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## TITLE PAGE

YouTube interactions between agonism, antagonism and dialogue: video responses to the anti-Islam film *Fitna*.

(16)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Fitna, is a 2008 short film made by a Dutch member of parliament to support his fight against Islam. It shows shocking footage of terrorism, violence and women's oppression and claims that these are inherent to Islam. The film caused immense controversy and mobilized people across the world to produce and upload their own views to YouTube. In this article we analyze these videos using different theoretical models of democratic interaction, and distinguishing between antagonism, 'agonism' and dialogue. On the basis of a cybermetric network analysis we find that the videos are mostly isolated reactions on the film. Only 13 % or fewer of the posters interacted with each other through comments, subscriptions or 'friendship'. These interactions could be qualified as antagonistic or agonistic, but very rarely involved dialogue. We therefore conclude that YouTube enabled a multiplication of views rather than an exchange or dialogue between them.

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## **Keywords**

Fitna, Islam, YouTube, Cybermetrics, Democratic Interaction, Social Network

[9]

## Introduction<sup>i</sup>

Products of visual culture have been highly controversial in the ever expanding debate about Islam . A particularly provocative case occurred early in 2008 when Dutch MP Geert Wilders announced he would make a short movie called *Fitna* to exhibit the dangers of Islam as he defined them. The video showed shocking footage of terrorism, violence and women's oppression, and claimed that these are inherent to Islam. Death threats, diplomatic questions, international riots and a fierce public debate followed, even before the film was made. The Pakistani and Indonesian governments issued warnings that websites showing *Fitna* would be blocked in their countries. In the end, it was a British video sharing site, *Liveleak*, that first allowed *Fitna* to be uploaded on March 27 2008, attracting three million visitors in three hours.<sup>ii</sup> *Liveleak* received so many threats that they withdrew the video the next day, but by then, *Fitna* had been uploaded by numerous other people and its online presence had become irreversible. In the ensuing weeks and months, people from many different countries uploaded their video reactions to YouTube, mostly in protest against the film and its maker, or in support of Islam. The controversy grew as the Dutch MP attempted to show his film in several international seats of government. He succeeded in Washington, Rome and Copenhagen, but was refused entry to the UK because his visit was thought to constitute a threat to public order. The international media covered his hold-up at the border extensively, and when he returned to the UK in the autumn of 2009, Wilders again had a queue of journalists and protestors in his wake. Another diplomatic conflict emerged by the end of 2009, when the Turkish government said it would not receive a Dutch parliamentary delegation if Wilders was part of it. Meanwhile, Wilders continues to stir the controversy with his widely announced plans for *Fitna 2*, a 'spectacular' sequel, which he says 'will show the consequences of mass migration from Muslim countries, freedom of expression and the Sharia or Muslim law'.<sup>iii</sup>

What makes the *Fitna* case more than just another instance of the Islam debate, is that it is strongly articulated with Web 2.0 practices. MPs making their political case in visual language is a relatively new phenomenon, but Web 2.0, and video sharing sites like YouTube in particular, made a host of user-generated video reactions possible. This resulted in an even greater novelty: a global public debate conducted through visual media. This visual debate is the topic of this article. In a previous study of these video reactions, we established that their makers perform a political and/or religious self through their videos and assume a global audience to whom they want to speak. Most videos express a desire to make a connection to geographically dispersed others in what we called a possible act of (global) citizenship (Van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, 2010). Yet, we also concluded that for such an act to become meaningful, it needed to be seen, listened to and acted upon by others, in some form of re-action or interaction. Whether and how this happened, and which views were shared and contested forms the general question of this paper. We will first examine the notions of

re-action and interaction through the the theoretical frameworks of political, religious and Web 2.0 studies. Then, we will present the combination of research methods through which we examined the video exchanges and networks.<sup>iv</sup> We will conclude the analysis by asking whether and how the videos constitute a 'video sphere' for different sorts of political and religious interaction.

### **Antagonism, agonism and dialogue**

It should come as little surprise that the *Fitna* controversy was aired on the internet. This is for two reasons. First, from its beginning, the internet has hosted religious websites, forums, chat rooms, e-mail lists and so on (O'Leary and Brasher, 1996). Internet users regularly list religion among their reasons for going online (e.g. Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie, 2004). In the context of Islam, several authors have pointed out that the internet offers possibilities to circumvent both religious and state authorities. Bunt (2009:2), for instance, claims that 'a collaborative horizontal knowledge economy, reliant on peer-to-peer networking, has enveloped areas of Islamic cyberspace'. Bunt's observations are mainly based on what happens online. Yet, research among young Muslims about their surfing behavior has pointed in the same direction: Ho, Lee and Hamid (2008) found that they use the internet for their own personal religious needs rather than to interact with Islamic institutions. The 'online Ummah' that is built from this peer-to-peer surfing, offers Muslims across space and time to discuss their own questions and understanding of Islam. For Muslim women in particular this has produced a unique opportunity to express their voice about, for instance, *hijab* (Akou, 2010), gender relations (Brouwer, 2009), and anti-Islam propaganda (Vis, Van Zoonen and Mihelj, 2011).

The second reason for the online prominence of the *Fitna*-controversy, is that the internet has also from the outset provided a new platform for ordinary citizens to express their political ideas and discuss them with others. While it is still debatable whether this potential extends to all citizens or simply offers additional possibilities to citizens already politically active, it is clear that every new internet application includes political usage, from the early bulletin boards and news groups of the Usenet to the blogs and social network sites of the world wide web. In this area too, it has been claimed that the Do-It-Yourself politics emerging from the internet, and exacerbated by Web 2.0 affordances, has facilitated a stronger interaction of voters with political representatives (Coleman, 2009), an easier mobilization of social movement activists (Bennet and Toft, 2009) and the emergence of a collective political intelligence that 'may outperform those produced by so-called authoritative, concentrated sources' (Chadwick, 2009: 5). As a result, the balance of authority between political institutions and representatives on the one hand, and voters, activists and citizens on the other has changed and made the latter parties more visible and more reckoned with. As

Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009:173) argue, 'this leads to an inevitable loosening of [government's and other political actors' ] control over the political agenda, forcing politicians into an increasingly responsive mode rather than the proactive, agenda setting role they would prefer to adopt'.

In our earlier study (Van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, 2010), we found indeed that the people absent from the mainstream media debates about *Fitna* (dominated by leaders and experts, both in the Netherlands and the UK) did partake in making and uploading protest and support videos to YouTube. Young Muslims, avant-garde activists and engaged citizens expressed their views through typical Web 2.0 methods of morphing, mixing and mashing visual images, audio tracks and written captions. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the videos uploaded in reaction to *Fitna* consisted of re-loads of existing news, current affairs, documentary or education material, thus replicating rather than complementing the existing debates. We concluded, therefore, that YouTube functions as a repository of videos that demonstrate both grass roots and elite voices, and both pro-and anti-Islam positions. The questions that remained for further research were whether YouTube also hosted a visual debate that involved direct interaction between those posting content, and how this debate could be characterized. Could these interactions be typified as dialogue within the context of particular normative political theories? We articulate these questions about the *Fitna*-response videos as an examination of re-actions and interactions combined with a specific investigation into the nature of the political and religious debate that occurred around the videos.

While public sphere theory – originating from Habermas' seminal work, but developed, adjusted and contested ever since – is often employed to embed these kinds of questions, Papacharissi (2009) has argued that it probably does not offer the most helpful perspective for understanding the kinds of engagement occurring on the internet, whether in its 1.0 or 2.0 variety. She argues that blogging and vlogging are best qualified as 'civic narcissism' because they are mostly means of self-expression and 'not created with the explicit purpose of contributing to a public sphere, the commons or heightening civic engagement' (p. 238). Nevertheless, Papacharissi claims that these activities have a democratizing effect because they reveal a plurality of voices, aimed at demonstrating disagreement and thereby disclosing not only diversity but also unequal power relations. Papacharissi takes her inspiration from Chantal Mouffe (2000) who developed the notion of 'pluralistic agonism' to capture ineradicable differences in value systems that divide individual and collective actors in today's societies. 'Envisaged from the point of view of "agonistic pluralism"', Mouffe argues, 'the aim of democratic politics is to construct the "them" in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an "adversary", i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right

to defend those ideas we do not put into question' (p. 15). Mouffe thus constructs a crucial distinction between antagonism (a struggle between enemies) and agonism (a struggle between adversaries) (p.16). In Mouffe's terms the aim of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions and encourage the formation of a rational consensus, but rather to transform antagonism into agonism and 'mobilize those passions into democratic designs' (p. 16).

Mouffe's model of democratic politics, centered on the notion of agonistic pluralism, does seem to capture the nature of some of the internet exchanges rather well, and has clear advantages over the consensus-centered model of deliberative democracy. Current research about online discussion spaces provides evidence of both antagonistic and agonistic exchanges. Several authors have claimed that at best, people use the internet to deposit their views without much interest in further discussion. This could be interpreted as a sign of pluralistic agonism, but the use of on-line communication to express antagonism, through, for instance, flaming and blaming is far more common (e.g. Douglas, 2008). The distinction between agonism and antagonism can also be useful to analyse the re-actions and interactions that emerged around the *Fitna*-response videos, especially with respect to the question of how they concern 'acts of citizenship' that need to materialize in interaction with others. Another thing to note is that empirically, Mouffe's alternative model of public discussion and democracy and the deliberative democracy model are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that in some cases, the democratic potential of on-line communication can be assessed adequately only by drawing on both models simultaneously. In a previous study of *Fitna*-response videos (Vis, Van Zoonen and Mihelj, 2011), we came across a group of YouTube posters who purposively aimed to engage in a dispassionate dialogue with the maker of *Fitna* and others fearing Islam, and who actively and respectfully engaged in conversations with their viewers. This group of posters, consisting of young Egyptian women, employed a video and discussion style that is easily characterised as 'deliberative', and that entailed the three virtues defined by feminist political theorist Allison Jaggar (2000) as key to deliberation: multicultural literacy, moral deference, and openness to reconfigure one's emotional constitutions. These virtues are not unique to Jaggar's political theory, but also emerge from writings about interfaith or interreligious dialogue. Michaelidis (2009:452), for example, claims similarly that 'interfaith dialogue entails mutual openness to change', which helps acknowledge the limitations of every single faith and facilitates the search for common responses to global challenges, without simultaneously erasing differences and uniqueness. While engaging in dispassionate on-line deliberation, the group of Egyptian YouTube posters did not intend to build an all-encompassing consensus, nor eliminate passions altogether. We could therefore argue that they also contributed to transforming on-line antagonisms into agonistic pluralism, even if their exchanges fulfilled the normative requirements of

public deliberation. Exactly whether, how and why on-line reactions and interactions contribute to rational deliberation or agonistic pluralism – or, indeed, both of these simultaneously – thus becomes an empirical question contingent on the situated articulation of the event, actors, motives, cultural and technological contexts.

To answer these empirical questions, we first need to ascertain whether and to what extent the *Fitna* response videos actually elicited any reactions or interactions. Then we need to consider who participated in these reactions and interactions and how likely it was that the content and nature of their participation contributed to democracy and the public sphere, be it conceived in terms of rational deliberation or agonistic pluralism. In the case of *Fitna*, the technological opportunities afforded by Web 2.0 and especially YouTube are crucial to establishing the nature of the reactions and interactions. Apart from offering users the possibility to upload their videos to the internet, YouTube also allows for written or video comments on these videos (reaction), and has social network features where users can subscribe to the channels of other users, or befriend them (interaction). Information scientists have begun to analyze these links using the large-scale methods of computer assisted network analysis, and have delivered contrasting results regarding size and reciprocity of these networks (e.g. Biel, 2009; Paolillo, 2008; Rotman et al., 2009). Cultural and social research on YouTube networks have analyzed small numbers of users and single networks and focused on everyday exchanges between friends and families (e.g. Lange, 2007; Rotman, et al., 2009). Both types of studies suggest that friend and family networks on YouTube can be relatively strong and reciprocal, clustering around specific types of content, whereas subscription networks (less often researched) are somewhat weak and random. There is, to date and to our knowledge, no research that examines the political and/or religious content that flows through YouTube networks, although there is an emerging body of work about using YouTube as a platform for political purposes (e.g. Winograd and Hais, 2008).

### **Research questions, data and methods**

Our review of the literature makes it possible, to parcel the overall research question of whether and how the videos are seen, listened to and (re)acted upon by others, into a number of more specific, operational research questions that address re-action and interaction.

The first set of questions relates to *reactions*, in particular the number of posters and videos, the number of videos uploaded per poster, their main tendencies in terms of form and content and the number of views and comments on the videos. We assume such re-actions are a prerequisite for further interaction.

The second set of questions relates to the numbers and types of interactions the videos provoked and that the posters engaged in. These are circumscribed by the possibilities that YouTube offers (leaving comments, subscribing to channels and befriending other posters). We will establish the size and strengths of these networks, their purpose, and their openness to different political or religious voices.

The third set of questions is concerned with the contents of the three networks, and more specifically how the visual and commentary flows that run through these networks can be characterized: as political and/or religious antagonism, agonism or dialogue, within the meanings of these terms developed above. As will become clear through our analysis, the lines between these categories are not always clear-cut. Some exchanges seem to fall mid-way between the categories of agonism and antagonism, and more precise categorization would require an interview with the individuals involved to ascertain whether their perception of the addressee approximates that of an (illegitimate) enemy or a (legitimate) adversary.<sup>v</sup> The categories of agonism and dialogue are also not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although agonism does not require a willingness to engage in dialogue with the opponent, such agonistic dialogues are, in principle, possible, and it will be interesting to see whether we can find any evidence of this in our materials.

We searched and selected the relevant video responses to *Fitna* from the YouTube site, using a custom-made cybermetric search tool developed by Mike Thelwall (2009) of the University of Wolverhampton.<sup>vi</sup> which enables the collection of Applications Program Interface (API) data that show which registration information the YouTube users uploaded (e.g. gender, age, nationality); how many videos they uploaded; and how many views and comments they received (Thelwall, no year) . This cybermetric search produced 776 videos uploaded by 419 posters in the months immediately preceding and following the release of *Fitna* (February, March, April and May 2008). After these months the number of videos that were uploaded dropped drastically. We collected and archived the data in February 2010, and used that material for our analysis. Any changes in the YouTube channels taking place after this date were not included.

We used the same cybermetric instrument to run network analyses for comments, subscriptions and friendships in the peak months. We ran descriptive statistics on these data, and described the size, strengths purpose and openness of the networks. We assessed the nature of the interactions through a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) analyzing the API data, videos and links of the posters that were part of one of the three networks.

In the presentation of our results, we have anonymized the channel names. Although YouTube videos can be considered semi-public data, the kind of network analysis presented here presents combinations and relations that posters may not have wished to be easily and publicly available. A fully annotated version of our analyses is available on request.

### Reactions: posters, videos and comments, 1000

*Fitna* was released on Liveleak.com on March 27, 2008. Many protest videos were already uploaded before that day, and came primarily from Dutch posters who were participating in an organized video protest launched by the Dutch new media lab *Mediamatic*:

“Why? Well we can’t stop Wilders. He has a right to freedom of expression ... We can compete for attention however. And we can produce disinformation. So we are going to make Movies called “*Fitna*” in which we apologize for Geert Wilders embarrassing behavior. ... So if you want to join in; just make your own *Fitna* movie and put it on line. ... Call it *Fitna* by Geert Wilders. ... .. If we work hard enough, no one will be able to find his crap among all the noise we produce.”<sup>vii</sup>

Over 200 videos with an average length of between 7 and 15 seconds were uploaded, of people saying sorry to the camera. They were part of an online political project that took its inspiration from ‘culture jamming’ and ‘hacktivism’, exploiting the typical internet features of information abundance and burying the upcoming movie under other ones with a contrasting message. Other videos, not related to the Mediamatic project, also used this practice of tagging their videos with the labels *Fitna* and/or (Geert) Wilders, while not directly engaging with *Fitna*. A Muslim poster from Singapore, for instance, recommends adding particular tags ‘so there will be direct link to other video regarding conversion to Islam if watching the *Fitna* video. Thanks’. Such videos mostly contained positive images and texts about Islam, others consisted of completely unrelated content (authors, 2010). Benevenuto (et al., 2008) have considered such tagging practices as anti-social online behavior aimed at self promotion and causing content pollution. Yet, the *Fitna* case makes it clear that such tactics can be employed for political and religious purposes, in this case to marginalize *Fitna* and demonstrate oppositional perspectives. Obviously, the point of such videos is not debate, let alone dialogue with Wilders or his supporters (who themselves are not interested in debate or dialogue either). At the same time, however, these videos do acknowledge Wilders’ right to express his views, and thus treat Wilders as an adversary rather than an enemy. As such, they qualify as agonistic rather than antagonistic.

The analysis of the content and form of the videos that did address *Fitna* directly, presented a critical position most of the time. This happened either by showing an alternative understanding of Islam as a peaceful religion, or by criticizing Wilders and his film for his demagogic methods and his demonizing of Muslims. Only a minority of videos expressed support for *Fitna*, mostly in the form of re-loads of *Fitna* itself, in Spanish, Russian, Polish and Farsi translations. The videos could be categorized as cut-and-paste uploads of material professionally

produced by others (for instance news items or parts of documentaries), vlogs, registration of speeches and sermons, and – the most typical web 2.0 genre on YouTube, the cut-and-mix production in which images, words and sounds from a variety of private and public sources are combined (see for a detailed analysis of these videos, Authors 2009).

Many of these videos were one-off uploads, which suggests that many people sought access to YouTube only to support or protest, not to engage in an exchange with others. 419 posters uploaded 776 videos, but, as in most participatory spaces on the Internet, a limited number of posters were responsible for uploading many different videos. One poster, for instance, uploaded 81 videos about Islam in our corpus all of them tagged with (Geert) Wilders. The average number of views for a video was about 24,000, with a minimum of 40 for the least watched (one of the Sorry-videos of *Mediamatic*) and a maximum of about 3.6 million for the most watched video, a piece to camera by an American stand-up comedian expressing his pride in being Muslim. In total over 10 million viewers watched one or more of the 776 videos, with almost 250,000 comments made altogether. These numbers suggest that the videos themselves certainly provoked views and reactions. In combination with the locations from where these videos were uploaded (half of them from the US, UK and the Netherlands, the other half from across the globe), we concluded in our earlier study that YouTube formed an important and global platform for reacting to *Fitna* (Authors, 2010). However, the tagging practices and the large number of single videos also suggested that regardless of these activities, there was little desire to exchange views with Wilders or to interact with other users. We will examine this suggestion in more detail in the final section, after we have discussed which networks of comments, subscriptions and friends we found.

### **Interactions: networks of comments, subscriptions and friends**

To assess the quantity and types of interactions between posters who uploaded their video(s) between February and May 2008, as well as between those commenting on their videos, we used the cybermetric instrument mentioned earlier. Based on the forms of interaction allowed by the YouTube tools, we identified three types of networks: a network of those who comment on the videos, a network of posters that subscribe to each-other, and a network of posters that befriend each-other. In the case of the network of commentators, we had to limit our analysis to interactions among the 50 most active commentators that commented on the greatest number of videos. The basic data of these networks are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Basic network data**

Type of links	# people linked	# of networks	Basic tendency in the network
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Comments	22,736 (out of some 250,000 comments)	-	-
	50 most active commenters	1	Pro-Wilders and his party
Subscriptions	55 (out of 419 posters)	8	Pro-Islam network (28 channels) <i>Mediamatic</i> network (8) Pro-Wilders network (5) Dutch fascist channels (3) Radio Netherlands Worldwide (3)
Friends	44 (out of 419 posters)	6	Pro-Islam friends (30) Anti-Islam friends ( ) Wilders supporters (3)

The number of interactions compared to the total activity shows that between 9 and 13 % of general activity had an interactive element. Thus, out of some 250,000 comments altogether, about 9 % were linked to each other, 13 % of the 419 posters subscribed to each other, while 10.5 % befriended each other. These data further underline that the great majority of activity around *Fitna* on YouTube consisted of reactions without interactions. A closer look at the networks that did emerge suggests that these interactions were further limited to people with similar viewpoints. In the following section, these networks are presented in a visual form. They are arranged heuristically by an algorithm so that connected nodes tend to be close together and disconnected nodes tend to be far apart. The purpose of this is to make the patterns in the data clearer: patterns formed by the lines between the nodes. The reader's attention should focus on these lines rather than the actual position of the nodes.

**The comments links** in the network of the 50 most active commentators form two connected clusters where many exchanges take place (see Figure 1).

[insert Figure 1 about here]

The nodes in this network represent *Fitna* response videos, the lines between them concern the comments given. Bigger nodes show that these videos got comments from more sources, the size of the line indicates the number of comments exchanged. On the right hand side of the network, mostly Dutch supporters of Wilders group together. The names of many of them make clear where they stand and in case of unclear names, the comments themselves make clear that, with some exceptions, they support Wilders and his party. The way the Wilders supporters and their few opponents in this network interact with each other is aggressive and rude. A video uploaded a day after *Fitna* was released, for instance, mixes images of Wilders with images and sound of Hitler and

explains: 'a remix from the movie *'Fitna'* showing geert's true ideology'<sup>viii</sup>. The video was watched 1497 times and provoked 23 reactions. In the excerpt below an exchange between a supporter and an opponent of Wilders illustrates the hostility in the comments.

Supporter:           What is the odd one out in this list?  
                          Tuberculosis, typhoid or Turk?<sup>ix</sup>  
                          Answer: Turk  
                          Why: TB and Typhoid can be cured, but a criminal Turk cannot  
                          The only cure for that is a very big Freedom Party [Wilders' party-  
                          authors]

Opponent:           What is the odd one out in this list?  
                          Fascism War Peace Wilders  
                          Peace  
                          War is inevitable if Wilders comes to power ... Wilders is simply another  
                          form of Hitler.

The other 23 commentators on this video use similarly hostile words ('Wilders is saving our country, can't you see you cancer morons'; 'most of you are paedophiles still living with your parents'; 'fuck the haters, nothing is gonna stop Islam') which suggests that many if not most of these responses were aimed at an enemy that was not conceived as a legitimate opponent (i.e. an adversary who has the right to defend his or her ideas). As such they fall in the category of antagonism. One poster, for instance, responds to a video of an Imam explaining the right of Muslims to defend themselves, with a series of swear words roughly translated as, 'fuck off to your own goddamn cunt desert and never show your hairy ugly face here again'. Many of the channels of these commentators were closed between the first upload of *Fitna* and the moment of writing<sup>x</sup>, and many of them don't contain videos at all. It is most likely that these accounts were created to belligerently support Wilders in the video turmoil that followed the release of *Fitna*.

The left hand side of the network represents the international interactions. They contain both more variety of viewpoints and less aggressive exchanges, although most are still very blunt. Thus, one woman speaks in strong terms against Islam, while another speaks for it. A third commentator on this side of the network promotes Christianity, and a fourth one is hard to locate because s/he mainly posts ironic comments. While the diversity of the positions suggests that in these links some dialogues could be present, the typical comment is rude and condescending and indicates that most of these responses fall into the category of antagonism or at the very least agonism (in some cases, it is difficult to distinguish unambiguously between the two). The following

comment by the woman opposing Islam provides a good example of an antagonistic expression, since it denies the addressee the right to defend her or his standpoint:

I laugh that you claim a book of myths/deceit which is fixated/obsessed with hate, sex, punishments, genitalia, barbarity has quality. first prove an allah before you dribble such IMMATURE junk.

The comments network thus contains flows that look like shouting matches between angry people aiming to silence each other. As said earlier, such ‘flaming and blaming’ is hardly uncommon in internet discussion. Wright and Street (2007) argue that the particular design and interface of the discussion space can be held partly responsible for such contents. Unmoderated and anonymous discussion boards, like the comments section on YouTube, would be especially welcoming to the disinhibited, antagonistic behavior that characterizes the *Fitna* exchanges we found in this network. We would therefore expect that the other links among the *Fitna*-response videos, based on subscriptions and befriending, exhibit different forms of exchange, and are perhaps more likely to fall into the categories of agonism or dialogue.

**The subscription links** reveal eight clear networks (both big and small) of 55 posters subscribing to one or more channels of the group of 419 posters. By far the biggest was a network of 28 posters from across the world, whose channels carry names that identify their pro-Islam position. They are represented by the square nodes in Figure 2. The second size network was exclusively Dutch and built around the Dutch video-activist company *Mediamatic*. These videos were uploaded through different dedicated channels that link to each other and form this network. The third network of 5 posters was again international and united by a pro-Wilders and freedom of speech agenda. One small network consisted of three channels expressing ideas of Dutch fascism, the other small network consisted of the international channels of Radio Netherlands Worldwide (see Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The nodes in this network represent the 55 channels of the posters subscribing to other channels in the corpus of data. Looking more closely at the flows within the distinct networks and examining the constituting channels directly, different types and intensity of interactions appear. With one exception, the small pro-Wilders network consists of channels that already existed before *Fitna*. Their creators made or uploaded a *Fitna* video as part of their wider US based neo-conservative agenda. One of them, however, was a channel especially launched to re-upload the original *Fitna* video and two other support videos. After its initial productivity, this channel rapidly became less active. The pro Wilders network is best typified as ‘weak’, since there are no strong nodes and only unilateral

sequential subscriptions. The posters have little else in common; they do not comment on each other's videos, nor do they have them listed as favorite.

The Mediamatic network consists of eight channels, two of which are hosted by staff members of MediaMatic; three others are specifically set up as channels for the Sorry videos, one channel contains one Sorry video, one is a channel of a friend of a staff member. One exceptional subscription in this network is to a clear anti-Islam channel, possibly to have the Sorry icon to show up as a message in the subscription list. These are primarily channels for the Sorry videos, and hardly constitute a network in the sense of other exchanges taking place, mutual commenting or listing favorite videos.

The only links that suggest a stronger network are the ones between the pro-Islam channels. This network includes clear nodes and outliers, unilateral and reciprocal relations. The most central node in Figure 2 represents a channel that started in August of 2007, and is connected to 11 other channels of the *Fitna* posters, both as subscriber and as subscribed. The poster is a very active YouTuber, subscribing to 618 channels, subscribed to by 835 channels and friends with 783 other YouTubers. His video 'response to the GARBAGE movie *Fitna*' is about 5 minutes long and begins with a note: 'This video is not intended to demonize Christianity. I made this video to show how easy it is to take a book out of context to make a religion look bad, as was done with the Qur'an.' The video consists of a still image of flames against a black background, overwritten by violent quotes from the Bible and supplemented by minimalist music. Halfway through the video, the music and background changes and peaceful quotes from the Qur'an appear. It was viewed 11,326 times and drew 283 comments. This central poster subscribes to the channel of another strong node in the network, which is linked to 9 other channels in the network, as subscriber and subscribed. This second central channel started in April of 2007, and is also maintained by a very active YouTuber (526 subscriptions, 586 subscribers). His response to the *Fitna* video is a reload of a testimonial from another YouTuber, a young American Muslim called BonsaiSky, who speaks to camera of his frustration with the 'boring propaganda' of *Fitna*. The channels of other key nodes in this network have a similar profile: they post videos about Islam, they are well connected to other channels and were highly active well before the release of *Fitna*.

**The friend links** form a smaller replica of the subscription network (see Figure 3), although the mutual relations between the nodes (channels) are by definition reciprocal. Like the subscription networks, the friend networks cluster around shared political or religious positions. There are six networks consisting of 44 people, of which three are small bilateral connections (we did not include the latter in Figure 3 to keep the diagram as clear as possible). Thirty befriended channels share their

appreciation of Islam. Five international channels that support Wilders have a 'friend' link to each other, and three Dutch Wilders supporters are friends.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

The names in the networks show that subscription and friends networks partly overlap. Thus, in the anti-Islam friends' network, two channels also subscribe to each other. In the pro-Islam friends' network, relatively strong nodes of friendship emerge around the same posters as in the subscription network. Altogether 15 people in the pro-Islam friends' network also subscribe to each other, making their links stronger. Yet, the friends' networks also reveal distinct additional relations to the subscription network, and especially striking is the network around the channel of Jordanian Queen Raina. The channel was launched on March 30 2008, three days after *Fitna* was uploaded to Liveleak. While the channel was announced without special reference to the film, its purpose (to counter stereotypes of the Arab world and engage in dialogue and respect) was an obvious antidote, and media across the world made the connection.<sup>xi</sup> The video that launched her channel was a call to 'send in your stereotypes' so that she could counter them. Almost two million people watched that video, and Queen Rania's channel is a central one in the whole YouTube community, with 27,347 subscribers and 7,530 friends. The Queen Rania friends in this network are similarly concerned with redressing stereotypes of Muslims: one poster started with videos deconstructing the anti-Islamic satire of the British comedian Pat Condell who uses YouTube as his stage. Another friend in the network makes videos to inform and educate people about Islam, and to 'start a dialogue with the western world'. A third friend re-loaded a video from Ummah-films of an American Muslim explaining Islam in a testimonial to camera. Unlike the subscription and friends networks in which *Fitna* was taken up directly, the queen Rania links also include non-Muslims; two of them are from the US and speak to their cameras in support of tolerance, respect and friendship. These links suggest that a portion of *Fitna*-related exchanges on YouTube did consist of exchanges between individuals that did not share the same religious identity. These were, however, extremely rare.

### ***Friends and subscribers***

The fifteen people of the total 419 posters that turned out to be friends and subscribing to each other form the strongest network in our data, yet it is still not a very interactive or personal one as the API data and the comparison of the channels and the links showed. The posters are all young men, some of them still in school or university. Their average age is 27 years, with the youngest being 19, and the oldest 34. They come from nine different countries (US/Canada: 4, Europe: 6, Middle-

East: 3, Indonesia, Jamaica). Their names and list of favorite books and films make clear that they identify as Muslim, albeit in different ways. One says on his profile, for instance, that music, television and movies 'are Pretty Much a waste of time and bad for you, so try to avoid it completely'. Another one, however, lists *The Mummy*: 'I love stories about ancient civilizations, even if they are not real, LOL'. All channels existed before *Fitna* was released, with one exception from a UK YouTuber who launched his channel especially to upload videos that counter the *Fitna* argument. All channels are very popular, have been viewed – on average – almost 20,000 times, and are subscribed to by an average of 543 other YouTubers.<sup>xii</sup> The channels' start dates and user numbers suggest that (with the exception of the one special channel) the *Fitna* responses of this group might have been just a small part of an overall YouTube practice loosely articulated with the Muslim blogosphere. In fact, comparing the channels, it appears that there are no links between them other than the subscriptions and the friendships. They do not comment on each other's channels and they rarely list the videos of others in this network as favorites. They do, however, share their perspective on Islam and world politics. Most of them fill the 'Who am I' section with references to Islamic websites, and their reactions to the *Fitna* video consist mostly of videos explaining and praising Islam and tagging them with Wilders or *Fitna*, a practice we described earlier. In addition, videos that purport to demonstrate that 9/11 'was an inside job', are popular within this network, as are videos addressing the plight of the Palestinians and revealing Israeli war crimes. Despite the double connections in this network (subscriptions and friends), this is still not a very strong or personal network, but rather a collection of sites that share views on life, religion and politics. The links between them do not contain substantive interactions but rather serve to multiply the pro-Islam message of a single site. However, what does make this network different from other Muslim networks of websites or blogs, is that it is truly international instead of national as most networks are (e.g. Etling et al., 2009).

### **Summary and discussion**

Our overall question was whether and how the video responses to *Fitna* were seen, listened to and reacted upon by others. In particular, we examined reactions to the videos, interactions between the YouTubers that uploaded the response videos and the qualification of these interactions as dialogue, pluralistic agonism or antagonism.

With regard to *reactions*, our analysis showed that the great majority of YouTube responses to *Fitna* (some 87%), while heavily commented upon, did not evoke additional interactions between the posters or between the posters and the commenters. We thus maintain our qualification of these videos 'acts of citizenship' especially directed against Wilders and in favor of Islam, and conclude

additionally that they come in the form of both pluralistic agonism (acknowledging the right of others to speak) and antagonism (trying to silence the other). With regard to *interactions*, we found that only some 13 % of the posters engaged with each other through comments, subscriptions or 'friendship'. The nature of these interactions varied, but the comments often displayed hostile and obscene language telling other commentators or the video poster to shut up. Subscriptions and friendships were mainly established between like-minded others (with the biggest ones part of the online Ummah) and did not involve much other interaction than sharing videos. In the strong network, between people who are friends and subscribe to each other, there was also little conversation taking place. It seems that both the strong and the weak networks could thus be better described as a *multiplication* of identities (primarily Islamic) rather than a form of (dialogic) interaction between them. The *MediaMatic* network is a case in point: it used the linking possibilities of YouTube to create a larger platform for the Sorry-videos rather than as a means for interaction. The video practices that emerged in reaction to *Fitna* can thus be characterized as a set of online demonstrations against (and to a much lesser extent in favor of) *Fitna* that express both antagonistic and agonistic passions and views, but that are not particularly conducive to the emergence of dialogue or mutual understanding.

While these outcomes provide a further empirical refinement of our theoretical framework, and are in line with other findings about (the lack of) dialogic interaction on the internet, they also raise new issues for reflection. The first of these is whether the outcomes can be seen as a result of the original hostility and aggression of the *Fitna* video and its maker, who is notorious for his rude language and lack of restraint in naming and blaming. His supporters, as they expressed themselves in these YouTube reactions and interactions, appear to do exactly the same and more. Evidently, such an 'opening' to a debate is not particularly inviting and is likely to provoke similarly antagonistic responses. The friends network clustered around Queen Raina's video provided the only evidence in our material (both in terms of videos uploaded and comments left) of interactions between people from diverse geographical and religious backgrounds that were friendly and respectful, and that could be typified as 'dialogue'. Further support for the suggestion that the substance and style of the original video is relevant to understanding the kinds of interactions that follow, comes from the interactions around the videos of the group of young Egyptian Muslim women discussed earlier (Authors 2011). Their video opens with a respectful address to 'Mr. Wilders' and an expression of hope that they will come to a better mutual understanding. They engage in friendly discussions with people commenting on their video, thanking them for positive comments, explaining their motives and discussing different interpretations of the Qur'an verses used. In addition to adopting an open mode of address, both this video and that of Queen Raina were made by Muslim women. From the beginning of computer-mediated communication, researchers have claimed that women

communicate in a friendlier manner than men, and are less involved in flaming (e.g. Herring, 1994). Other researchers have pointed out that gender in itself is not enough to explain online styles of interaction, but that the theme and history of the interaction contribute as well (e.g. Baym, 2000). In the case of the *Fitna* response videos, the relevant discussion concerns the questions of whether and how this situated articulation of gender, Islam and the general hostility of and towards *Fitna* produced the dialogic interaction that surround the videos of Queen Raina and the Egyptian women. This is not a question that can be answered in this context, but it does point to the need for further research into political and religious conflict, online interaction and gender, an as yet unexamined topic.

A second matter worthy of further reflection is the benefit of combining cybermetric methods with a discursive, qualitative approach. Evidently, the cheap and quick systematic collection of videos carrying the tags 'Fitna' and/or 'Geert Wilders', of API data and of network relations is impossible to match by manual methods. Therefore, cybermetric instruments are likely to become indispensable in further innovative and systematic social scientific research about the internet. However, the cybermetric provision of comprehensive and systematic data also involves risks of particular fallacies. Three issues in our data further clarify this point. First, as mentioned above, the cybermetric search produced many videos that carried the tag Wilders or Fitna but did not address the film itself. In some cases watching these videos and examining their channels made clear that these were obvious examples of the kind of 'hacktivism', organized collectively by Mediamatic but taken up by individual YouTubers as well. Other cases promoted Islam without referring to Wilders or anti-Islam views, and some videos did not make sense at all, even after closer scrutiny. The cybermetric procedure put all these videos in the same body of material, suggesting more coherence and consistency between the videos than there may actually be (fallacy of coherence). Secondly, there is a possible 'fallacy of meaning' in the network analysis. Our discursive examination of the nodes and connections in the network made it possible to articulate them with the *Fitna* controversy, but in some cases an outcome remained inexplicable. One node in the subscription network, for instance, carries a name that suggests the presence of a production company. Its number of subscriptions suggests that it is a well embedded company in the pro-Islam network. Yet, the channel itself looks quite unmaintained, and the website that is referred to for further information has been under construction for more than a year, making it impossible to explain why this is such a popular node.<sup>xiii</sup> Finally, because of its sheer size and range of findings, a cybermetric search and analytic instrument runs the risk of suggesting 'completeness'. Such completeness, however, is by definition temporal, and biased towards well-established and maintained websites. The intrinsic volatility of internet material, its disappearance and re-appearance in different forms is much greater among individual and marginal

posters than among institutional and collective ones. Our research demonstrated that these limitations can best be overcome by combining cybermetrics with additional descriptive and analytic methods.

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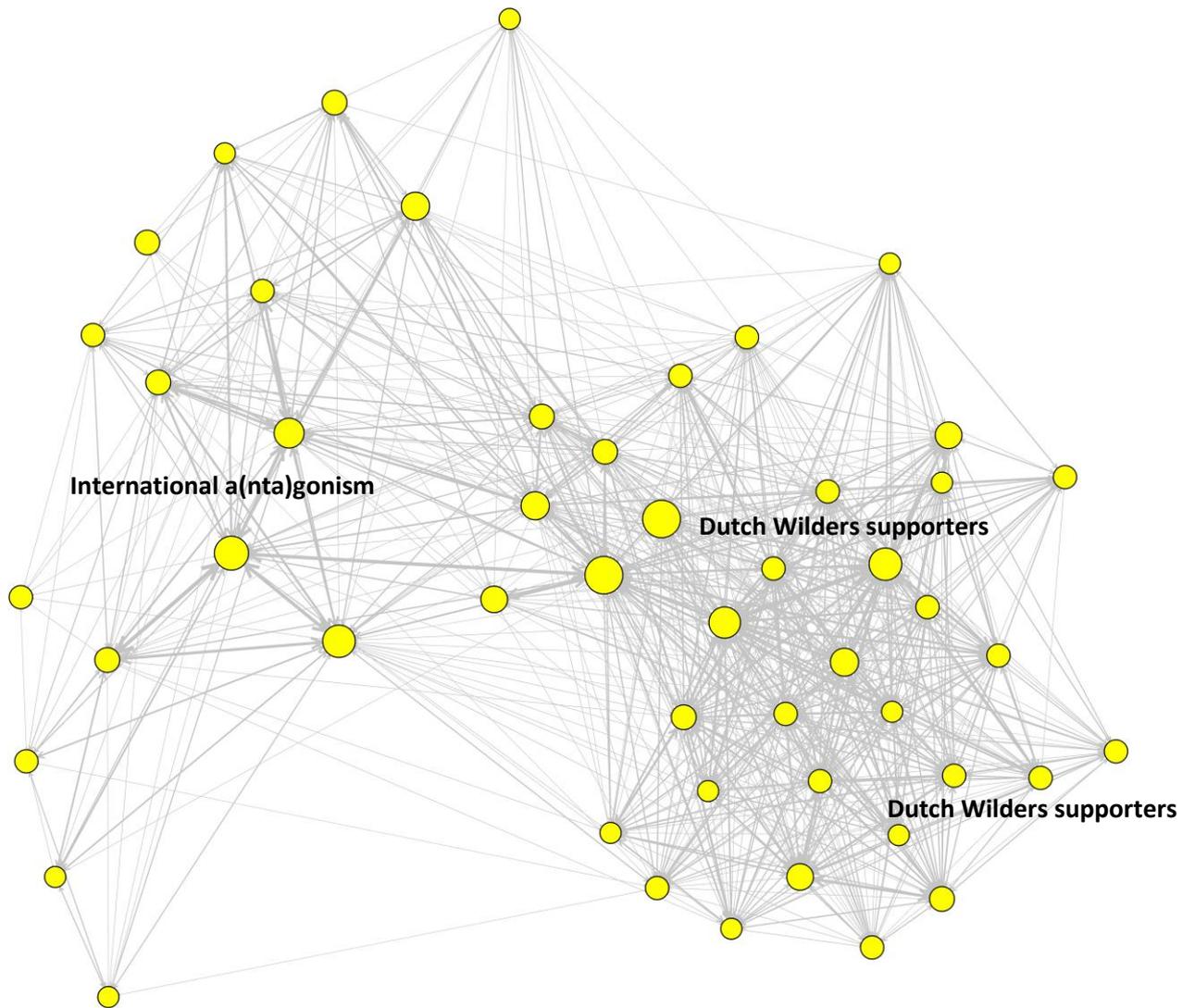
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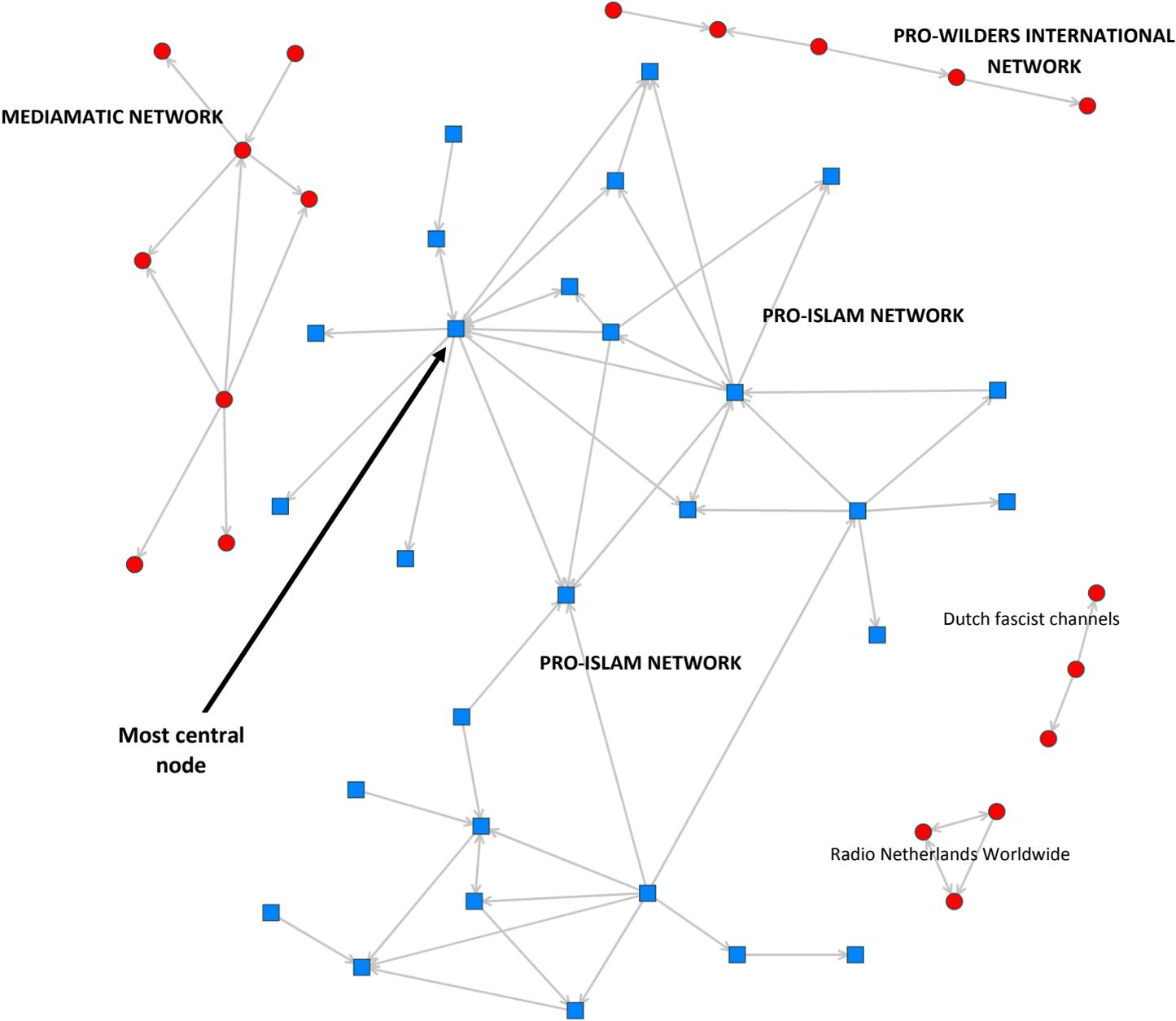
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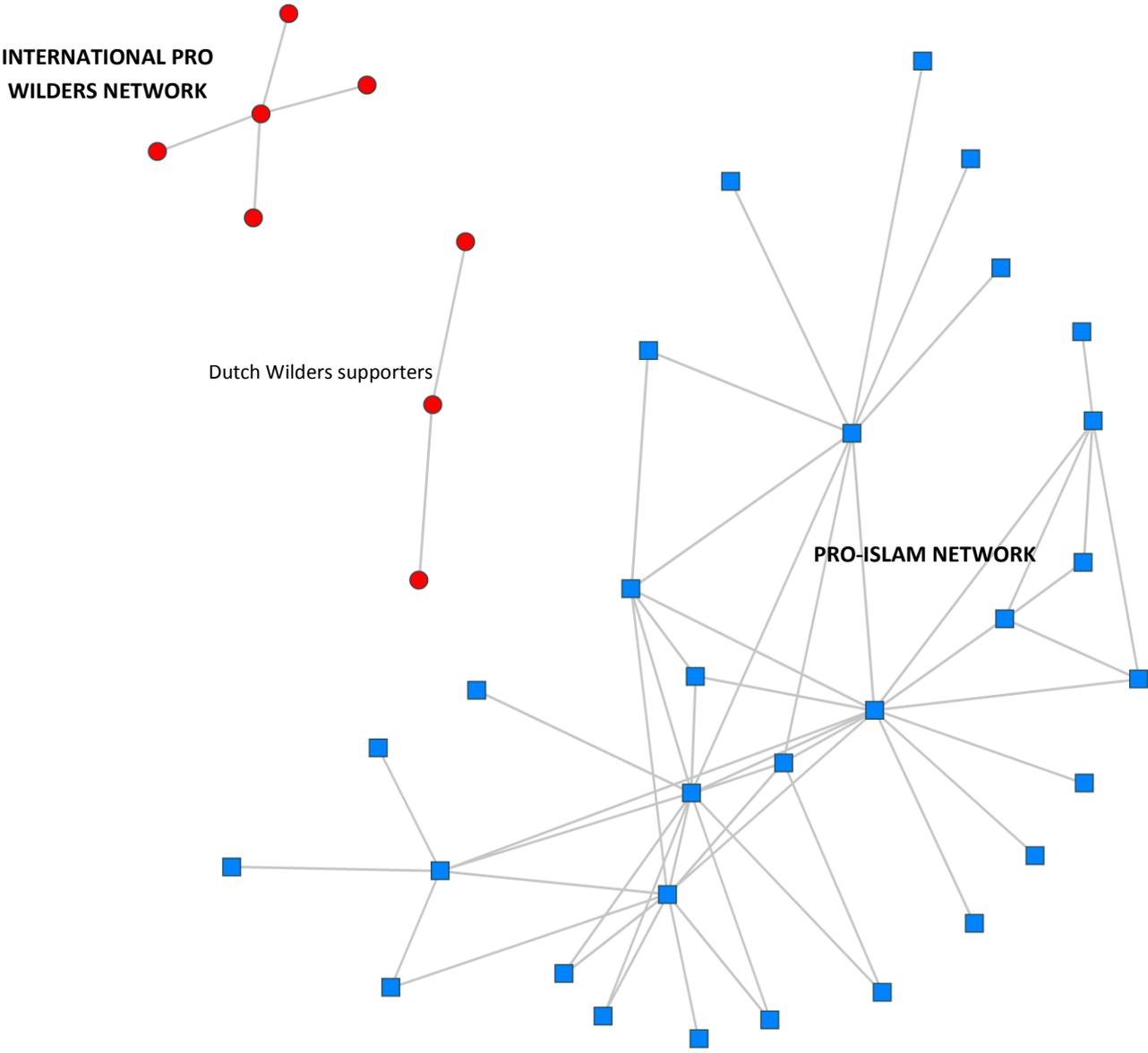
**Figure 1. Network of comments between Fitna response videos**



**Figure 2. Network of subscriptions between the Fitna video channels**



**Figure 3. Network of friends among the Fitna video posters**



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- ii [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/losing-our-spines-to-save\\_b\\_100132.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/losing-our-spines-to-save_b_100132.html), Last accessed May 24, 2010.
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- v We report on these interviews in a separate paper.
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