

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

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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 (Maussen 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 visibility 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.

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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