

# The Necessary Checks and Balances in the Age of Social Media, AI, and Technology

**By Sana Tayyen, PhD**  
**Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Redlands**

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In this article, I aim to discuss the empowerment of youth and women and the hinderance posed to that empowerment by the acceleration of Islamophobia, specifically gendered Islamophobia, via technology, social media, and generative AI. Although these technologies in many ways can be and are empowering for youth and women, they are in too many ways being used to disempower. And hence, I will emphasize a system of checks and balances to help aid empowerment rather than disempowerment in the reality of our new technological order.

We have a long history of Islamophobia that begins as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Christian Europe. Islamophobia is a new term coined first in the 1990s; yet its phenomenon is historic. In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, as Islam grew and the Roman Empire weakened, Muslims would be viewed as a threat to Christian European Empire and to the central Christian trinitarian theological doctrine. Quickly, the Prophet Muhammad would become a threatening persona. According to the scholar Avinoam Shalem, “It is possible to identify more than 100 Latin texts dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century that mention the Prophet Muhammad... They depict him in various guises: as a false prophet; an anti-saint; a precursor to the Antichrist or the final manifestation of the Antichrist himself; and a pagan god.” Islamophobia would take its twists and find its way in orientalist paintings, diaries of orientalist travels, literary novels, journals and magazines, movies, television shows, and news media. According to the late Jack Shaheen, in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*, more than 1000 films from the 1880s to 2000 in which he himself analyzed depict Middle Easterners and Muslims as violent, extremists, dimwitted, lacking values, particularly the value of human freedom and dignity, patriarchal, male dominated, oppressive, and depicting women as lacking agency, voice, nuance, emotion, and education. In my own analysis of texts, images, movies, and news media, “From Orientalist Sexual Object to Burkini Terrorist Threat: Muslim Women through Evolving Lens,” I identify four lenses of gendered Islamophobia by which women have been historically and presently viewed through. These are: the lens of sexual objectivity, lens of backwardness and ignorance, lens of domination and subjugation, and the lens of fear and threat.

Today, faster than ever before, Islamophobia is accelerating through the use of social media and AI evolving into a fifth lens, the lens of irrationality. And with this, mainstream news media outlets who have long portrayed Muslims through Islamophobic lenses are now feeding off social media misinformation by publishing false news pieces and creating fear and hostilities. In the last month, an opinion piece in the respected Wall Street Journal called a city in Michigan, which is home to a high number of Arabs and Muslims, “America’s Jihad Capital.” Further, we hear unverified claims that London has no-go zones for Jews. Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims, and anyone associating with the Palestinian cause gets lumped together with violence and irrationality. False information spreads quickly in these circles as algorithms focus on viewer history, clicks, and likes. My feed is filled with images of Muslim women and youth holding Palestinian flags, chanting for freedom and calling for a ceasefire to protect people from famine, disease, ethnic cleansing, and genocide; yet the title of these images often is captured under the headline and meme as “Terrorists,” “Hamas,” and “Threat.” Further, we are witnessing an unfortunate twist of retelling where anti-antisemitism is deemed Islamophobic and anti-Islamophobic is deemed antisemitism.

Further, in a troubling evolution, social media is now becoming the main source for news, education, and information, particularly for our youth as they have lost trust in our social institutions. Social media and chat GPT have become more trustworthy sources of information for our youth than universities, mainstream news media outlets, and governments. The youth know that innocent people are sacrificed for geopolitical and economic gains. What else, for them, could explain why countries, universities, and corporations that have cried out freedom, human rights and equality for as long as these students and young adults can remember, now turn a blind-eye towards the suffering in Palestine, to the inequality and lack of freedom that Palestinians live under. Further, to protect geopolitical goals and economic benefits, these same social institutions support the regimes that kill innocents for their own gains. We don't need to discuss the number of dead and those dying due to imposed starvation and disease. We ALL know. The youth know. Social media has lifted the veil off these institutions that hide behind their slogans and because of that our youth don't trust them anymore. The distrust of social institutions like universities and government is highly problematic. In an era of generative AI, social media, and growing complex technologies, we need these social institutions; however, we need them to be institutions of integrity that are true to the human rights and freedoms they claim.

If we are to achieve social protection and the maximization of women's and youth empowerment in the world today, then we need to recognize that social media, and AI function in relation to formal social institutions. These social institutions include our governments, civic centers, medical centers, schools and universities, media outlets, corporations, and religious institutions. Unfortunately, today, we are seeing the development of deepening mistrust between our youth, and these vary institutions that are known to be the framework of a society. In a healthy society, people have a relative amount of trust in their educational, medical, religious, and civic leaders. They carry with them a badge of trust. For the last year, and particularly since October 7, we have seen these institutions lose their badges. Our young adults form virtual communities, turn towards social media for seemingly real and honest news, and rely on chat GPT for so-called non-bias accounts.

Social media, technology, and AI are powerful and beneficial tools if used properly. Their development has shifted global society. It is established that we must bridge the digital divide and enable equal access to training and preparedness in digital literacy across the globe. However, to gain the greatest benefits and minimize threats of gendered Islamophobia and other forms of fear and threat, people must be connected to social institutions that they can trust and respect. Social institutions help balance and weed out the false and toxic information that is wielded against people through social media and AI. If people can't trust mainstream news media, then they can't verify a false image, TikTok, or Instagram message by going back to trusted sources. They can't decipher between actual criticism of politics and behavior and Islamophobic or antisemitic statements and images. We have all seen false images or false videos of government, religious, or educational leaders generated through AI. If our youth and our adults don't have access to trusted sources outside of social media and the internet, where can they go to verify accounts algorithmed to their screens? How can we keep them from being victims of misinformation? Often youth and women are coming into contact through social

media with disempowering information. As a Muslim, I am aware of voices that have nothing to do with Islam; yet somehow have robbed the place of authority of trusted scholars. These non-scholars who have no legitimate expertise in Islamic law and scriptural studies present on TikTok and Instagram platforms telling Muslim women that it is better for them not to leave their homes even in an abusive relationship, not to wear their jackets over their abayas, and that if they are abused by their fathers, it is somehow their fault for being alone with them. These social media influencers speaking on behalf of Islam and Muslim scholars are NOT representative of mainstream Muslim voices. They disempower youth and women before we can help empower them. On social media, they claim Islamic authority without the credentials and recognition of scholars. Further, they are not connected to established Muslim communities; yet, somehow, they have become the voices of Islam to online communities across the globe. These are not extremist voices, they are pseudo voices. Unfortunately, in return, these pseudo voices work to embolden Islamophobes looking for a motive to paint Muslims with the lens of irrationality, and Islamophobia grows at an exponential rate.

In this tense situation, we need to establish a system of checks and balances to render these pseudo and Islamophobic voices meaningless to those they target. Accompanying the rules, regulations, and tech safety features that are quickly coming into effect to regulate social media and AI, we need to enforce a level of integrity upon our social institutions and hold them responsible for their actions so they can regain the trust of our youth. Governments should be held accountable for their claims on protecting freedom, news media should be held accountable for their claims of honest and true news, universities should be held accountable for their claims that campuses are safe spaces for ALL students and academics engaging in free speech and protest, and corporations should be held accountable for their ethical branding. In this way, our social institutions become the needed checks and balances of social media and AI. If they operate with integrity, they can be important and trusted external sources for people to fact check what they learn online. At the same time, social media and AI can continue to hold our social institutions accountable through fact checking their publications and dealings. We have seen in the last six months, social media hold our governments, corporations, universities, and news media accountable by unveiling their hypocrisies. This is applaudable and should be protected. Together, our social institutions and our technology of social media and AI can work together and form a two directional flow of accountability. Society is shifting and we need a system of checks and balances.

Sana Tayyen, New York, March 2024.