

Anti-social networking

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Anti-Social Networking: Findings From a Pilot Study on Opposing Dudley Mosque Using Facebook Groups as Both Site and Method for Research

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Abstract

With research highlighting the growing incidence of public opposition to the building of mosques and the innovative use of social networking, especially Facebook, to disseminate and garner support for such opposition, a pilot study sought to investigate this in relation to the proposed Dudley “super mosque.” Focusing on the Facebook group Stop Dudley Super Mosque and Islamic Village, members were engaged online to explore why they opposed the mosque. Some of the emergent themes included planning and location, inclusion and public investment as well as those relating to notions of identity, heritage, otherness, and Islamification. Overt racist and Islamophobic reasons were also identified. The sense of political disconnect of members is also considered. Concluding with a contextualization of the findings within the existing body of scholarly output, in particular the building of mosques and Islamophobia, having recognized how spaces such as Facebook have potential to function as sites for research and method also, an extended methodological consideration is also included.

Keywords

Islamophobia, Facebook, mosques, Dudley mosque, social media, Islam, English Defence League, Muslims, politics, communities

A report published that explored Islamophobia in the West Midlands region of England highlighted two particularly interesting findings (Allen, 2010b). First was the acknowledgment of a relatively widespread opposition being shown toward the building and development of mosques. This was particularly evident in the “Black Country,” a colloquial name given to the former industrialized area to the north of the city of Birmingham comprising the towns of Dudley, Walsall, and Wolverhampton. Here, three mosques had been firebombed in 2009 alone, two of which were completely destroyed (Allen, 2010b). Second was how social media and networking sites, particularly Facebook, were being used to voice and garner support for this opposition. More problematic was the recognition that many of these sites were also disseminating highly explicit and inciting Islamophobic content. As the research highlighted, both had been catalyzed by the unfolding situation in Dudley where since the late 1990s, some of the town’s Muslim communities had been engaged in an ongoing campaign to build what opponents describe as a “super-mosque” (Allen, 2013a). While Allen’s (2010b) research paid considerable attention to the prevalence and manifestation of Islamophobia across the West Midlands region, the nature of the presentation—a civil society report targeting policy audiences—meant that although these two extremely interesting findings were highlighted, they were

not fully investigated. As such, although opposition to mosques and the growing prevalence of social media were highlighted as being distinct, little could be drawn from this or about the relationship that might exist between the two.

Opposing Mosques in Public Spaces

When considered more widely, the building of mosques has not been without controversy or contestation elsewhere. Across a number of Western European countries, the proposition as indeed the actual construction of mosques and other similar buildings has been seen to be increasingly problematic; many providing a focus for hostility and opposition as also social, political, and academic scrutiny (Allievi, 2009). This is true of Britain, in Birmingham (Gale, 2005) and Bradford (McLoughlin, 2005) among others. Beyond Britain, studies have shown similar opposition in France (Cesari, 2005), Germany (Jonker, 2005), Italy (Saint-Blancat & di Friedberg, 2005), and the Netherlands

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(Maussen, 2004). Such studies have also been undertaken in Switzerland following the 2009 vote to ban the building of minarets. From further academic inquiry, Stussi (2008) found that the overwhelming majority of those who voted to ban minarets did so to make a public display of their widespread anxieties about Islam and the presence of Muslims rather than having a particular dislike for minarets or even mosques.

Likewise, Göle's (2011) study found that public anxieties were in fact being catalyzed by the visibility of minarets and mosques, increasingly seen to be symbolic of all that was deemed problematic about Muslims and Islam. Göle explained how this meant that mosques were being seen as public manifestations of difference quite irrespective of whether that difference was perceived or actual. For her, this was consequential of the tumultuous transition underway in contemporary Europe, where Muslims were moving from temporary migrants to fully fledged European citizens, something that was affecting as much at the regional level as indeed at the national and local levels. Going beyond the sheer physicality of the structure, Göle set out to find how opposition was increasingly being justified on the basis of a whole range of social, political, and cultural precepts. This might have been evident in the United States too in response to the furore surrounding the proposed "Ground Zero" mosque in New York. As Kilde (2011) noted, what began as an application for the construction of the "Park 51" Islamic community center in lower Manhattan in the summer of 2010 was soon latched onto by a whole host of different individuals and organizations that saw this as an opportunity to express their "hatred for Islam and their opposition to the growing Muslim presence in the United States" (p. 298). For opponents, Park 51 was symbolically transformed into the far more emotively and discursively charged "Ground Zero mosque." Polarizing thought and opinion—see Kilde (2011) for a full exposition of these public debates and discursive transitions—the site became one through which debates about Islam, America, terrorism, belonging, patriotism, and sacredness among others were politically, publicly, and symbolically played out. As such, opposition to the building of mosques is a contemporarily complex matter, one that embodies social, political, and cultural relevancies that at times appear to have very little to do with the physical structure itself.

Opposing Mosques in Online Spaces

Characteristic to the West Midlands region was the way in which opposition to the building and development of mosques was being disseminated and propagated through social media. Noting the ease with which new alliances, groups, and networks are able to be established online (Shirky, 2009), the West Midlands research highlighted how many of those creating these new online spaces were aligned or active within far-right and neo-Nazi organizations (Allen,

2010b). A good example was the Facebook group, *Say no to Solihull mosque*, which was created and maintained by supporters of the British National Party ("BNP"). With more than 1,600 members, more than 1,000 messages were posted on the group's public wall in a fortnight (Allen, 2010b). Other Facebook groups opposing mosques were also emerging, many of which focused on Dudley. The largest of these (as of the 1 January 2012) had more than 19,000 members. Some of these were deliberately offensive, in particular the Facebook group, *Fuk [sic] the Dudley mosque, let's build a big fat pig there instead*. Although Facebook has since changed its policy—it has closed all of the groups referred to in this article since mid-2012—most of the groups referred to maintained walls characterized by highly offensive and explicit Islamophobic content. Maybe somewhat surprising was how much of this content was accompanied by the names and photos of individuals. As research has shown, Islamophobic discourses are rarely so overt (Allen, 2010a) so this is even more surprising because as Back et al. (2010) noted, the majority of Facebook users are genuine and have profiles to match. Explicit discourses therefore become easily attributable. Noting Markham and Baym's (2009) findings, this could be because of the shifting nature of the private and public online, where private citizens are increasingly willing to share even the most personal and private aspects of their lives to indiscriminate mass audiences.

Despite Facebook having closed all of the groups referred to here, some have transferred to other social networking platforms. Some however have just disappeared. This is not to suggest however that Islamophobia online has disappeared. Monitoring organizations such as *Tell MAMA*¹ (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) suggest that levels of Islamophobic discourse online are ongoing and increasing, especially through Twitter. Despite these more recent changes, the West Midlands research presented two clear research opportunities: to explore the opposition being expressed toward mosques—in particular Dudley mosque—taking place online via Facebook groups; and to explore social media as a site as also a method of research. Recognizing this, a pilot study was initiated in late 2011 eventually running from September 2011 to March 2012. At the time, a pilot study was preferred as it was not envisaged that Facebook would change its policies and thereby close all of the groups soon after the pilot study finished. This article therefore presents a critical analysis of the findings from this pilot study while also reflecting on the online methods and approaches used and the challenges encountered. Beginning with a contextual overview of the proposed Dudley mosque, the article follows with a section on methods and approaches before setting out the findings from the pilot study. Thematically analyzed, the article concludes by contextualizing the findings within the broader bodies of scholarly evidence relating to opposing mosques and Islamophobia.

Dudley “Super-Mosque” in the Public and Political Spaces

In the late 1990s, the Dudley Muslim Association began exploring sites for a new, purpose-built mosque in Dudley. Having purchased land on the outskirts of the town, the site was identified as overlapping with the soon to be built Dudley bypass. Negotiations between the local authority—Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (“Dudley MBC”)—and the Dudley Muslim Association agreed a land-swap on the proviso that significant building work be undertaken on the site by the end of 2008. Subsequently in 2001, the Dudley Muslim Association submitted plans for a purpose-built mosque. Named the “Pride of Dudley,” the mosque included a dome and minaret as well as a separate community center. Initial opposition was voiced by a handful of local people although things escalated quickly once local media and far-right political groups got involved. Focusing on the size of the “super mosque,” opposition increasingly focused on allegations that the “giant minaret” would overshadow the town’s castle and “Top Church,” an iconic medieval church visible from beyond the town. Opposition also focused on what was termed the “Muslim village” surrounding the mosque and how this was perceived as being against the Christian ethos of the area: as Councillor (“Cllr”) Malcolm Davis put it, Dudley’s Christian society (Reeves, Abbas, & Pedroso, 2009).

Soon after, Simon Darby—deputy leader of the BNP at the time—stood for local councillor in the town and won with 43% of the vote. Despite losing the following year, Dudley remained a key battlefield for the far-right BNP. On the back of an increasingly vitriolic anti-mosque campaign, the BNP polled about 4,000 votes in the 2005 General Election before being bolstered by its post-7/7, “Islam out of Britain” campaign. A feature in the national *Observer* newspaper at the time noted how the BNP were “particularly determined to sound its knell in Dudley” (Temko, 2006). The most successful politically, as regard campaigning against the mosque, was Cllr Davis. First elected as a Liberal Democrat in 2000, Davis defected to the politically right United Kingdom Independence Party (“UKIP”) in 2005 where he lost his seat a year later. Nonetheless, Davis continued with a vigorous campaign against the mosque, presenting Dudley MBC’s Development Control Committee with a petition signed by more than 22,000 people. That same year, Davis was re-elected.

Shortly after in February 2007, Dudley MBC’s Development Control Committee unanimously rejected refused planning permission for the mosque on the basis that the land be used for job creation (“Go-Ahead for Mega-Mosque in Dudley,” 2008). The Dudley Muslim Association (DMA) appealed against the decision to the national government’s Secretary of State who in turn called for a Planning Inspectorate inquiry in June 2008. Overturning Dudley MBC’s decision, planning permission was granted. Dudley MBC responded by arguing that the Inspector’s

decision granted outline planning permission only and that along with the need to submit detailed plans, the original land-swap required substantial building work to have been undertaken by the end of 2008. On this basis, Dudley MBC took its case to the High Court to challenge the decision. Immediately rejected, local media reported how Dudley MBC’s opposition had cost £16,000 in legal fees (“Dudley Loses Mosque Battle,” 2009).

The fallout from the planning debacle undoubtedly gave impetus to the far-right as a mouthpiece for opposition (Allen, 2013a). Most prominent at the time was the newly established and rapidly growing English Defence League (“EDL”; Allen, 2011). Claiming to be the only group responding to the frustration felt by “ordinary people” about the ongoing mosque saga, the EDL took its opposition to the streets of Dudley. Organizing a march in the town in April 2010, the EDL amassed about 3,000 supporters—its biggest march to date at the time—to protest against the mosque (Casuals United, 2010). Two months later, the EDL returned, staging a rooftop protest on the disused building currently occupying the proposed mosque site. Complete with banners proclaiming “No to the burka [*sic*]” and with a week’s supply of food and water, protestors intended to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer 5 times a day in order that local people experience how it would be once the mosque was built (EDL, 2010). While the protestors were quickly removed, community relations in the town deteriorated.

Despite Dudley MBC announcing that it had reached agreement with the DMA to develop an alternative site, the EDL continued to oppose the mosque. Announcing a second march in the town in July 2010, Cllr Banks created further confusion by categorically stating that “plans to build the mosque were no longer going ahead” (“Injuries as EDL Clash With Police,” 2010). The second march was marked by violent clashes including the BBC reporting that six people had been seriously injured when a car hit pedestrians (“Six Hurt as Car Hits Pedestrians in Dudley,” 2010), an incident an EDL-run website reported as being a deliberate attack on innocent “White” bystanders by local Muslims (Opinionator, 2010b). A week later, the local *Dudley News* newspaper confirmed that violent disorder had broken out in the town including reports of gunshots (“Violent Disorder Breaks Out in Dudley Last Night,” 2010). Other sources reported how young Muslims—the Muslim Defence League—had attacked cars outside a bar in the town (Opinionator, 2010a).

Despite outline plans having once again been submitted to Dudley MBC, these too were rejected on the basis of “technical issues” and the need to compulsorily purchase nearby land (Mudie, 2010). Although the DMA announced they were prepared to exhaust all options to identify alternative locations, there remains little agreement between them and Dudley MBC. Despite alleged costs of millions, no site has been agreed yet, no planning permission granted, nor has one brick been laid. Dudley mosque remains as distant a reality

today as it did at the turn of the millennium. Yet it remains a controversial and contested issue. Not only has hostility toward Muslims been on the increase in the town (Allen, 2010b) but so too have there been firebomb attacks on mosques on the periphery of Dudley. And although the far-right has been active in the Black Country for some time, the proposed mosque has undoubtedly catalyzed them, not least through the exploitation of new spaces online through which it is able to voice opposition. It is here that social media as a vehicle becomes especially relevant.

Anti-Muslim, Anti-Islam Expression in Social Media Spaces

As mentioned previously, far-right groups had been using social media to oppose mosques and campaign against Muslims and Islam elsewhere in the West Midlands region. The BNP had orchestrated a particularly polemical Islamophobic campaign via Facebook against the proposed Solihull mosque (Allen, 2010b):

These [Muslim] bastards will not go away and until we kick them all out and send them back to their own countries we will have to continue fighting this war. But every time a Muslim blows himself up or abuses a white person or tries to take over a neighbourhood we gain more supporters. Time is actually on our side and all of Europe is itching to kick these useless perverts out of Europe. I do not know one person who wants Muslims in Europe . . . If Hitler hadn't gone and messed things up for nationalism we would never have let them in. Well the tables are turning and these guys are toast (p. 162).

As Lee (2000) explained, online spaces appear to afford individuals a greater sense of security: "the less involved face-to-face contact, the more likely respondents were to admit to socially undesirable behaviour" (p. 3). Consequently, it would seem that this "sense of security" gave space to some to be more open with their discriminatory and prejudicial views. Likewise, Marham and Baym (2009) explained how the online spaces continually invert and blur the boundaries between the private and the public where that which might typically be restricted to the privatized spaces now begin to permeate the public also, albeit those that exist online. Online spaces therefore create environments where social disruption occurs: Where what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable, private and public, legitimate and illegitimate become increasingly blurred. As Markham and Baym (2009) noted in relation to this, the result is an ever increasing "willingness of private citizens to bare the most personal and private elements of their lives to mass audiences" (p. xi). Given that prejudices and discriminations are typically restricted to the private, it is maybe unsurprising that given the social disruption occurring, that such sentiment and expression would appear to be beginning to emerge publicly online.

Methods and Approaches Using Online Spaces

The pilot study focused on the Facebook group opposing the mosque with the greatest number of followers. Identified as *Stop Dudley Super Mosque and Islamic Village* (membership circa 21,000 as at 1 January 2012), a personal Facebook profile was used soon after to join the group. From a research ethics point of view, it was decided that an open as opposed to closed or hidden approach to the undertaking would be most appropriate. On joining the group, a personal statement was posted on the group's wall giving information about the intentions for joining and which included full contact details as well as a link to an institutional webpage. This was questioned by just one member of the group, someone who as part of an ongoing communication admitted to be using a pseudonym to covertly monitor certain individuals affiliated to the group. While this open approach seemed appropriate, the potential adverse consequences of doing so were acknowledged. At the individual level, this included causing dismay among existing Facebook "friends" as well as encountering hostility or abuse from group members, neither of which incidentally occurred. Instead, some members of the group expressed genuine interest in the study.

Shortly after the initial introduction, a further statement was posted inviting members to discuss their opposition to the mosque. Doing so was potentially problematic. Such a direct and overt approach could have been offputting to some members of the group, not least because of the sensitivity of the subject matter. And indeed, this approach did fail to get any significant buy-in from group members with only a few responding. In addition to being offputting, it is possible that such an approach might also have the potential to skew the findings through the identification and subsequent engagement with those holding stronger feelings of opposition or at least to be more vociferous with them. Given the Facebook group was created with the sole intention of opposing the mosque, it was felt that approaching members to discuss this would not necessarily be too problematic.

In trying to overcome the lack of buy-in from members, the next approach was to send direct messages to those who were most active. As before though, there was again a general reluctance to engage. This was interesting because despite the fact that many were willing to post personally attributable explicit messages on the group's wall, few appeared willing to personally discuss them. One explanation might relate back to Lee (2000) and his theories relating to unobtrusive research methods. In the context of Facebook, might one-to-one contact be perceived as face-to-face contact? To try and overcome this, a new approach was devised based on Back et al.'s (2010) observations about the need to close the gap between the actual and self-idealized individual on Facebook. In trying to ensure members felt a critical distance was being maintained, anonymity was offered to those wishing to engage. Recalling Lee (2000), anonymity was

clearly seen by members as affording them greater individual protection. It would seem that expressing something to a known and attributable individual was perceived quite differently from expressing much the same to a mass and indiscriminately unknown audience.

The Back et al. (2010) inspired approach required the creation of an anonymous online questionnaire. Comprising 10 questions, 3 quantitative and 6 qualitative were coupled with an additional question relating to consent. Targeting the 50 most active members, direct messages were again sent this time including a link to the questionnaire and a statement about anonymity should they choose to participate. Noting Hewson, Yule, Laurent, and Vogel (2003), this non-probabilistic sampling method is not without problem. Most notably, respondents would represent a dramatically skewed sample of the population at large, thereby lacking generalizability. While acknowledging this, this approach remained valuable given that the sample did not need to be representative of any wider population. Instead, the research was focused on the views of a very specific group of individuals for whom opposing the mosque via Facebook was their common cause. Such an approach is not without precedent. As Hewson et al. (2003) went on to note, social and behavioral science research routinely uses selective approaches to sampling when investigating special interests.

Anonymity prompted unprecedented results. Having sent only 50 requests, 65 questionnaires were duly completed. Given some snowballing occurred, this presented further methodological problems not least because anonymity meant that it was impossible to differentiate between those invited and those gained through the snowballing process. Equally problematic was that it was unclear whether those snowballed were members of the Facebook group. Future research would therefore need to incorporate safeguards in this respect, to confirm the membership of respondents as a sample. In relation to the increased levels of response following the incorporation of anonymity, most of the received questionnaires were completed to a high standard. Although arguments and ideas were reasonably well articulated, a reasonably high percentage of completed questionnaires used a form of “text-speak.” A significant number of others were completed with the incorporation of a very strong Black Country dialect. Some combined the two. With this in mind, all responses are reproduced verbatim including any local dialect or colloquialisms as also any typographical or grammatical errors or inconsistencies.

Findings: Arguments, Themes, and Analysis

From analyzing the questionnaires, 61% of respondents identified as male and 39% as female. The largest age group of respondents identified as being between the ages of 26 and 40 (35%). Another 10% were below the age of 18, 25%

between 19 and 25, and a further 25% between 41 and 60. The remaining 5% of respondents identified as being above 60 years of age. In terms of location, more than three quarters of respondents stated they lived in the West Midlands region. The greatest number of respondents identified as living in the town of Dudley (37%). A further 25% of respondents lived in areas adjoining the town, in Cradley Heath, Gornal, Netherton, and Tipton. A further 11% identified as living in the Black Country more widely, in places such as Walsall and Wolverhampton. Another 5% of respondents stated that they lived elsewhere in the West Midlands conurbation including the city of Birmingham. Given the vast majority of respondents identified as living in the locale of Dudley, any findings might challenge pre-existing notions about opposition to the mosque in the town. As the findings from the West Midlands case study noted (Allen, 2010b), many Muslim community leaders believed that local people in Dudley and the surrounding areas overwhelmingly supported the proposed mosque. Maybe somewhat misguidedly, they believed that opposition emanated from “outside agitators” who were opportunistically promoting and voicing opposition as a means of creating divisions (Allen, 2013a). Because of the limitations of the sample group, it cannot be categorically concluded that this is not the case. However, given that a significant percentage of respondents claimed to live in the Black Country and used highly localized dialects throughout, it might be right to at least question the “outside agitators” perception.

From initial analyses, a clear resonance emerged for opposing the mosque in Dudley with those identified by Gale (2005) in nearby Birmingham. Most prominent was the notion that England remained a Christian country, that Islam was “alien” to England and its heritage, and that were the mosque to be built, there would be an exponential growth in the numbers of Muslims living nearby. Some differences were however apparent. For instance, although Gale noted how opponents rarely challenged the decision making of the planning authority, in Dudley, this emerged as a relatively well articulated argument from a significant minority of respondents. As one put it,

I am opposed to the proposed building being constructed on the site at Hall St as the site was designated as industrial land for the creation of jobs. A mosque does not fit the criteria and was rightly (in my opinion) refused planning permission based on planning rules. It does not help when the DMA [Dudley Muslim Association] say they will press on with the plans apparently with no thought for anyone’s legitimate objections.

The location was clearly problematic. For some, this was because of the perception that it would have a detrimental impact on the area as well as the quality of life of those living there. As another respondent put it,

It’s being built the top of my street the cars am horrendous dow my street I think they should just expand the other 1 and build

sumthink for the kids of Dudley as they are born need sumthink to entertain them or build houses as we are cleanly in need of more housing.

Given that such arguments go against the findings of Gale's research in nearby Birmingham, it would be wrong to conclude that such opposition was anti-Muslim *per se*. Instead, what such arguments might highlight is the very real anxiety that some in British society have about the building of mosques and of the religion of Islam more widely. This can be seen in the findings from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2010 (Park et al., 2010). In it, nationally representative findings highlighted how more than half the British population would be concerned if a large mosque was to be built near where they lived. The survey also highlighted how a significant proportion of the population expressed feeling "cool" toward Islam while also believing that "religious diversity"—largely equated with the presence of Muslims and Islam—had detrimentally affected British society. It would seem fair to suggest that these nationally identified concerns had resonance with what was occurring in Dudley. As such, respondents from the Facebook group expressed their apparent anxieties about the mosque, were decidedly "cool" about it—albeit never using the term itself—and felt that the mosque, as also Islam and Muslims, were having a detrimental impact on the town. Still though, it is important—and indeed necessary—to add that it was extremely difficult to disaggregate what might be legitimate opposition and that which might have been rather more driven by discriminatory views and ideas about Muslims and Islam.

One explanation for public anxiety was apparent in the view that both the mosque and the religion of Islam were inherently exclusive: excluding those who were not Muslim and thereby the majority of local people. A recurrent reaction to this was for the need to build something "for all" instead. Such a reaction however overlooks the fact that this is a mosque, a building that would be as exclusive to worshippers as indeed all other places of worship are. However, the reaction is interesting, as an integral part of the original "Pride of Dudley" plans was the adjoining community center that the DMA stated would be "for all" (Allen, 2013a). Given that this did not specifically feature in any of the responses, might this suggest that the original plans were poorly communicated, that local residents simply did not believe it would be "for all," or was it that the views of respondents merely reflected those of the wider British population? Trying to disaggregate responses in this way was problematic. Further muddying the situation was the argument put forward by a handful of respondents which related to the issue of religion as opposed to Islam specifically:

I don't want to see any new religious buildings being built when the money and land could be used to build something more needed and more productive for the whole community.

Such comments seemed to reflect the shift away from public religiosity in today's Britain more so than anything that was specifically anti-Muslim or anti-Islam. However, as with the British Social Attitudes Survey (Park et al., 2010), when people spoke about "religious diversity" and its apparent detrimental impact on British society, many were using the term "religious diversity" as code for the presence of Muslim communities. As such, it is unclear to what extent such responses might be Islamophobic.

Respondents also referred to the perceived cost of the mosque as justification for opposition. It is necessary to stress that it is unclear to what level, if indeed any, public funds have or would be contributed toward construction and maintenance, conclusive information has been difficult to obtain (Allen, 2013a). Although representatives from the DMA claim that the mosque is being funded entirely from within Dudley's Muslim communities, there have been conflicting reports in local media claiming that the proposed mosque would require £18 million of public funding in addition to the legal costs referred to previously (Allen, 2013a). This and the claims made by the DMA were tackled by one respondent:

The Muslim community is way too small in Dudley to be able to raise £18 million. It's too large a project but the capacity of the Mosque will only increase from 470 to 750. It's not worth £18 million. There are Mosques in Birmingham with capacities of 3,000 or 4,000 which costs half as much and they are in much more densely populated Muslim areas making the collection of funds easier. The people that fund Mosques are taxi drivers, restaurant workers and those with everyday office jobs. No millionaire is going to wade in with the money and no middle eastern government would give any money unless it's to a Mosque in London/ Manchester/Birmingham/Glasgow/ Edinburgh, etc. with strong theological links back to the Middle east which this Mosque and small community does not have.

Although competing claims have been routinely made about public funding, it is necessary to acknowledge what appeared to be very real concerns by some respondents about the potential or actual public cost of the mosque. When considered against a backdrop of austerity cuts, an economic downturn and the fact that some of Dudley's areas are in the top 10% of those with the highest levels of poverty in the country (Dudley Children & Young People's Partnership, 2011), it may be understandable why public investment is seen to be contentious. Given the public nature of the fallout from the mosque, despite the many refutations put forward by the DMA as also Dudley MBC, both would seem to have failed to convince local people that public monies are not being invested nor that the mosque is being funded solely by Dudley's Muslims. From interviews undertaken with those associated with the DMA (Allen, 2010b), it was suggested that additional funds were being sought overseas to enable the building of the mosque, something that not only resonates with the comments of the previous respondent but that

could also lead to more public anxiety given what this might be perceived to mean.

Size was a significant and recurrent feature of respondents' opposition, both in relation to the size of Dudley's Muslim communities and of the mosque. These were largely voiced through arguments that pitted the two against each other. In the 2001 Census, 7,476 people (2.45%) of Dudley's population identified as Muslim, slightly less than the national average of 3% at the time (Reeves, 2008). In line with the national picture, the vast majority of those identifying as Muslim in Dudley were of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Indian heritage. So although the Muslim population as a percentage of the town's population was slightly smaller than the national average, it was not disproportionately so. Of course, it is necessary to stress the irrelevancy of seeking to confer any legitimacy on arguments that seek to equate the number of Muslims with any resultant size or numbers of mosque. Not only are such arguments misleading but are also extremely problematic and highly dangerous. Size though was a recurrent focus, something that respondents clearly linked with notions of "need":

We have enough Mosque's already! Why build another one?

As a number of respondents pointed out, given the town already had three established mosques, there was no "need" for the new, significantly larger mosque. Reflecting on this, it was again apparent that the greatest challenge in analyzing the responses was the issue of whether, and if so where, respondents were covertly opposing the mosque on the sole basis of being anti-Muslim or anti-Islam, if indeed they were.

One way of trying to navigate this is to consider the opposition in Dudley with that expressed elsewhere. What was evident in Dudley was that the mosque was clearly being opposed on the basis of its visuality as the meaning attributed to it rather than as mere structural aesthetics (Gale, 2005; Göle, 2011; Stussi, 2008). For Allen (2013b), all forms of opposition expressed in relation to the Dudley mosque had been routinely dismissed out of hand by both Dudley MBC and the DMA, which undoubtedly created a highly emotive and politicized landscape. Such a landscape is extremely problematic because as Göle (2011) noted, the construction of mosques have become inextricably bound to social and community constructions that not only reify social and cultural boundaries but also reinforce the stereotypes and meanings attributed to Muslims and Islam. This was clearly evident in the comments of some of the respondents. For example, some posited the idea that the mosque—and by likely consequence, Islam and Muslims—was against the "norm" of Dudley. Notions of the "norm" were variously expressed through markers of culture, value, and heritage:

[the mosque] does not go with the heritage of Dudley it will dominate the towns picturesque skyline . . .

. . . Dudley is in the Black Country, known for the Black Country museum and its history, also the Zoo and Castle. In years to come it will be known for this proposed mosque . . .

The issue of size was also incorporated within this:

. . . [the mosque is] planned to be higher than "Top Church," is this a statement?

Much of the early local political campaigning against the mosque featured this type of discursive argument. From the allegation that the mosque's minaret would overshadow the spire of the "Top Church" through to the opposition recently posited by the EDL about the mosque contravening the medieval nature of the town, the idea that the mosque could never be a part of Dudley was recurrent. It is interesting, especially in the light of Gale's findings, whether this manifestation of opposition first emerged in political campaigns or whether political actors duly picked up on it following engagement with local residents. Nonetheless, as Göle (2011) rightly suggested, the visuality of the mosque—more so, what that visuality was seen to represent—was clearly influential in the way in which opposition was voiced and justified.

It was particularly interesting how visuality and meaning were combined with other arguments for opposition. For the respondent who highlighted the idea that the mosque ". . . does not go with [Dudley's] heritage . . ." or ". . . picturesque skyline . . ." this was voiced in combination with

. . . the Islamification of these shores is not acceptable!! No to sharia law.

Another suggested something similar but about Muslims and Islam rather more indiscriminately:

. . . very violent actions promoted by the Muslim community, this worries me about their intentions . . .

Another respondent associated ideas that were far more worrying in terms of the visuality and meaning of the mosque:

. . . [the minarets resemble] look out posts (I know what they say they are) . . . [the] design of the buildings seem more fortified castles than spiritual houses . . .

Another gave an insight into how they attached meaning to the visual aspect of the mosque:

. . . mosques currently in existence would appear to be hotbeds of extremism . . . media reports have produced what would seem to be conclusive proof that a great deal of what is preached by the Imams is filled with hate and incitement to cause harm.

Clearly, the mosque as physical structure was interpreted as being more than a mere place of worship. Far removed

from the aesthetics, therefore, were a number of different representative and symbolic meanings that in turn were seen to require greater attention and urgency. Likewise, these same meanings were those that created anxieties.

It might be that the culmination of these meanings about Islam and Muslims became most evident in the recurrent notion of “Islamification.” Especially prominent in the discourses of the far-right for much of the past half decade (Allen, 2011), the EDL has been one of the most prolific exponents of using “Islamification” as a means of justifying hostility and hatred toward Muslims and Islam on what it believes is sound evidence (Allen, 2011; Marsh, 2009). For the EDL, Islamification can be seen in “a country besieged by Muslims, the erosion of Christmas, jihadist preachers, the banning of nativity plays, halal-meat-only school dinners, the marginalization of Englishness, the removal of the St George’s Cross and so on” (Allen 2011, p. 338). Given that EDL has regularly marched and protested in various locations where mosques are being built or proposed, it might be fair to conclude that for them at least, the building of more mosques is clearly evidence of this process of Islamification. This resonated with many of the responses:

... this is England. We let them in without a problem, let them live English lives seeing as they are in England and then they try and turn it into a Muslim Islamic place and that isn’t the worst part, the worst is that after that and when the numbers grow, they will attempt to overtake the country and win the general election due to numbers and then imply sharia law and I don’t care to see that happen to my country.

Coupled with the perceived need to defend against Islam and Muslims, these responses resonated with broader discourses of Islamophobia where Islam and Muslims seen as posing a threat to who “we” are and what “we” are perceived to stand for (Allen, 2010a; INSTED, 2007). In the responses of some, this was applied not only to Dudley but also beyond, to England and indeed Britain:

Islam is taking over Britain. British people are becoming second class citizens in their own community.

This response is extremely similar to one made by the EDL a few years ago: “[the EDL will] not let our culture and traditions be eroded . . .” therefore justifying the need to “ . . . preserve English values” (“Six Hurt as Car Hits Pedestrians in Dudley,” 2010). It is interesting how the EDL has rationalized this perceived need to resist Islamification not just as a means of preserving “our” way of life, values, and culture but also to refute accusations of Islamophobia (Allen, 2011). Quite irrespective of whether they achieve this or not, clear resonance between the discourses of the EDL and the respondents was evident.

In line with Gale’s (2005) study of mosque opposition in Birmingham, the need to oppose Islamification was also evident in the way in which Islam—the mosque as physical

manifestation, Muslims as human manifestation—was repeatedly differentiated from Christianity as a means of justifying a “them” and “us” dichotomy. Although Reeves et al. (2009) noted how Dudley’s Christian heritage had previously fed tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in the town, it was clear that the utilization and accentuation of Christianity and Christianness as an integral part of “our” identity was ongoing. Seemingly irrespective of the actuality of Christian identity, doing so seemed to function by reinforcing and codifying the otherness of Islam and Muslims, something that was evident in the responses. Again though, this reflected local political discourses. Those such as Cllr Davis routinely stressed what he perceived to be the differences between Islam and Christianity. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this notion of the mosque going against “our” Christian identity and, as Davis put it, the Christian needs of Dudley was recurrent.

Demarcations of “us” and “them” were largely implicit, expressed through what might best be termed as coded and covert expressions. For some, however, this was much more explicit. As one respondent stated, their opposition was founded on the view that

... Dudley use to belong to us White people not foreigners.

Others were more offensive. For them, the mosque would

... mean more paki’s will commute into the Dudley area, thus creating a curry infested atmosphere and I for one despise the cunts.

It is worth stressing that such overtly discriminatory and offensive expressions were evident in only a minority of the responses. So although many used markers of Islam or Muslimness to demarcate “them” from “us,” few explicitly did so through the utilization of racist and racialized discourses. Whether this reflects a shift away from the recognition of skin color, ethnicity, nationality, and so on as markers of discrimination remains open to question. Indeed, it is possible that people might have become rather more nuanced, recognizing that the expression of anti-Muslim or anti-Islam sentiment has acquired a much greater social and political civility than similar expressions against Black or other minority groups (Allen, 2010b, 2013b; Commission on British Muslims & Islamophobia, 1997). Yet, as the respondent’s comments highlight, in the minds of some at least, religious and racial markers—Muslim and “Paki”—are interchangeable if not entirely the same.

Disconnected Publicly, Connected Online

A final theme to emerge from the analysis did not specifically relate to mosques or even Islam or Muslims. For many respondents, alongside various other arguments, there was

the expression of how they felt overlooked or excluded from public and political debates about the mosque. Quite irrespective of the main thrust of their opposition, few respondents expressed that they had been able to find a voice in the proceedings. So prominent was this sense of disconnect that almost three quarters of respondents referred to it albeit through a combination of both explicit and implicit discourses. Some of these are set out below:

Because the majority of people in Dudley don't want it but their protests fall on deaf ears!

... because the local community opposed it, but as per usual no one listens.

... because I support the people of Dudley who are clearly against it, and the council who also turned down the proposal, until intervention from the government who care nothing for the people of Dudley.

From analyzing the responses, clearly, the lack of opportunities arising to voice opposition to the construction of the mosque—whether legitimate or other—created something of a vacuum. Although Dudley MBC and the DMA publicly opposed each other until the common enemy of the EDL arrived, those wanting to voice opposition found their views being curtailed and dismissed as irrelevant and in some instances, Islamophobic (Allen, 2013a). Since the late 1990s, few opportunities or spaces appear to have been made available to them where voicing their opinions about the mosque might have made local residents feel respected and valued. And as research has shown, the far-right has capitalized on these vacuums (Allen, 2011). Exploiting the fact that many feel they are not being heard, those who become desperate to have their voice heard are increasingly drawn toward those willing to listen. Given that this tends to be the far-right, individuals become aligned with them more on the basis of them having listened as opposed to explicitly supporting or even understanding their campaigns or ideologies. By doing so, the far-right valorize those marginalized voices whereas simultaneously, those marginalized voices subsequently valorize the far-right. This was succinctly put by one respondent:

... as an EDL member I feel that the peeps off Dudley 'av just been ignord that's why we the EDL do wot as to be done.

What should be neither overlooked nor underestimated is that the EDL and indeed others are doing “wot [has] to be done” not only in Dudley but also in many other places.

Contextualizing the Findings

As a pilot, this research sought to engage Facebook group members opposing the proposed Dudley mosque to explore the causes and drivers underpinning their opposition. In addition, the pilot sought to share preliminary findings

about how social and political opposition functions in the virtual spaces. As before, however, it is necessary to reiterate the limitations of the pilot not least given the constraints of the methodologies adopted and that this was an opportunistic study. And as many of the groups referred to here have since been closed, these findings might best be seen as being largely indicative. Nonetheless, the study generated significant qualitative data and used in conjunction with the research undertaken on behalf of the European Muslim Research Centre, it is possible that the findings have wider appeal and impact. Evidence of this can be seen in how the pilot provided new opportunities to re-consider and re-contextualize existing scholarly literature while also providing a timely insight into the opposition expressed toward the building of mosques. Likewise, the pilot provided findings worthy of consideration and further questioning as regard the relevance of social media, social networking, and online tools as both a method and site for research.

From the findings alone, the opposition shown toward Dudley mosque clearly resonates with opposition shown toward the building of mosques elsewhere. Drawing on a wide range of different arguments and justifications, these reflected previously identified themes for opposition, in particular, those identified by Gale (2005): of Islam being “alien” to English heritage, its Christian identity, and fears of an expansion of Islam and Muslims in the surrounding area. Reframing these within a contemporary context, it could be argued that the findings from the pilot went further than Gale's study, highlighting a number of more pressing, contemporarily contextualized arguments. These included opposing the mosque through challenging the decision making of the planning authority, something that the existing literature only tentatively touches on. More substantially though, the pilot highlighted how the mosque—and by consequence, Islam and Muslims—was perceived to be exclusive, a drain on limited public money and resources, as also being deemed unnecessary and far from “needed” by anyone in the town, Muslim or non-Muslim. The findings also touched on the growing public antipathy toward all forms of public religion in today's Britain, not just that being shown toward Islam and Muslims alone.

Without doubt, the visuality and meaning attributed to mosques were extremely important. As Göle (2011) rightly noted, the public signs and symbols of Islam and Muslims are increasingly becoming entities on which social, political, and cultural dissonance and dispute are being projected. As Göle adds, physical structures such as mosques not only catalyze this but also accentuate concerns about the re-territorialization of space and the presence of difference, both visual and non-visual. The construction of mosques is therefore no longer a matter for Muslim communities; unsurprising that many of those who joined the Facebook group seemingly lived in close proximity to the proposed site of the mosque. As Göle concludes, mosques are increasingly seen as more

than mere places of worship, instead functioning as cultural artifacts, representative and symbolic of all that is contemporarily known and understood about Muslims and Islam. And this includes those meanings that are contemporarily seen as informing what is wrong or problematic with Muslims and Islam. Mosques, therefore, not only become inextricably bound to social and community constructions about Muslims and Islam but also become visual and physical structures that seemingly evidence them.

Given the emphasis on the visibility of mosques—both in terms of physical and symbolic manifestations—a consideration of Allen's (2010a) use of semiotics theory may be appropriate. While other theories might be relevant—including social integration and social cognitive theory, particularly in relation to the online public spheres—Allen's use of this theoretical frame to interrogate other manifestations of Islamophobic and anti-Muslim expression would seem to lend itself to this particular context and associated constraints. Referring to “visual identifiers,” Allen set out how a vast array of different markers and characteristics of Islam and Muslims were being increasingly appropriated as “signs.” For him, these signs functioned by signaling what is perceived to be contemporarily known, received, and accepted as valid in terms of the meanings of Islam and Muslims somewhat irrespective of whether that be accurate or inaccurate, fair or unfair, and so on. It would seem that the mosque functions in accordance with this theoretical premise: as a “visual identifier” signaling that which is perceived to be known and subsequently accepted about Muslims and Islam. In the contemporary setting therefore, this becomes manifested in meanings that perceive mosques to be, among others, “hotbeds of extremism” where “sharia law” ferments. Likewise, they are also perceived to signal the “Islamification” of Dudley and beyond. None was more obvious than this in the observation by the respondent who claimed the “design of the buildings seem more fortified castles than spiritual houses,” especially given how the minarets resemble look-out towers.

For Allen, all those for whom the visual identifiers make known such meanings have the potential themselves to be Islamophobic or at least interpret meaning within an ideological Islamophobic frame (Allen, 2010a). This requires further explanation and it is here that relevance of the mosque as not being a part of the “norm” becomes vitally important. As noted previously, not only was the mosque—in its function as visual identifier—not seen to be part of the norm but was also seen to be never able. Instead, the mosque signaled the perceived threat posed to Dudley and “us” more widely. Underpinning this was the identification and demarcation of “us” and “them.” Opposition to the mosque “makes sense” because it is about preserving the self from the threatening other. As the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (1997) put it, such processes function in ways that appear to be “commonsense” despite being divisive and highly discriminatory.

To what extent then might all opposition shown toward the mosque be seen to be discriminatory or even Islamophobic? For Allen (2010a), Islamophobia has to be understood both singularly and variously in terms systems of thought, belief, and action that seek to actively reinforce Islam and Muslims as the “other.” Islamophobia is therefore not necessarily restricted to any specific action, practice, discrimination, or prejudice but can be found in the meaning that is, at times, both critically and uncritically accepted as natural and normative of Muslims, Islam, or both. Clarke (2003) argued that through such ideological processes, a sense of order is formulated, one that establishes and reinforces notions of who we are, or more precisely, who we are not. For him, this is achieved through processes of stigmatization, marginalization, and intolerance that are necessary to legitimize “us” as “norm.” It would seem reasonable to suggest that underpinning many of the arguments expressed in opposing the mosque was a formulated sense of order. Without any doubt, many of the arguments of opposition expressed by respondents embodied a clear sense of who “we” are while clearly demarcating the “us” from “them.”

To what extent is it therefore legitimate to suggest that any opposition that accentuates difference might not necessarily be Islamophobic but might have the potential to be interpreted as such and thereby fuel the discrimination perpetuated by others? What the findings from this study suggest is that even where there is some evidence of an “us” and “them” dichotomy existing, it would be extremely difficult and rather simplistic to suggest that all those voicing dichotomous discourses were Islamophobic: discriminatory probably, but Islamophobic not necessarily, something that creates a series of very real dilemmas. For instance, where do the boundaries of Islamophobia begin and end? Similarly, when are the lines between valid and invalid, legitimate and illegitimate opposition crossed? Likewise, how can one know when justified opposition transgresses into unjustified opposition? What the study in Dudley highlights is that a good number of people—even those who are prepared to express their opposition in the blurred reality/unreality of the private/public online spaces—have many different oppositional viewpoints that they perceive to be legitimate, valid, or justified. The vast majority are not, one might suggest, Islamophobic, anti-Muslim, or anti-Islamic per se; nor are they even likely to be explicitly prejudicial or discriminatory as indeed the findings might suggest. Yet, when those individuals fail to acquire a voice and are left feeling excluded, ignored, and marginalized, it is possible that their views harden, thereby requiring them to seek outlets—or conversely, “outlets” such as the far-right to seek them—to find valorization. Any ensuing Islamophobia, therefore, may be the consequence of a transitional process of seeking valorization and not necessarily a start point for many, whether focusing on those joining Facebook groups or indeed voicing opposition elsewhere. The reasons for joining and being a member of an online Facebook group that opposes the building of a mosque, therefore, may not be as simple as one might presume. More likely, the reasons

are far more complex and multi-faceted and driven by social and political conditions as much as anything else.

And this is where the irony becomes apparent: that which connected all of those engaging through the Facebook group was a sense of disconnect. This sense of disconnect may provide some insight into why Facebook groups, social networks, and other online spaces are being used not only to oppose mosques but also, more importantly, to encourage others to do so. As Gurak and Logie (2003) put it,

the highly specialised virtual spaces on the internet make it easy to join a community and quickly understand and assume this community ethos . . . often, participants do not have to spend time making introductory remarks or defending the premises of their statements. This “instant ethos” makes it easy to reach many individuals of similar values. (p. 31)

In conjunction with the lack or at least the perceived lack of opportunities to engage and find a voice in the offline “real” spaces, it would seem that social media increasingly provides those immediate opportunities to not only find a voice but also to find valorization. This will, as Facebook has found since this research was undertaken, require a constant process of scrutiny and revision to try and ensure that those “individuals of similar values” have fewer opportunities to form communities that have the potential to foster and promote discrimination, bigotry, and hatred. And it is here that notions of opposition become relevant once more. As Shirky (2009) noted,

. . . when it becomes simple to form groups, we get both the good and the bad ones. This is going to force society from simply preventing groups from forming to actively deciding which existing ones to try to oppose . . . (p. 21)

It is therefore likely that groups opposing others that oppose will be undoubtedly necessary.

Note

1. See <http://tellingmamauk.org>.

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