groups or the perpetrator themselves, motivated by radical Islam were accompanied by steep

drops in sentiment. In addition, it appears to take several days to weeks for sentiment to return to pre-attack levels or, though this has yet to happen for the 2015 Paris Attacks. This is indicative that, as a result of such attacks, Americans possess “lingering resentment and reservations about Arab and Muslim American” (Panagopoulos 613-615).

It is important to study and take note of trends in public portrayals of and feelings towards Islam in the United States if we wish to right the wrongs committed against Muslims by American society and avoid the possibility of a history of terrible discrimination and internment from repeating itself. Only through understanding can we hope to defuse the building resentment that many Americans, including the government itself, harbor towards Muslim Americans and Muslims around the globe.

Tentative Works Cited

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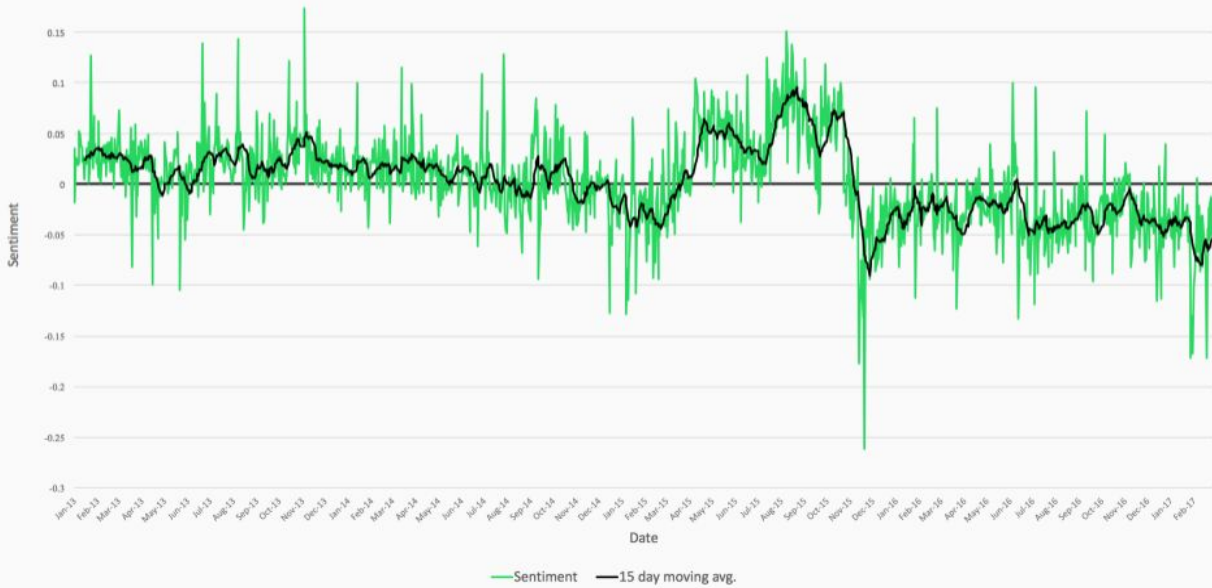
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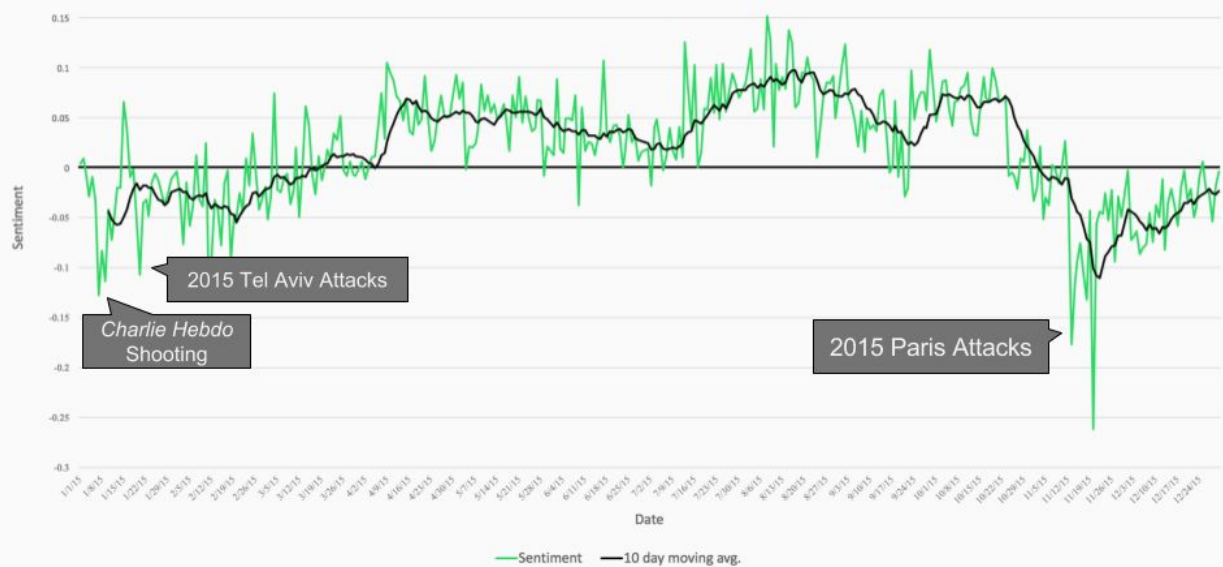
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Appendix A

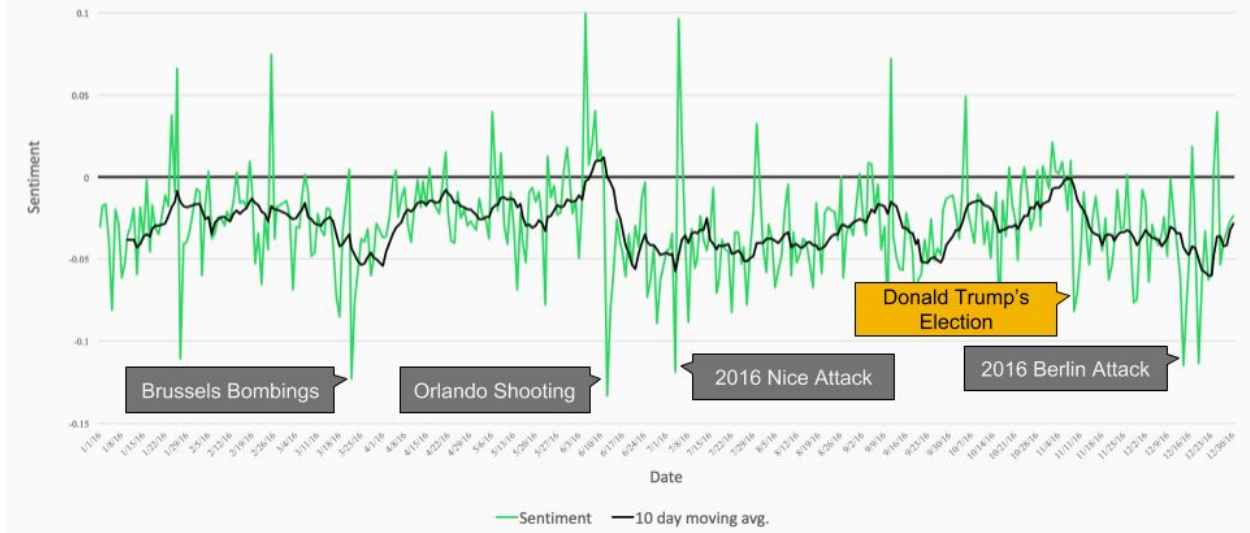
2013-2017 Date vs. "Muslim" or "Islam" Tweet Sentiment



2015 Date vs. "Muslim" or "Islam" Tweet Sentiment



2016 Date vs. "Muslim" or "Islam" Tweet Sentiment



2017 Date vs. "Muslim" or "Islam" Tweet Sentiment

