

Religion and Internet

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“Stop Dudley Super Mosque and Islamic Village”: Overview of the Findings from a Pilot Study

Chris Allen

Introduction¹

Since 9/11, the building of mosques in Western Europe has not been without controversy. In various locations the proposition let alone the construction of mosques and similar buildings has been increasingly problematic; a focus for hostility as also extensive social, political and academic scrutiny from an increasingly broad range of stakeholders (Allievi 2009). This is evident from a growing number of studies: in France (Cesari 2005), Germany (Jonker 2005), Italy (Saint-Blancat and di Friedberg 2005) and the Netherlands (Mauszen 2004) among others. Maybe most evident emerged following a public vote by the Swiss in 2009, duly voting to ban the building of minarets. For Stussi (2008), those supporting the ban did so not because they did not like minarets but to make a public display of their wider anxieties about Islam and the presence of Muslims.

Göle (2011) found that public anxieties were in fact being catalysed by the visuality of minarets and mosques, increasingly seen as symbols of all that was seen to be problematic about Muslims and Islam. As she goes on, this has meant that mosques have increasingly become seen as public manifestations of difference, perceived or actual. Consequential of the tumultuous transition she argues is contemporarily underway in Europe, Göle believes this to be the result of Muslims moving from temporary migrants to fully fledged European citizens. Going beyond the mere materialistic aspect of mosques, Göle concludes that the opposition being shown towards mosques is increasingly justified on the basis of a whole range of social, political and cultural precepts. Consequently, opposition to the building of mosques is typically complex rarely seeming to have much to do with the physical or material structure.

¹ For an expanded version of this chapter which explores the use of Facebook groups as both a site and method for research, see: Allen, Chris. “Anti-Social Networking Findings From a Pilot Study on Opposing Dudley Mosque Using Facebook Groups as Both Site and Method for Research.” *SAGE Open* 4.1 (2014): 2158244014522074.

Dudley Super Mosque and Islamic Village

Similar is true of mosques in Britain too, evident in the work of those such as Gale in Birmingham (2005) and McLoughlin in Bradford (2005). However, it is in the central heartland of Britain – namely, the West Midlands region – where opposition to mosques has been most significant: among other incidents, three mosques were firebombed in 2009–10 and three others had nail-bombs placed outside them in 2013. From research undertaken in the region (Allen 2010a), much of this opposition – as also the dissemination of Islamophobic materials – was being managed through the use of new forms of social media and networking sites including Facebook. Focusing primarily on mosques being built or those seeking planning permission, the roots of this activity has been traced back to the furore surrounding the proposed building of a new mosque in Dudley which, since the late 1990s, had been attracting a high profile campaign against it. For its opponents, the mosque was no ordinary mosque but a “super-mosque” (Allen 2013a).

It is maybe unsurprising that social media and networking sites have begun to be used in these ways. As Shirky (2009) puts it, such applications allow new alliances, groups and networks to be created with ease and extremely little expertise. As the West Midlands research showed, many of those using such means to oppose mosques tended to be aligned with existing far-right and neo-Nazi political groups and organisations (Allen 2010a). One of the first such endeavours in relation to the Dudley “super-mosque” was a Facebook group named *Fuk [sic] the Dudley mosque, let's build a big fat pig there instead*. In spite of the fact that Facebook has changed its policy so that groups such as these no longer exist, whilst active, almost all featured public “walls” contained highly explicit Islamophobic content that was typically accompanied by names and photos as also other personal information. Given the expression of Islamophobic or indeed any other form of discriminatory phenomena are rarely so overt (Allen 2010b), this was maybe even more surprising because as Back et al. (2010) observe, the majority of Facebook users are genuine. Through these online spaces therefore, such explicit discourses can be easily and accurately attributable. For Markham and Baym's (2009), this is because of the extremely fluid divides that exist online between the private and the public with individuals increasingly sharing the most private parts of their lives to indiscriminate mass audiences.

In seeking to explore this in greater detail, a pilot study was undertaken upon which the findings of this chapter are based. Exploring how opposition against mosques was being disseminated via Facebook groups as also used to garner support online, the pilot study used the Dudley “super-mosque” as a case study. Beginning with a contextual overview of what has been described

as anti-social media, this chapter goes on to set out the findings from the thematic analysis of the study. In conclusion, it seeks to contextualise the findings within the broader bodies of scholarly evidence relating to the opposition being shown towards mosques as also Islamophobia more widely.

(Anti) Social Media in Context

It is interesting because when religion – especially Islam – and social media have been referred to, it has typically been from the point of view of trying to understand how radicalisation has taken place, who is behind this and how best such approaches might be countered. There has also been much made of the new opportunities presented by social media in terms of evangelising and spreading the message of various religions. Little focus has been devoted to spreading hate about religions. As mentioned previously, in the British context preliminary research showed that it was primarily far-right groups that were utilising social networking to garner support for opposition towards mosques in the West Midlands region. An example is shown below:

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.

cited in ALLEN 2010a

For Lee, online spaces afford a greater sense of security given "the less involved face-to-face contact, the more likely respondents were to admit to socially undesirable behaviour" (Lee 2000: 3). This security, or so it would seem, appeared to afford individuals space to be more overt and explicit in airing their discriminatory and bigoted views. For Elm et al. (2009), this was because the online spaces invert and blur boundaries between the private and public that normally exist offline. Accordingly, online spaces create environments where social disruption not only takes place but so too flourishes. Consequently, the boundaries between unacceptable and acceptable, public and private, illegitimate and legitimate become increasingly protean. Given that voicing prejudicial and discriminatory discourses are typically restricted to the private in

the offline spaces, it is maybe unsurprising that in the online spaces such discourses appear to be becoming increasingly public.

To investigate this in relation to the Dudley “super-mosque”, the research focused on the largest Facebook group opposing the mosque. Names *Stop Dudley Super Mosque and Islamic Village*, its membership exceeded 21,000 at the start of 2012. Employing methodologies resonant with Back et al.’s (2010) research, an anonymous online questionnaire was designed. Comprising ten questions – three quantitative, six qualitative and a question relating to consent – the fifty most active members of the group – those publicly posting group content – were contacted via direct message requesting their participation. Noting Hewson et al. (2003), similar non-probabilistic methods of sampling are not without problem because they limit the ability to generalise. Whilst so, for this research study such sampling was valid given the group did not need to be generalizable. And as Hewson et al. (2003) rightly note, such approaches to sampling are routinely employed within the social and behavioural science research carried out in the offline spaces and so should be seen to be as appropriate online too.

Having sent requests to participate, 65 completed questionnaires were received; evidence that some snowballing took place. A problem to arise out of this was that because the questionnaires were anonymous, it was impossible to differentiate between those approached to participate and those who were not. This methodological problem is explored in more detail in Allen (2014). Nonetheless, the questionnaires received were completed to a high standard where arguments and ideas were reasonably well articulated. However, a high percentage of returned questionnaires were completed using a form of what might be best described as “text-speak” whilst an equally high number were completed with the incorporation of a very strong Black Country dialect. Some combined the two. With this in mind, direct quotes are reproduced here verbatim incorporating local dialect or colloquialisms as well as typographical and grammatical errors.

Arguments for Opposition

Of the respondents, 61 per cent identified as being male; 39 per cent female. In terms of the age, 35 per cent of respondents were between 26 and 40; 10 per cent under 18; 25 per cent aged 19 to 25; and 25 per cent aged 41 to 60. A further 5 per cent were over 60 years of age. 37 per cent of respondents stated they lived in the town of Dudley with a further 25 per cent living in areas adjoining it; in Cradley Heath, Gornal and Netherton among others. Only 5 per cent

stated that they lived outside the West Midlands conurbation. That most identified themselves as living locally, challenges the findings from the West Midlands case study which noted that many local Muslims felt that opposition was from outside the town with local people being overwhelmingly supportive (Allen 2013a). Given the limitations of the sample group, it cannot be categorically argued that this was not the case but could be seen to be indicative.

From analyses undertaken in relation to opposition being shown towards the mosque, there was clear resonance with Gale's (2005) study in nearby Birmingham. These included notions of England being a Christian country, of Islam being an alien "Other" that sat outside of England's heritage, and that if the mosque were to be built there would be a "flood" of Muslims coming to the town. There were also some differences. For example unlike Gale (2005), some respondents openly challenged the planning authority and associated decision-making in well-articulated forms:

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 anyones legitimate objections

Concerns about location were also articulated as being problematic, arguing that any mosque would have a detrimental impact on the area the quality of life of nearby residents:

Its being built the top of my street the cars am hurendous dow my street i think they should just expand the other 1 and build sumthink for the kids of dudley as they are bord n need sumthink to entertain them or build houses as we are cleanly in need of more housing

Such objections would seem to suggest that a very real sense of anxiety about mosques – and possibly Muslims and Islam more widely – is evident in parts of British society. This was similarly evident in the findings of the nationally representative British Social Attitudes Survey 2010 (Park et al. 2010), highlighting how over half of Britons would feel concerned if a large mosque was built nearby to where they lived. A significant percentage also expressed feeling "cool" towards Islam adding that "religious diversity" – equitable with the presence of Muslims if the findings were duly drilled down – had detrimentally impacted contemporary Britain. It would seem fair to suggest that similar

concerns were underpinning the opposition expressed in Dudley. It was however very difficult to disentangle what might be described as legitimate opposition from illegitimate, that which might have been informed and driven by bigoted or hateful views and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam than anything else.

Underpinning the respondents' anxieties was the view that both the mosque and Islam widely were inherently exclusive. As such, respondents believed the majority of local people would be excluded from using the space let alone go into the mosque. For the respondents, there was a greater need to build something "for all". Whilst so, all religious buildings and places of worship will always be relatively exclusive to worshippers and adherents, quite irrespective of what the religion is, Islam or otherwise. Interestingly, when the plan to build the "super-mosque" was first mooted, the Dudley Muslim Association stated that the "Pride of Dudley" (the name given to the mosque and surrounding development) would be "for all" (Allen 2013a). As this did not feature in any of the responses received, it might be argued that the original plans were either poorly communicated or that local people did not believe it:

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

Maybe reflecting the shift from public to private religiosity in today's Britain, again such expressions may not necessarily be anti-Muslim or anti-Islam. However as with the British Social Attitudes Survey (Park et al. 2010), here are clearly times when criticisms and concerns about "religion" and "diversity" can be seen to be mere codes for "Islam" and "Muslims".

The perceived cost of the mosque was also recurrent in the discourses of opposition. For Allen (2013b), it was always unclear whether public funds were to be contributed towards the mosque's construction and maintenance. Whilst the Dudley Muslim Association repeatedly claimed the mosque was to be solely funded by local Muslim communities, alternative claims were routinely made in the local media, some suggesting the contribution to be in excess of £18 million (Allen 2013a). As one respondent put it:

The Muslim community is way too small in Dudley to be able to raise £18 million. Its too large a project but the capacity of the Mosque will only increase from 470 to 750. Its 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 its 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.

Considered against ongoing austerity cuts at national and local level in Britain as also the relatively high deprivation levels in Dudley, it is clear why public investment became so contentious. Despite numerous refutations by Dudley Muslim Association and Dudley MBC about no public funding being made available, neither would seem to have convinced respondents. Interestingly, from interviews with Dudley Muslim Association representatives (Allen 2010a), any shortfall in funds raised through Dudley's Muslim communities were said to be being sought overseas. Whilst overcoming the issue of public funds being used, in resonance with the previous respondent's comments, doing so might have the potential to create even greater public anxiety.

The size and scale of the "super-mosque" was another feature of the respondent's reasons for opposing it. For some, the size of Dudley's Muslim communities was particularly problematic. Whilst Dudley's Muslims account for just under 2.5 per cent of Dudley's population, slightly less than the national average at the time (Reeves 2008), there is an irrelevancy in trying to locate legitimacy in arguments which seek to calculate the optimum number of Muslims per mosque "needed" – and duly supported – in any given town or city. Not only might such calculations be highly misleading but so too problematic and extremely dangerous. Nonetheless, such discourses and justifications were widespread:

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

Given Dudley already had three mosques, some respondents argued that there was no "need" for another; especially not one that was significantly larger.

As with the findings from the existing body of scholarly work relating to mosques, much of the opposition was underpinned by meanings attributed the mosque's visuality and what this symbolised as opposed to the material structure itself (Gale 2005; Göle 2011; Stussi 2008). As Göle (2011) notes, the construction of mosques have become inextricably bound to social and community constructions that not only reify social and cultural boundaries but so too reinforce the problematized stereotypes and meanings attributed to and accepted about Muslims and Islam. Such processes also support the construction of forms of order about who "we" are and who "we" are not (Clarke 2003) where

Muslims as also the religion of Islam become reduced to undeniable “Others” for whom a myriad negative and stereotypical attributions become irremovable and eternally fixed. As Allen (2010) puts it, such become what he describes as the “normative truths” about Muslims and Islam that can be made known through a vast array of different actions, utterances, images and texts – as also physical and material entities including mosques – that function symbolically to shape, inform or indeed reinforce, opinions, attitudes and prejudices.

This was apparent in the discourses of the respondents with the mosque clearly being seen to go against the “norm” of what they perceived Dudley to be:

[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 it's history, also the Zoo and Castle. In years to come it will be known for this proposed mosque

As before, “Otherness” was also seen in the mosque’s size also:

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

This objection was particularly interesting because for a number of the respondents, Dudley was “Christian” and so Christianity and being Christian were seen to be the “norm”. In arguing that the mosque would be taller than and overshadow (both unproven) the spire of the “Top Church” – the medieval church that sits atop a hill in the centre of Dudley – respondents also interpreted this as a deliberate and confrontational challenge to Dudley: “a statement of intent”.

Demarcating Islam from Christianity resonated with the demarcating of “us” from “them” as identified by Clarke (2003). Such was far from new in Dudley as Reeves et al. (2009) note in terms of the historical tensions between “Christian” (typically un-practising and White British) and Muslim communities. Such tensions were evident in the pilot project’s findings too. For one respondent, the mosque “...does not go with [Dudley’s] heritage...” being alien to the town’s “...picturesque skyline....” For another, this went beyond the “statement intent” stated previously: it was far more serious:

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

For another, the visual symbolism of the mosque provided a “real” insight into what its real purpose was likely to be:

...mosques...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

Adding:

[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

It was repeatedly stated by respondents that Dudley's Muslims had a far more insidious agenda than merely trying to build a place of worship. Discursively expressed as potential "normative truths", for many this was evidence of – as it has been more popularly termed – the process of "Islamification":

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 isnt 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 dont care to see that happen to my country.

As another put it:

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

For some, demarcations of "us" and "them" were somewhat covert. For others, it was far more overt, typically coupled with explicit racialized discourses:

Dudley use to belong to us white people not foreigners.

Some preferred even more offensive language. For them, the building of 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.

Whilst highly offensive, it is important to stress that such expressions were made by a mere handful of respondents.

Conclusion

In considering the findings, it is important to reiterate the limitations of the study: the constraints of the methodologies and that many of the groups have been closed down by Facebook (Allen 2014). Nonetheless, the pilot provides new evidence against which to compare, consider and hopefully contextualise the contemporary expression of opposition being shown towards mosques with those historically, largely before social media and online spaces were so widely available and accessible to mass audiences. It was immediately clear that much of the contemporary online discourses resonated with historical offline discourses. This was evident in the arguments for opposition identified by Gale (2005) where Islam was seen to be “Other”, where mosques were perceived to sit in contention to the English heritage, of Islam being oppositional to Christianity, and of fears that Muslims were seeking to “take-over” local areas through building mosques and changing the landscape. However, new insights also emerged including a greater emphasis on the challenging of the decision-making of planning authorities, the “drain” on ever dwindling public funds and resources, and the fact that more mosques could not be seen to be justified on the basis of “need” alone. There were also some inferences to a growing public antipathy towards all forms of religion in contemporary British society.

The visuality and symbolic meaning attributed to mosques was also important. As with Göle’s (2011) research, material and physical aspects of Islam and Muslims were seen to be increasingly symbolic through which social, political and cultural meanings were understood. As such, the symbolism of mosques was such that not only did they catalyse the concerns and anxieties of local people but more so accentuate those relating to the re-territorialisation of space. The proposition and subsequent construction of mosques is therefore no longer a matter for Muslims only. More than mere places of worship, mosques contemporarily function as cultural artefacts, representative and symbolic of all that is contemporarily known and understood about Muslims and Islam in particular, that which is seen to be “Other”, wrong and problematic (Göle 2011). Mosques therefore become inextricably bound to social and community as also discursive constructions.

For Allen (2014), the emphasis on the visual – whether physical or symbolic – is best understood through semiotics theory (Allen 2010b). Preferring the descriptor “visual identifiers”, Allen argues that a vast array of markers and attributes associated with Islam and Muslims are increasingly being appropriated as “signs”. Such signs function by signalling the normative truths – referred to previously – that are contemporarily known, received and accepted as valid about Islam and Muslims irrespective of whether such are

accurate or inaccurate, fair or unfair and so on. As highlighted by the Dudley study, this becomes manifested in ways where mosques become routinely seen to be "hotbeds of extremism" where "sharia law" ferments. In doing so, they are seen to symbolise the processes of "Islamification". No more apparent was this than in the following comments: the "design of the buildings seem more fortified castles than spiritual houses" where the minarets were seen to resemble – and subsequently symbolise – look-out towers. For Allen (2010b), those who understand such meanings – those symbolised by the visual identifiers – therefore have the capacity to interpret such meaning within an ideologically framed notion of Islamophobia. This does not mean that all interpretations *are* Islamophobic just that a very real potential exists.

Unlike other racisms including antisemitism and homophobia among others (Allen, 2010b), Islamophobia continues to be a complex and contested concept. Most definitions – including those preferred at the European level (Allen and Nielsen 2002) – appear to have evolved out of literalist interpretations where Islamophobia is simplistically seen as a mere fear or dislike of Islam and by extension, all Muslims. This literalism is particularly common in populist and public discourses, typically being voiced by critics and detractors who contest the existence of an Islamophobia arguing instead that there is little discrimination or hate in being "fearful" of Islam. As Shryock (2010) acknowledges, usage of the term tends to be overly simplistic and impervious to nuance. For Sayyid (2010) and Readings et al. (2011) however, there is a need for context to differentiate the analytical – where Islamophobia is contested and nebulous – from the polemical, the latter discursively evident in those venting grievances, smugly pontificating, or canvassing politicians and policymakers.

Nonetheless Klug (2012) argues that the term has "come of age" within scholarly circles. Moosavi (2014) agrees, arguing that Islamophobia can no longer be contested if it is ever to be understood. He goes on, academic studies must now knowingly avoid literalist interpretations in the same way that those researching homophobia and Antisemitism did in the past, neither of which were descriptors that were ever truly suitable or functional. One way of doing so is the adoption of a more critical approach to studying Islamophobia evident in the work of Allen (2010b), Lean (2012), Sheehi (2011) and Taras (2012) among others. Here, Islamophobia is necessarily more than mere phobia or fear. For Allen (2010b) and Sheehi (2011), Islamophobia is ideological, functioning and embedded within the individual, communal, social and global patterns of thought and meaning about Muslims and Islam that mark the contemporary setting. Consequently that which becomes known – and subsequently understood – about Muslims and Islam is through signifiers and symbols which pertain to influence, impact upon, and inform the social consensus (Allen 2013a).

Islamophobia is therefore no longer restricted to specific actions, practices or discriminations but instead exists in processes of identification and recognition which result in such meanings and understandings being unquestioned and accepted as natural and normative of what is perceived to be Muslims, Islam or both.

This of course highlights the similarities with Clarke's (2003) theory about forms of order – about who “we” are and who “we” are not – being constructed through processes of stigmatization, marginalization and intolerance. In applying this to Islamophobia, Muslims therefore become reduced to undeniable “Others” for whom various negative and stereotypical attributions become irremovable and thereby eternally fixed. As Allen (2010) states, once established as irremovable and fixed so too do these stereotypical attributions become accepted as – and in reiterating the point made previously – “normative truths”, made known through a vast array of different actions, utterances, images and texts that function symbolically. In doing so, they become recognised, meaningfully understood and subsequently utilised to shape, inform or indeed reinforce, opinions, attitudes and prejudices. This does not mean that all recipients to such “truths” are Islamophobic, far from it. However, those deploying them in order to rationalise and justify exclusionary practices and actions against Muslims most likely are. Even where not deployed though, the same still have the potential to shape and inform what might be described as “Islamophobia-thinking” (Allen 2014).

To what extent then might at least some of the opposition expressed towards Dudley mosque be seen to fit in this Islamophobic frame? Without any doubt, elements of the opposition embodied a very clear and coherent sense of who “we” are, simultaneously and unequivocally demarcating “us” from “them”. Nonetheless, it would be far too simplistic to suggest that all those voicing such dichotomous discourses were or indeed might have been Islamophobic: potentially discriminatory, maybe. This of course creates a number of dilemmas not least where the lines between what constitutes Islamophobia – and what does not – would appear to exist. Similarly, how to identify and differentiate between valid and invalid, legitimate and illegitimate discourses of opposition and criticism about Muslims and Islam. Intentions too – whether individual or collective – are also vitally important. How then does one know when justified opposition might transgress into unjustified, Islamophobic opposition?

The Dudley pilot study shows that people – in this instance, those preferring to express their opposition in the blurred public/private realities/unrealities of online spaces – hold various different viewpoints, all of which are held onto as being legitimate, valid and justified. Whilst the majority – or so it

would seem – were far from or would appear to be necessarily Islamophobic, where they failed to acquire a voice – whether excluded, ignored and marginalised – so it became apparent that those same views had the potential to harden as they sought to find suitable outlets through which to acquire a sense of valorisation. Any transgression into what might be described as Islamophobia therefore may be consequential of that need to find valorisation and the means to which they have to strive to find this as opposed to being the start point from which opposition – and Islamophobia particularly – evolved. The reason for joining a Facebook group or indeed any other online group or network to voice opposition – and subsequently more anti-Muslim, anti-Islam discourses – may not therefore be as simple and one-dimensional as it might be presumed.

What seemed to connect all of those engaged through the pilot study was a sense of disconnect, something that affords some insight into why Facebook groups and similar online spaces are not only being seen to be used to oppose mosques but more importantly to encourage others to do so. For Gurak and Logie:

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.

GURAK AND LOGIE 2003: 31.

In the contemporary setting, the lack – perceived or otherwise – of opportunities to engage and find a voice in the "real" (offline) world might be one of the reasons why social media and network spaces are increasingly being seen as providing alternative and more immediate opportunities to find a voice as also valorisation. Such spaces therefore, as Facebook has since found, are likely to require ongoing scrutiny and revision in order to try and ensure those "individuals of similar values" seeking to foster and promote discrimination, bigotry and hate have fewer opportunities to do so online. As Shirky observes:

...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...

SHIRKY 2009: 21.

This is already evident in the way in which some governments – the British being one – that are seeking to curtail groups that seek to radicalise or promote certain ideologies via social media. For religion and religious communities therefore, these new spaces provide much scope and opportunity; scope and opportunity that is as equally positive as indeed it is negative.

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