**‘Keyboard warriors’: the production of Islamophobic identity and an extreme worldview within an online political community**

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**Abstract**

*The far right English Defence League (EDL) is a strange product of global and local dynamics, most prominently the ‘War on Terror’. While the EDL has become well known for its high-profile demonstrations within local communities, the bulk of its day-to-day activity occurs online within its social networking sites, between supporters – referred to as ‘keyboard warriors’. ‘Keyboard warriors’’ activities are confined to the virtual realm and they are extremely unlikely to attend EDL events in physical space, such as demonstrations. This study explores the kind of Islamophobic identity that is produced by EDL supporters within the networking sites and will focus on how this identity is constructed around insecurities that are central to the lives of this population. EDL supporters can be identified as members of the working class that have experienced significant ontological insecurity since the 1980s, as a consequence of globalisation and related deindustrialisation. Working class identity has been weakened in contrast to the post war era when stronger roles could be located for such groups. Adrift in a post-industrial landscape, located in an ethno-religious war attached to feelings of class and national pride and now mediated by new social networking systems, the insecurities of these sections of the white working class have become attached to a construct of Islamic identity that is defined as essentially immoral and dangerous. This attribution of ‘otherness’, however, is not restricted merely to Muslims, but is applied to any perceived anti-EDL agent, including the government and the police, which are aggregated into a hegemonic foe that persecutes the English nation and facilitates Islamic expansionism. The central theme of the thesis is that new media systems have become critical to an understanding of extreme political identities and the expansion of worldviews in which inter-group conflict is amplified while also offering a sense of meaning and self-esteem for those involved.*

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# Declaration of originality

In accordance with the University regulations, I hereby declare that:

1. This thesis has been composed solely by myself

2. It is entirely my own work

3. It has not been submitted in part or whole for any other degree or personal qualification

# 1/ Introduction

## The genesis of an ‘extreme’ political formation

At the heart of the genesis of the English Defence League (EDL) lies the ‘War on Terror’ and, specifically, an event linked to this war. In March 2009 the town of Luton, just north of London, hosted a homecoming parade for its armed forces who had served in Iraq. The town’s people had come out in force to support their soldiers and they lined the streets. In the last decade or so Luton has experienced a significant amount of inward migration which has seen a surge in its Asian population (Mayhew and Warples 2011), including Islamist elements. In attendance at the event were members of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, a prominent Islamist organisation. This small group of Islamists was intent on protesting against the soldiers and what was perceived as their murderous involvement, killing Muslims, in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. This prompted confrontation with the local people who had turned out to show their support for the troops. Following this event there were tit for tat demonstrations organised by what would become the leadership of the EDL. These events brought together various nationalist and far right movements and football hooligan firms who would unite to form the EDL, an ostensibly far right organisation with an anti-Islamic agenda (Copsey 2010). Aggression and violence became a mainstay of expression at these early events, with counter-protesters and the police being the objects of hate. That this group had been spurred to form in response to a localised protest, within a community in Luton, taking place in reference to the global ‘War on Terror’, highlights how the EDL would become engendered around a complex mixture of global and local dynamics.

The EDL quickly started to grow as an organisation and its demonstrations began to take place outside Luton, particularly in areas where ethnic tensions were salient (Copsey 2010). In these early days there was ambiguity regarding the identity and aspirations of the fledgling organisation. However, it became increasingly clear that the EDL was attached to an ostensibly political agenda that was constructed to fill the vacuum left by a political establishment that was perceived to be incompetent and acquiescent to Islam, and which was not protecting the nation and its cultural identity from the apparent threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism (Jackson 2011). In effect the organisation sought to define itself as the defender of the national realm and through its demonstrations it would use England’s local communities as key sites where resistance against the perceived pernicious spread of Islam would take place. Inevitably this would provoke confrontation between ‘native’ and Muslim populations.

With a better understanding as to why the EDL was formed it is now important to delve deeper into what exactly the organisation is. This is best explained through exploring the ideological underpinnings of this far right organisation. To understand what the EDL is about it is worthwhile briefly touching on the notion of ‘populist nationalism’ (Copsey 2007). Populist nationalism offers an agenda linked to the ‘new far right’, which has come to espouse a sanitised version of ethnocentric nationalism that is capable of favourably courting populist opinion, in a manner through exploiting popular insecurities. Linked to this is an anti-immigration stance, a reverence for key democratic values such as freedom of speech and human rights and a fervent cynicism for the mainstream political establishment that is seen to be duplicitous in its approach to protecting the interests of its people.

Through examining the values promoted in the EDL’s organisational Mission Statement we can see that its underlying ideology has an explicit focus on Islam and Muslim communities. Five core values can be identified that the organisation publicly adheres to: 1) Protecting human rights 2) Promoting democracy and the rule of law by opposing Sharia 3) Ensuring that the public gets a balanced picture of Islam 4) Promoting the traditions and culture of England while at the same time being open to embrace the best that other cultures can offer 5) Working in solidarity with others around the world. This suggests that the organisation has positioned itself as being on the side of the common citizen, with the intention of defending the culture and the values that the vast majority of the country cares for. What is somewhat ambiguous is the EDL’s approach to Muslims. It is unequivocal in its opposition to Islamic fundamentalism and the precepts that attach to fundamentalism, particularly Sharia. There is greater scope for interpretation with regard to the organisation’s approach to moderate Muslims. In the Mission Statement there is a very carefully constructed attack on Islam as a religion disposed to domination that must be resisted. The implication of this is that even Islam’s moderate followers are theologically compelled to submit to this doctrine, thus making them incommensurate with ‘British cultural values’. This indicates that even the moderate Muslim population is not trustworthy and, by implication, an unwelcome threat to society. This could well be an ideological rationalisation for a collective dislike of the followers of Islam. The issue of where moderate Muslims fit within EDL ideology is therefore crucial when attempting to decipher whether this is an organisation that has an agenda against Islamic fundamentalism or a more racially motivated animosity toward Muslims in general.

The Mission Statement makes reference to the failure of government, policymakers and the media in protecting ‘native’ culture as well as a failure to stand up to Islam and tell the truth about its malign effects on society. The EDL and its members clearly see themselves as having a duty and responsibility to expose what they perceive to be Islam’s subversive agenda. In many respects this sense of duty may serve a need for ideological legitimisation for EDL adherents; promoting and consolidating a sense of purpose for the organisation and its reason for being. As with many far right groups the EDL is concerned with aggressively challenging the ‘mainstream’ establishment, especially the political elite, as it seeks to defend a ‘traditional’ way of life that it perceives to be under threat from what are defined as enemies of the nation (Jackson 2011). This is clearly an organisation that seeks to exploit the abstract insecurities experienced by ‘native’ populations surrounding the loss of traditional cultural and political identities, which has occurred as a consequence of processes such globalisation. The perceived pervasive influence of the immigrant ‘other’ is central to its cause.

Following on from this articulation of the EDL’s cause I would like to go on to discuss the general strategy employed by the organisation as it seeks to garner popular support and challenge its enemies. As was touched on above, the EDL promotes a politics “driven by the desire to defend and promote a shared [national] identity… the EDL develop[s] these non-materialistic issues as central grievances in which to air wider concerns” (Jackson 2011:14). The organisation has two defining campaigns that are used to promulgate this sense of grievance: one focused on what it sees as the proliferation of mosques and another on banning the availability of halal meat. The former is designed to directly oppose the development of new mosques in local communities and through a series of interventions the EDL is savvy at exploiting localised ethnic tensions. The halal meat campaign is opposed to what is deemed to be the covert trade in ritually slaughtered animal meat by organisations such as KFC and Tesco. Both campaigns are promoted and coordinated virtually, within the organisation’s networking sites, and sometimes acted upon in local physical space through demonstrations where direct confrontation with the enemy may occur.

There are two noteworthy types of activity that the EDL appropriates in order to resonate with what Allen (2011) refers to as the growing animosity toward Islam that has become salient in contemporary Britain. The flash demo: this is a spontaneous reaction to a local occurrence; for example, when 30 demonstrators gathered outside a police station in Gateshead following the arrest of EDL members responsible for burning a Qur’an. The flash demo has been a tool used in the halal meat campaign, with demonstrations taking place outside retail premises identified as selling the product to unwitting consumers. Another method of protest is the organised demonstration, a theatre for performance that helps to reinforce a sense of grievance with Islam (Jackson 2011). These are pre-arranged with the authorities, and can take one of two forms: static mass mobilisations, whereby protestors must remain in a designated location, contained and constrained by police. Alternatively the EDL will organise marches. This is clearly the preferred option as EDL supporters are allowed to traverse the streets, through a designated ‘problem area’, on a prescribed route. These mass mobilisations are often labelled internally as national events, whereby members from around the country are invited to attend the locality. There are also regional events that will be arranged by a specific division or range of divisions from an affected region. The no more mosques campaign has brought a variety of these mobilisations, but also what are defined by the organisation as heavily Islamised areas, such as Tower Hamlets in London, may also be targeted as problem areas and therefore worthy of co-ordinated actions. These forms of protest tend to be high profile events as a consequence of the media coverage that is afforded to them, which is largely in anticipation of some sort of violent confrontation that is usually blamed by the media on the EDL.

While the EDL’s presence in the public sphere has been enthusiastically articulated by the news media there is another important dimension to the organisation’s activities. In order to fully understand the EDL as an organisation one must understand its relationship with new media and, in particular, the deployment of social networking sites. The EDL has appropriately been attributed the moniker labelled a ‘child of the Internet’ (Tweedie 2009). It has adroitly exploited the potentiality of networking sites, Facebook in particular, in order to drum -up a significant national and international support base. Its approximately 130 regional divisions have been formed around a Facebook page (Jackson 2011) and it is the unique functionality of the networking sites that has facilitated the growth and maintained the durability of the organisation. For example, the ‘share’ facility on Facebook acts as a device to diffuse the EDL Facebook page and news of important events into the personal networks of supporters, thus potentially garnering further support from individuals within these networks. Or, as will be explored later, the cluster posting of stories based on a specific subject, such as ‘Asian’ grooming gangs, may function to create within the networking sites the perception that this is a pervasive problem within English communities and act as a unifying cause for supporters of the organisation to mobilise around. Mobilisation may result in little more than anti-Muslim expression, but should not be underestimated for its attempt to aid in legitimising the EDL’s cause. Interactions between EDL supporters are facilitated, occurring in a dynamic and remote way within the networking platforms. In January 2010 the EDL had 12,000 supporters on Facebook, measured using the number of ‘likes’ its Facebook page had received (Garland and Treadwell 2010). At the time of writing (October 2013) it has now received in excess of 160,000 likes, highlighting that the EDL’s agenda does appeal to certain sections of the public. This support has shifted in reaction to high profile incidents that involve the EDL or Muslims, a recent terrorist attack in Britain having been one major event that dramatically boosted popular acquiescence to the organisation’s agenda, provoking a massive surge in use of the networking sites. This underlines how the EDL has been successful, perhaps more than any other British far right organisation, in exploiting new media to develop a community of like-minded supporters that is connected within cyberspace.

The overwhelming majority of EDL supporters’ overall activity and interaction is conducted on social networking sites, rather than in the physical sphere, such as through mass mobilisations. While mass mobilisations occur only a few times per year, with a few hundred supporters likely to be in attendance at an event, the networking sites are active every day and are used by a considerably larger number of supporters. Those supporters whose activities are confined to the virtual component of the organisation tend to be regarded as ‘keyboard warriors’ by those supporters who are active at demonstrations. The term ‘keyboard warrior’ highlights how this cohort of supporters do not partake in any direct confrontation with the EDL’s opponents at events in local communities, but use the networking sites via their mobile phones or personal computers to interact and express themselves.

As has been noted, the organisation is to a significant extent structured around its networking sites. It has an online Forum attached to the EDL website, a Facebook page and a Twitter account. Facebook is seemingly the most popular platform among supporters as it garners a much greater frequency of interactions and a greater number of commenters than the Forum. Facebook and Twitter are used as the primary platforms to communicate with the EDL’s support base. Facebook could be regarded as the central node of the organisation upon which many supporters converge. Attached to this are a large number of ‘grassroots’ divisions (Jackson 2011), which have their own Facebook pages. These divisions appear to be to a large extent set up on an ad hoc basis by members and are linked to regions, counties, cities, boroughs and districts of England. Each region of the country has their own regional officer who reports back to the EDL leadership, forming a link between members in each region and the leadership. The main EDL Facebook page is by far the most heavily used platform by EDL members, with the grassroots pages tending to be much less frequented. With regard to the Forum, it has a similar central page with a few grassroots pages – the central page is again most heavily used. It is notable that the Forum is a much less dynamic space, with fewer users than can be found on Facebook. This kind of organisational structure, constructed within the virtual realm, is a unique aspect of the EDL and it has allowed for the organic growth of the organisation as new divisions were produced at the click of a button.

The EDL uses its networking sites to maximum effect. In addition to raising the profile of upcoming events the networking sites act as a space that connects EDL supporters and where they formulate discussions about issues that matter to them, generally within an Islamophobic climate. The narratives produced through the interactions of EDL supporters within these sites are central to this study in terms of how identity is collectively constructed. As will also be touched on, e-activist protests can also be coordinated and executed via the networking sites. This can take a range of forms; for example, through online petitioning based on an issue that is ideologically important to the EDL. E-activism allows members to become active campaigners from behind their computer screens. As Jackson argues, through “fusing the old strategy of ‘march and grow’, with the ‘new far right’ cause of anti-Muslim sentiment, all centralised through internet mobilisation and online networking, the EDL has rediscovered a potent form of political campaigning” (Jackson 2011:19). Indeed, the extent to which the EDL has used the internet to bring supporters together online and organise their offline activities underlines how well it has appropriated modern technology to advance its cause.

Far right movements like the EDL are concerned with the “production of false geographies, intent on division and enmity, seeking power through the exploitation of vulnerable places, attempting to reorganise space on ethno-racist lines” Davey (2010:622). Building on this we will see how , through its virtual presence, the EDL and its members actively engage in the construction of forms of geopolitical symbolism that ascribe meaning to places on a local and international scale, based on the organisation’s own ideological worldview. Through attaching meaning to places they produce an understanding of what is otherwise an uncertain world, fashioning it around their own ideology. It is through mass mobilisations within local communities that identity is consolidated in the physical sphere (Davey 2010). Through highlighting ‘problems’ in these locations and turning out at these locations as a group to resist the ‘problems’, be they related to the spread of Islam or a perceived threat to national identity, the EDL not only confronts the problem head on, but seeks to garner support for its cause from the wider community and engender a sense of ethno-religious threat outside its membership. As has been noted, in the physical sphere, the EDL’s approach is one of ‘march and grow’; although it is perhaps hampered in reaching out to local communities as a legitimate political vehicle as a consequence of the frequent occurrence of disorder at its demonstrations. As a consequence of this the organisation’s online presence is perhaps more endearing to potential ideological supporters, as the internet is a space they can interact in a depersonalised, disembodied manner without having to come into direct contact with another human being (Postmas and Brunsting 2002). It follows that this is an important arena to study the identity and the worldview that is constructed by the EDL and its supporters. So who are these supporters that attend events and interact within the EDL’s networking sites?

From the formation of the EDL its core was heavily comprised of members from football hooligan ‘firms’. Since then the organisation has grown to have a support base believed to be around 25,000 to 35,000 members who are active online; most of which have never, nor will ever, attend an event (Bartlett and Littler 2011). The organisation is an ideological catch-all for individuals disaffected with immigration and, more specifically, the perceived threat to the nation posed by Islam and Muslim communities. From a socio-economic perspective, there is a significant contingent of angry working class members, who are experiencing severe feelings of marginalisation and disadvantage (Treadwell and Garland 2011) socially, economically and politically. There are some key groups, often with an underlying working class association, that combine to make up the EDL; most notably far right supporters associated with organisations such as the British National Party and the National Front. The EDL rejects these parties as racist, although individuals from these parties and other ostensibly far right organisations have been spotted at EDL events (Jackson 2011) and appear to have been drawn to the EDL’s agenda. Ex-servicemen are a highly respected element within the organisation, largely as a consequence of the EDL’s glorification of the armed services. Whilst it is difficult to gauge the numbers of ex-servicemen involved with the organisation, it is obvious through viewing the profiles of supporters in the networking sites that there is a significant cohort from this group. It is easy to understand how some of these people may be drawn into the EDL rank and file if they have spent time fighting Islamism in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. There are also some unlikely components of the EDL’s membership, such as small numbers of Jewish and LGBT supporters. The rationale for these splinters within the organisation is because they are groups to which Islamic fundamentalists are opposed on religious grounds. The EDL is enthusiastic to promote this diverse aspect of the organisation as a basis for generating wider popular appeal and distancing itself from fascist or racist connotations (Garland and Treadwell 2010). The actual level of support from these groups is difficult to establish; however, there have been Gay Pride flags and Israeli flags flown at EDL events. In terms of online support, the EDL has a LGBT division Facebook page which has almost 2,500 likes and the Jewish Division’s Facebook page has over 3,700 likes (as at January 2013). Whether these numbers are a true reflection of actual levels of support from these groups is unverifiable; as Facebook ‘likes’ can be easily manipulated, such as through the creation of false accounts, in order to give the organisation a more diverse look than is actually the reality. The seeming diversity of supporters of the EDL indicates that it has progressed somewhat from its original manifestation as a collection of hooligan and nationalist supporters.

Throughout the following chapters I will go on to explore how this collective of EDL supporters defines itself in comparison to its foes. The EDL has a somewhat extensive range of defined enemies. Islamist groups, such as the police proscribed Muslims Against Crusades (MAC) and the Muslim Defence League (MDL) have been official targets for EDL hate due to their association with Islamic fundamentalism; however, as has been noted above, this is not an organisation explicitly pitted against the more extreme followers of Islam and moderate Muslims are also viewed with suspicion (Jackson 2011). The government and police are often believed to be servants of the Islamist’s agenda because of the restrictions they have often tried to impose on unruly EDL marches and protests. The police are condemned by the organisation for being heavy handed with EDL supporters at demonstrations and as being in general opposed to the organisation’s agenda; using covert surveillance in an attempt to thwart EDL activities. Organisations deemed by the EDL to be on the left of the political spectrum are often identified as hostile opponents; the foremost of this group is Unite Against Fascism (UAF), a confrontational anti-fascist movement (Jackson 2011). The EDL often blames the UAF for sparking violence at demonstrations and contributing racist and inflammatory comments on the EDL networking sites in order to smear the organisation. Other ‘leftist’ groups the EDL is in tension with are trade unions, the BBC and the Occupy movement. The media is frequently vilified for adhering to what is regarded as an anti-EDL stance and reporting in a negative way the activities of the organisation. Indeed, in addition to this range of groups that the EDL finds objectionable can be added any person or group that opposes the EDL or does not conform to its worldview.

This tendency to define those that they perceive as non-conformist as enemies has fed into an important internal schism within the organisation as groups with a more extreme outlook than the EDL have splintered from the organisation to form their own anti-Islamic movement. The so called North East Infidels and North West Infidels are the new factions and they have joined forces with the Scottish Defence League (SDL). The reasons for the split were linked to a falling out with the EDL leader Tommy Robinson based upon their desire to act upon an agenda that is more extreme and less acquiescent to the authorities of the state than had been the EDL’s approach (Jackson 2011). Jackson (2011) stipulates these splinter factions should still be regarded as adjuncts to the main organisation. The split negatively impacted attendance at EDL national events and provoked occasional discord within the organisation’s networking sites as tensions increased between supporters of both sides. This underlines a key internal debate regarding whether the EDL should behave in a more ‘mainstream’ or ‘extreme’ manner in going about its business, with those unwilling to submit to a more passive diktat breaking away on their own terms. The EDL, like many other extreme political formations can be seen as a rather unstable, loosely knit alliance of a variety of support bases, often infused with implosive potentiality.

The EDL’s official line is that it is a non-violent organisation in its means of protest and it claims that when violence does occur it is in response to provocation; for example, from anti-fascist organisations, such as the UAF. In actuality, there are clearly aggressive members who are drawn to the organisation by the possibility of finding violent confrontations that generate excitement and a sense of fulfilment (Treadwell and Garland 2011). This may only be a minority of supporters, but it is the actions of such individuals that have come to define the EDL in media and government representations of the organisation, which is generally defined as thuggish and violently racist. This is a representation the organisation seems to be at pains to reconstitute in a more popularly appealing manner but, as we will see, is incapable of gaining any significant purchase over; this being to a large extent due to its inability to control the actions and interactions of its ‘extreme’ fringe. This is a notable dynamic within the organisation’s networking sites, where expression can become violent and extreme.

## Aims of the research

The research has three aims, which are broadly based on the themes of identity, security and the global-local nexus:

1. Explore the process of identity and worldview production within the EDL’s networking sites and the characteristics of the identity that was constructed in this space.

2. Identify prevailing security concerns of EDL supporters and examine the manner in which these concerns are experienced and dealt with by them.

3. Explore the relationship between the global and the local in an EDL context.

To provide further context in terms of these research aims, we can identify three themes which are at the heart of this study: identity, security and the global–local relationship. I made reference in the previous section as to why the social networking component of the EDL was an interesting space in which to examine the identity of this extreme political group. Three such manifestations of identity in particular are touched on throughout the thesis: working- class identity, national identity and Islamophobic identity. All of these identities share common attributes and are influential in structuring the networking site users’ impressions of the world. In presenting the results of this research we will see how identity is produced as a comparison to that of the ‘other’ (Allen 2011). The networking sites, as largely unregulated spaces, allow for the production of extreme forms of identity in this regard and as a consequence these comparative identity constructs are built around troubling characteristics.

At the heart of the three identity constructs is the relationship between community and security. Here I was particularly interested in the way communal formations could be identified at global, national and local levels in the way that members of this extreme political group discussed the world around them, with particular regard to security concerns. The corollary of this is the perception of community as a place of, as Baumann (2001) argues, safety and warmth where people are familiar with one another and share a common sense of security. The research explored how these feelings of ‘warmth’ for EDL supporters were undermined as a consequence of the perceived influence of Muslims, and also how this provoked a resistant response in the defence of community. From a broader perspective Young (2007) attributes the sense of insecurity experienced in the late modern world to the destabilising forces of globalisation, which have brought insecurities of status and economic position through initiating massive social transformation. Also the effects of deindustrialisation and neoliberalism on the working class will be considered in terms of how structural unemployment and political disenfranchisement have considerably weakened the standing of this social group (Peck and Tickell 2002, Mouffe 2000). It is unsurprising that for the EDL’s working class far right supporters, it was immigration and the seeming threat of cultural contagion that were aspects of globalisation that created the greatest concern. The study explores how the perceived increase in ethnic populations and their concomitant cultural forms unsettles the ‘native’ population’s traditional way of life and produces within it insecurities and how these insecurities are perhaps a proxy for unacknowledged insecurities produced by the neoliberal capitalist system.

With regard to research aim 3, the global-local relationship in the context of the EDL’s ideology and worldview was a theme that became apparent during the scoping of the study and which I felt it would be interesting to explore in greater depth. The organisation had a notably global outlook in terms of how it perceived the threat of Islam and its ideological diffusion. At the same time this was an organisation rooted in matters occurring inside local communities and seemingly dedicated to preserving traditional notions of a local way of life; its working class supporters’ local social conditions being fundamentally impacted through transformational processes such as deindustrialisation. The internet and social-networking technology linked the organisation to a global audience and engendered the prospect of creating a global community of ideological supporters. The study was therefore focused on interpreting notions of global and local within the framework of the EDL in order to understand the manner in which these scales interact and in doing so function to facilitate in the construction of the worldview of the EDL and its supporters.

## Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured in the following way. In Chapter 2 key concepts are examined that assist in informing the understanding of the far right and how such groups function to construct identity through the juxtaposed production of the ‘other’ (Jensen 2011). The chapter is structured around three themes. First there is an exploration of the European far right, which rose to prominence following the First World War. An examination of the British National Party (BNP) is provided in order to further elaborate on how white working class communities have often become attached to extreme political organisations. There will also be an exploration of the contemporary far right’s online existence. The second section of Chapter 2 will provide an exploration of identity, initially outlining the primordial and constructivist approaches to understanding identity and proffering a middle ground that reconciles the approaches. The role that cultural narrative plays in relation to the production of identity will be explained, which will facilitate an understanding of how identity might be produced through discourse in networking sites. There is also an examination of the relationship between identity and local community as well as an exploration of important dynamics regarding the production of identity online. In the third and final section of the chapter literature on group dynamics is considered within the context of ‘othering’.

Chapter 3 examines the research design and methodology of the study. It addresses some important ontological and epistemological issues surrounding the research. There will be an account of the virtual ethnographic underpinnings of the research, along with an exploration of some key issues relating to the approach. The chapter will also outline how data analysis was conducted and it will foreground some ethical issues encountered whilst doing the research. The findings of the research are split into four chapters. Chapter 4 deals with the global-national-local bases of the EDL’s identity and explores questions of insecurity among EDL supporters. The particular worldview of the EDL is articulated with its unified global, national and local perspectives. In Chapter 5, the EDL is situated within the context of the post-political and how this situation provokes a type of ‘rage response’ among the EDL’s supporters, a disenfranchised and alienated group whose grievances propel them to associate with the far right with a contempt for the political establishment that is deemed to be facilitating the interests of Islamic expansionism. Within this milieu, the EDL’s networking sites are seen as a site for the expression of a troubling form of insecure post-political rage. In Chapter 6 the issue of racism in relation to the EDL’s brand of Islamophobia is probed in greater detail. The notion of a clash of civilisations between the Muslim and non-Muslim world is considered from the viewpoint of EDL supporters, many of which believe a direct confrontation will occur in the not too distant future and that Islam is currently positioning itself alongside other prominent agents in preparation for global domination. Finally Chapter 7 examines the relationship between virtual and physical space in relation to the EDL, whilst ultimately exploring the unique type of hybrid space that the EDL supporters produce within the networking sites. In this chapter we will take a look at the relationship between virtual, physical and hybrid space in the context of the EDL’s worldview and also how these spaces affect the production of identity.

# 2/Review of literature

This chapter explores the research literature on three key themes for the purposes of the research detailed here: the far right, identity and group dynamics. In exploring these themes it will provide an introduction to the far right within Europe. Being driven by the politics of identity, far right organisations exploit local dynamics surrounding inter-ethnic discord. Conflict theories and psychoanalysis can help us unravel the complex identity issues that compel certain sections of society to engage with far right ideology and how the internet has emerged as a space where communities of far right supporters interact and collectively construct a unique worldview and an associated extreme identity. The themes are probed within the broader context of the production of ‘otherness’. ‘Otherness’ is best regarded as a categorisation of “self and other in which the juxtaposition towards the other constitutes the self” (Jensen 2011:64). ‘Self’ and ‘other’ are thus indivisible, but constructed in relation and in tension to each other. Clearly how the far right constructs and instrumentalises the ‘other’ to acquire popular appeal is of key interest, especially in times of social, political and economic crisis or transformation. Attention is given to Nazi Germany and the crisis of national identity which the Nazis exploited to construct the Jewish ‘other’. In the British context, we will explore how the British National Party’s (BNP) exploited ethnic tensions, in order to appeal to the white working class. Through addressing the relationship between working class identity and the local we can begin to understand how change at a local level, notably from the perspective of deindustrialisation and globalisation, has negatively impacted this identity and facilitated the production of inter-ethnic boundaries. It is exactly this situation that far right organisations such as the BNP are savvy at exploiting as they attempt to engage with disaffected local populations. The internet has become a central tool for some contemporary far right organisations to appeal to the disaffected on a mass scale and attempt to acquire their support.

## The far right and the ‘other’: The European dimension

Far right ideology often gains the ascendancy in times of national crisis, when national identity is salient or somehow threatened. This can make elements within national populations more prone to identify a scapegoat for problems that are afflicting the nation. Far right organisations tend to be highly effective at producing and persecuting what they deem to be enemies of the nation, thus channelling popular frustrations and anxieties onto the figure of hate. Europe has had its fair share of crises and it is therefore unsurprising that it has also been an environment conducive to far right ideas and the relative success of far right organisations. This section will explore the far right in Europe, from the overtly racist fascism of the Nazi party to its more popularly appealing modern day manifestation ostensibly constructed around cultural or religious differences, but which still has racial undertones.

In the aftermath of the First World War the Treaty of Versailles that officially ended the war between the allies and Germany generated much dissatisfaction for the German nation as it forced full acceptance of blame for the war and demanded huge reparations be paid for the damage that had been inflicted (Taylor 2001). In the years that followed, which were further tarnished by the economic consequences of the Great Depression, there was an intensification of interest in fascism within Germany and Italy where Mussolini’s brand of the ideology was influential in the evolution of Hitler’s National Socialism (Holborn 1964). The popularity of fascism was however in no way constrained to Germany and Italy, although these states would adopt it as their political system. In Britain, fascism courted some appeal in the inter-war years, only as a consequence of economic problems, but interestingly driven by middle class interests in defiance of the growing prominence of the working classes and socialism (Thurlow 1998). The key attributes of fascism include:

the negation of rationalism, progress, freedom and equality…rejection of capitalism, liberalism, communism, democracy and the parliamentary system; idealisation of the nation, and struggle as the fundamental impulse of history… the cult of the leader… Organic society, in the view of fascists, should be spiritually united and ethnocentric (Kopecek 2004:281).

Zizek identifies a further key characteristic of fascism, which was particularly discernible in relation to Nazism, that of defining an enemy and associating social ills with this enemy: “The cause of the social disequilibrium is projected onto some cancerous formation, some external enemy” (1997: 60). Zizek also makes the point that disillusionment with democracy may give rise to the search for an enemy or group as a scapegoat for what may come to be perceived as a kind of failed political project. Most certainly the situation in which Germany had found itself in the inter-war period generated enormous disillusionment and insecurity and the search for an object upon which to displace these social ills led to the construction of the Jew as a maligned enemy of the nation. The manner in which the Nazis and wider German society constructed a Jewish ‘other’ remains relevant to analyses of the far right in contemporary Europe with its contemporary ‘other’ being identified as the enemy of Islam and its followers.

Schleunes (1990) carefully captures the ambiguity of the position in which Jews were to find themselves within societies around Europe where they had long been a low status, persecuted minority. There had been a large influx of Jews to Germany from the turn of the 20th Century and questions regarding the place of Jews in German society were becoming increasingly prominent within German social circles, often linked to issues pertaining to German identity. The Nazis were to harness this racial antipathy and generate widespread hatred for the Jews, who would become the locus of blame for many of Germany’s problems. The Jews were regarded as a subversive force that had gained power within the social, political and economic structures of German society and beyond. Jewish ‘breeding’ was deemed to be having diabolical consequences for the purity of German stock. Through dehumanising the Jews and hyping the threat they posed, tapping into the social undercurrent of anxiety attributed to this group that was salient at the time, Hitler’s fascist movement would gain popular appeal with devastating consequences.

With fascism having been discredited as an ideology, the decades that followed World War II heralded the emergence of neo-fascism, which was largely a marginal force in Western Europe. The most prominent mobilisations including the rise in France of the Poujadist movement in the 1950s, in Germany the Nationalist Democratic Party in the 1960s and in Italy the popularity of the neo-Fascist Social Movement in the 1970s; yet none of these waves of neo-fascism proved to be politically enduring for the organisations in question or for ideological shifts within their respective countries (Betz 1998). The far right was undoubtedly a faltering force, tainted by its association with Nazism and racism. It would take a strategic refashioning of the politics of the far right to reengage with European societies. Eatwell (2003) contends that there is a widespread belief that fascism was an epochal phenomenon that never truly overcame the barrier of its own legacy and the failures of neo-fascism throughout this period might also suggest this conclusion. Eatwell goes on to note that new forms of fascism began to take shape during the 1980s, with one type engendered on racial street violence and terrorism and another that had parties seeking electoral success. In particular, the political manifestation of neo-fascism would seek to appeal to voters on terms other than racial ‘difference’.

The European political right has strategically repositioned itself to focus on questions of national culture Stolcke (1995). Stolcke notes the rapid spread throughout Europe of hostility toward immigrants. This hostility is expressed through attributing immigrants blame for all the socio-economic problems that have befallen European countries. The reasoning behind this attribution of blame is that the immigrants do not have the requisite moral and cultural values to be anything other than a regressive influence within the ‘host’ culture. Stolcke outlines a shift in exclusionary discourse away from one foregrounding biological human difference toward a discourse purporting difference associated with cultural identity, traditions and heritage, with culture related to as being bounded to a specific piece of national or ethnic territory:

This culturalist rhetoric is distinct from racism in that it reifies culture conceived as a compact, bounded, localised, and historically rooted set of traditions and values transmitted through the generations by drawing on an ideological repertoire that dates back to the contradictory 19th century conception of the nation-state...Rather than asserting different endowments of human races, contemporary cultural fundamentalism... emphasises differences of cultural heritage and their incommensurability(Stolcke 1995:4).

Taguieff (2001) usefully outlines how the change of focus from race to culture served to shift the dynamic of intolerance from one of power and racial superiority, which have become unacceptable terms of reference in mainstream social and political discourse, to a less controversial focus on cultural incompatibility. Taguieff explains that the narrative had a fearful implication, in that the mixing of different ethnicities could have the ultimate outcome of cultural extinction. This is indicative of the role the far right itself can play in facilitating the construction of a paradigm of fear, engendered around ‘other’ cultural formations within the nation, instrumentalising the fears the majority has in respect of seemingly subversive minorities. Appadurai’s (2006) *Fear of small numbers* and the ‘anxiety of incompleteness’ can in a manner be applied to help make sense of these issues. In this regard the far right tap into anxieties relating to the ‘purity’ of the nation, putting forward a political project that offers the removal of the minority populations which are popularly perceived to stand in the way of the nation’s greatness . The appropriation by the far right of the more abstract notion of cultural ‘difference’ served to shift the attention away from biological distinctions of ‘difference’ that had become highly controversial. This helped pave the way for the far right to be regarded increasingly as a legitimate political movement within Europe (Stolcke 1995) and helped increase the far right’s popular appeal. As a result the far right came to strategically define itself and its cause around specific populist themes – with Islamic culture being a key focus of concern.

Cesari (2006) observes that the far right was to re-emerge and grow in prominence in Europe during the 1980s and 1990s, charting the rise of a number of the prominent far right parties, including the French National Front (FN) and the German National Democratic Party. The more sanitised ideological underpinnings that these organisations of the far right had adopted coincided with an influx of Muslim immigrants into Europe. The foothold the far right gained was forged upon an identity politics that had positioned Muslim immigrants in particular as a pervasive threat to national identity. The success of the French FN in 1984 appears to have been a key occasion for far right progress in Europe and the popular appeal of the French FN political model and its strategy for electoral success that included a hawkish stance on immigration became influential as Goodwin observes in relation to the subsequent spread of the FN model:

[The French FN] engendered a new ‘master frame’ for far right parties… Rarely innovative, political parties – like organisations more generally – will often adopt pre-existing strategies, actions and discourse that are already available and subsequently adapt them to fit their specific national context(Goodwin 2007:244)

What followed over the coming years was a metamorphosis of socio-political strategy, away from widely understood notions of fascism with an overtly racist bent, to coincide with that of the French FN, across a range of Europe’s prominent far right organisations. This increasingly contributed to a consolidation of the appeal of the far right on the continent and the mainstream legitimation of its anti-immigration message. That is not to overstate the popularity of the far right within Europe throughout the 1990s and into the early 21st Century, as countries such as Ireland, Portugal and Spain had no significant party, and in the British case, which we will go on to examine in greater detail, there was no extraordinary electoral breakthrough (Eatwell 2000).

The apparent incompatibility of Islamic values and traditions to those of Europe has often been foregrounded by far right organisations in Europe, and has promoted “a generalised suspicion of Muslims, who are characterised as holding on to an alien culture that... threatens core European values” (Fekete 2006:2). Fekete (2006) explains that, particularly in the period that followed 9/11, the views and purported policies of the far right were no longer to be found on the political fringe in Europe. Interestingly, it appears that the mainstream and far right parties now shared a common purpose, based on security and liberal democracy. If one considers, for example, the issue of immigration. Security concerns pertaining to immigration and the movement of migrants into Western nations became an important political discourse as a consequence of 9/11 (Zucconi 2004) and this became a defining project for the far right which attempted to conflate immigration with the perceived problem of cultural contamination which was deemed to accompany the movement of these bodies into the state. That this discourse came to be popularly accepted left the far right in a position of strength on the issue and pushed the debate on immigration further to the right as mainstream parties shared in the hysteria provoked by the crisis; although it must be acknowledged there was no significant hardening of immigration policies across European states as a consequence (Favell and Hansen 2002). Nevertheless, this was typical of the populist appeal of the far right, especially in times of crisis and its influence on mainstream politics through the exploitation of fears in relation to the ‘other’.

Akkerman (2005) takes a closer look at the specific liberal values that the far right parties have adopted in their move to the mainstream wherein the parties have sought to appeal to enlightenment principles, such as the freedom of expression, the equality of women and men, and the separation of church from state. This is regarded by Akkerman as paradoxical in that the traditionally fascist far right was not aligned with such progressive principles. The paradox is deepened to the extent that the far right’s attack on Islamic culture appears as the antithesis of these values. Akkerman claims the goal of some far right parties was to avoid at all costs the situation whereby European countries end up living in a state of fear under a hostile political regime that does not recognise the rule of law. In addition:

A recurrent image in this [far right] resurgence was the suggestion that Europe’s “Christian” identity and heritage were being replaced by a far more covert Islamic one: Muslims were an internal threat who, through high birth rates, asylum seekers, and proliferating immigration, were insidiously attempting to infiltrate and conquer Europe (Allen 2004: 8).

This new narrative and ideological positioning from the far right has evidently tapped into the consciousness of the European political and social mainstream, which has increasingly legitimated it. The rightward shift in the political priorities of mainstream parties, noted by Savage (2004), is manifest in an increased focus on national identity and increasingly intolerant debates regarding religious symbols, such as women wearing the hijab or the building of Mosques. Savage suggests that the far right is likely to gain greater popular acquiescence to its anti-Muslim agenda over coming years. This is on account of projected socio-political trends within Europe that dictate an increasingly ageing population, increased immigration into European countries, strained welfare systems, and constant reminders of the threat of terrorist activities. Indeed, the present milieu of recessionary turmoil within Europe has seen far right parties, such as Golden Dawn in Greece, achieve significant electoral success. Through exploiting the economic collapse of Greece and weaving these widespread insecurities into an anti-immigrant narrative Golden Dawn has shifted from relative obscurity to become recognised as Greece’s third most prominent political party (Koronaiou and Sakellariou 2013) and there has been a rise in nationalist intolerance levelled at Muslims as a consequence (Triandafyllidou and Kouki 2013).

From a European perspective, we can identify a sort of situational fluidity in terms of the popularity of the far right and its intolerant agenda that relies on the construction of the ‘other’ as a scapegoat for crises or general social changes that might be befalling nations. Perceived crisis can be a particularly potent tool for mobilising interest in far right ideology. To take the two distinct crises – that of the fallout from 9/11 and the financial crisis – in the case of the former, it was perhaps unsurprising that the far right would conflate the activities of a cadre of Islamic extremists with the presence of Muslims in Western states and subsequently utilise Islamophobic sentiment to win popular support (Poynting and Mason 2006). This crisis was assembled in Huntington’s (1993) terms as a *clash of civilisations* that pitted the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds against each other; a Manichean setting-up of the contrasts and conflicts between these communities that served the needs of the far right thrives as Muslims were characterised as the evil ‘other’. The residual mistrust of Muslims from such assessments will likely have been a force behind how Muslims were viewed in subsequent crises. The far right had a very popular figure of hate that it could appropriate at times of turmoil and crisis, in order to transform the associated feelings of insecurity within society into support for its ideological cause. It follows that the financial crisis from 2008, otherwise not associated with Islam, could be transposed into an anti-Islamic framing, as has been defined for example by Golden Dawn, as it exploits mistrust of Muslims and the populist tendency to scapegoat this group. Therefore, the dynamic nature of support for the far right in Europe could to an extent be regarded as situational and reactionary, the product of insecurity and the search for a narrative that has a tangible ‘other’ upon which to project anxiety and blame.

Akkerman’s (2005) and Savage’s (2004) research provokes important questions regarding far right values and opinions and the extent to which such values and opinions are to be regarded as ‘extreme’ in the present geopolitical milieu, or indeed whether the ‘extreme’ nature of opinions is in some way relative to the geopolitical milieu. In this respect events such as 9/11 engendered a significant shift in public opinion against Islam that pushed Islamophobic opinion into the mainstream. Mainstream political parties within Europe were also to shift their politics further to the right as a consequence of the increased popularity of the far right itself. The outcome of this crisis was to recalibrate Islamophobic sentiment from extreme to mainstream, as politicians, the media and the citizenry applied a ‘risky’ status to Muslims (Mythen, Walklate and Khan 2009) who were viewed as untrustworthy.

Islamophobia can simply be defined as “the practice of prejudice against Islam and the demonisation and dehumanisation of Muslims” (Mohideen and Mohideen 2008:73). Sayyid (2008) explains how Islamophobia has been presented in a positive light by its proponents, as being non-racist and as a necessary response in the face of the threat posed to universal values by ‘backward’ Islamic values. Since this is an attack on Islam, a religion, it cannot be associated with racism, which has biological connotations. Meer and Modood (2009:344) refute this biologically deterministic paradigm and offer a reformed articulation of how racism should be depicted:

We should guard against the characterisation of racism as a form of ’inheritism’ or ‘biological determinism’, which leaves little space to conceive the ways in which cultural racism draws on physical appearance as one marker, among others, but is not solely premised on conceptions of biology in a way that ignores religion, culture and so forth.

The authors make the important point that attacks on culture and religion can have racist connotations. Indeed, a key component of racism aside from biology is the existence of a power dynamic between the antagonist and their target, a dynamic that is often observable in how for example the far right relates to Islam and Muslims, in a demeaning fashion.

## The British far right and the British National Party

Within a British context, the BNP was throughout the 1970s and 1980s a typical neo-fascist, street based movement, with an overtly racist outlook. Throughout the 1990s, however, the organisation followed the lead of France’s Front Nationale and sought to reinvent itself around a popular image, with a culturalist logic that sought the protection of the nation’s culture and identity, as opposed to one of racism (Copsey 2008). The BNP, whilst having a street based roots also sought political success via the ballot box. Events in 2001 are a useful point of reference from which to assess the progress made by the BNP and also the general strategy of the far right in what was a defining period for the organisation and its relationship with Islam. Ultimately the organisation sought to take advantage of the anti-Muslim sentiment within some of England’s working class communities.

In mid-2001 a small number of northern English cities, Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, experienced rioting amongst their disgruntled ‘Asian’ minority populations. It was suggested by some commentators that a key element of the conflict was tensions between the young Asian and white populations and that the unrest and “these 'riots' cannot be divorced from a context in which minority ethnic communities were alarmed by the mobilization of neo-fascists such as the British National Party (BNP) and the National Front (NF)” (Bagguley and Hussain 2003:1).Copsey (2004) explains the BNP’s greatest success at the time was in Oldham, where reports of Asian on white violence had been raising tensions. The BNP acted to exploit the disharmony through organising a demonstration in the affected area, further facilitated by the local media which appeared fixated on ‘Asian’ on white attacks. Meanwhile, the BNP’s far right rival the NF added flames to the fire by proposing its own march. Tensions finally boiled over when a gang of around 450 Stoke football supporters created a disturbance in the area. There were skirmishes between groups of ‘Asians’ and far right activists. What was of significance, however, was the BNP leader, Nick Griffin’s desire to distance the organisation from this street violence, as a means of rejecting its confrontational neo-fascist past. Instead, the BNP began an intensive doorstep canvassing campaign, incorporating literature that blamed local Muslims for the rioting. This framing and the grassroots doorstep campaigning proved popular with white working class voters. A similar anti-Muslim framing was successful in Burnley, where the BNP took advantage of perceptions within the white community that Muslim communities were getting preferential council founding. Again, this strategy was a success, with voters switching from Labour to the BNP as it increased its share of the vote. An important outcome of the riots was that they strengthened the hand of the far right as issues relating to ethnic identity, diversity, multiculturalism and integration were thrust to the top of the political agenda (Phillips 2007). This had translated into votes for the BNP and it was not long after the riots that 9/11 occurred, which provided a further boost for the BNP’s cause, as it intensified its Islamophobic campaigning (Copsey 2004).

The BNP was able to gain an increasing foothold in the electoral system in the years that followed the riots and 9/11, reorienting its strategy of voter engagement. From 2004 Nick Griffin, continued his efforts to shed any historical links the BNP had with fascism, in favour of foregrounding the ideology of national populism, offering a more moderate style of ethnocentric nationalism (Copsey 2007). The BNP’s 2005 manifesto played on fears of the creeping Islamification of Britain and, invoking the clash of civilisations paradigm that had gained credence in particular following 9/11, Griffin predicted that the relationship between Islam and the West would define politics going forward; the party should focus on this in order to achieve power (Copsey 2007).

An interesting quantitative analysis attempting to gauge the demographic of support for the BNP in white working class areas uncovered surprisingly few correlations between residents living in these areas and support for the BNP (John et al 2006). However, the one telling indicator identified was that BNP support was high in areas where there was a high presence of Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups. A more recent analysis conducted by Ford and Goodwin (2010) was able to categorise the typical BNP supporter as the white, middle-aged working class male with few educational qualifications, concerned about immigration and hostile in relation to the political establishment. The failure of the main political parties, particularly Labour, to engage with this group had motivated an increasingly large number of alienated voters to embrace the BNP and its ideology (Goodwin 2011). This is not to overstate the significance of the BNP, as following the pinnacle of its success in 2009, securing the election of two MEPs in the European Parliament, the party has been undermined by an internal power struggle and has been haemorrhaging support in local and national elections. Goodwin (2011) claims that the fundamental failing of the BNP is that it has not been able to widen its support base beyond the aforementioned demographic of middle-aged males. The BNP is a useful example of the British far right based on its relative success within white working class areas and its strategy of carefully stoking inter-ethnic tensions, particularly those engendered around Muslims. Its success also exemplifies a disconnect between the working class and mainstream politics. That the BNP’s success has primarily occurred in areas with a high Pakistani and Bangladeshi presence is something of an unfortunate endorsement of its Islamophobic tactics around voter engagement.

In the UK the BNP is critical to explorations of the increasing popularity of the far right among the white working class that was realised from the early 21st Century, though it had seen popularity in the 1980s. This was a consequence of its careful rebranding in order to appeal to its target audience and its strategic manipulation of crisis in engaging with this audience. In what Hewitt (2005) terms the ‘white backlash’, white communities began to question the value of multiculturalism in relation to their own interests. Perhaps underpinning and motivating this white backlash is a ‘politics of resentment’, which Nord (2005) had identified among shopkeepers in late 19th Century Paris, which formed around a resentment toward loss of economic prosperity and a lost sense of community that resulted in an ‘othering’ mentality to perceived outsiders. Wells and Watson (2005) translate this to the politics of resentment of shopkeepers in 21st Century London and highlight some fundamental components that undoubtedly have wider significance to the experiences of sections of the white population, including the working class:

They are bitter. They resent the loss of economic prosperity and the sense of community that, in their nostalgic recollection, characterised their neighbourhood in an earlier era… Many of them blame their loss of community on those British citizens who are neither Anglophone, nor Christian, nor white… They perceive the distribution of political and economic resources by local and national governments, below them to ‘asylum seekers’ and above them to large capital to be illegitimate and unfair (ibid: 261-262).

Wells and Watson suggest that the product of the politics of resentment is an exclusionary notion of Britishness, characterised by being white, Anglophone and Christian. In effect, through appropriating the notion of the politics of resentment it is conceptually possible to draw a line between the prevailing political and socio-economic environment that defines the everyday lives of the white British population and how the perceptions of some of this population are shaped to accord with aspects of the ideology attributed to the far right.

It would appear that there is a prevailing opinion within white working class communities that multiculturalism is a top-down engineering project, conducted by the government, without any democratic mandate in the shape of popular consent. The needs of the ‘indigenous’ communities, it is felt, have been wilfully allowed to be superseded by those of ‘other’ communities. In a drive to make minorities feel part of wider society, a lack of attention was applied to how the resident white population felt about the social change that was engendered (Georgiadis and Manning 2009) with some among the white working class viewing the term multiculturalism as a shorthand preferential treatment (McGhee 2008:100). In this context the Labour party, once the preserve of the working classes, is blamed for inviting ‘other’ cultures in via an open immigration policy and encouraging them to segregate into distinct cultural forms and areas.

Muslim communities are a key focus of disparagement in this respect, as they are perceived to have a separatist tendency, whereby they have no interest of integrating with the ‘mainstream’ culture and are seen to be very inward looking as a group. Resentment towards Muslims has remained high in traditional white working class areas, where Muslims have settled and sought to introduce cultural symbols, such as through the development of Mosques, which further alienated the white working class (Eade 1996). These forms of resentment, engendered around sensitivity to change at the local level and an associated ‘white backlash’, have been heavily exploited by the far right in Britain.

## The far right online

In the 21st Century the far right has become more active within the virtual sphere, as it has diversified its operations in order to unleash the potential of the internet, although research on the far right within this arena is still in its infancy (Caiani and Wageman 2009). In this section I will explore exactly how far right organisations have used the internet to their own ends, such as to communicate with their audience. I will also touch on what it is about the internet that appeals to far right supporters.

The first significant incarnation of the far right on the internet arguably appeared in 1995 and was an online forum for racial supremacists and nationalists called Stormfront. Schafer (2002) explains that Donald Black, creator of the website made the claim in 1998 on ABC news that the website had allowed him to recruit people to the cause that would otherwise have been unreachable. As was the case with the relationship between newsgroups and street violence in Mann, Sutton and Tuffin’s (2003) study, it is impossible to quantify the extent to which users of this popular forum (it currently claims to be host to over nine million messages posted by in excess of 250,000 users) have been mobilised as activists or went on to be recruited by far right organisations, as a consequence of their involvement within the Stormfront online community. Bowman-Grieve (2009) underlines the sense of solidarity that can be found within the community, as people seek validation for their beliefs, with forums like this offering the possibility of collective affirmation for ideological and personal belief systems that may be ignored, derided or shunned in daily social life. Through interactions in such spaces a sense of identity may be created and a sense of group belonging engendered. Aside from the more malign attractions of obscene expression in reference to the ‘other’ that online forums appear to promote, far right groups also seek to provide confirmation of personal identity constructs and a sense of belonging to like-minded individuals. We can see that the combination of social technologies, historical formations of far right affiliations and the histories of particular groups, such as an alienated British working class, form key ingredients in understanding the positioning and growth of such a politics globally today.

The internet could be regarded as effectively adding a third strand to Eatwell’s (2003) twin construct that averred the far right had both a political dimension and a street based form, with the virtual realm an easily accessible space where far right supporters, potentially from around the globe, are free to interact. It follows that, as opposed to being active on the street, some far right supporters find their space of choice being that of cyberspace. The internet’s borderless nature opens possibilities for individuals who are intent on promulgating a discourse that would be otherwise difficult to broadcast for fear of social or legal castigation (Chiang, Grant and Gerstenfeld 2003). As a consequence there is global potential for movements with an online presence that previously operated in more discreet or closed ways. For far right groups prospects for broader engagement are significantly enhanced. Castells (2012) highlights how the far reaching scope of the internet internet can be a tool of empowerment for social movements and this can be applied to the far right, as disparate individuals who share grievances in relation to a common ‘other’ can converge as a collective in virtual space to partake in the group building act of ‘othering’, regardless of their geographical location. As Whelp and Wheatley argue:

the Internet allows those with far-right sympathies to engage in a discourse that would not be tolerated in the streets and to network and communicate with like-minded individuals. In this way the internet can provide a kind of ‘breakaway public sphere’ for right wing activists whose views have no place in the broader public sphere (Welp and Wheatley 2009:23).

The legal castigation that may be associated with involvement in the far right in an offline public space context is also diminished. Regulatory frameworks are much harder to impose on online activities. This may function to liberate an individual who is intent on espousing hateful or controversial views and whom would otherwise feel accountable to the law and thus constrained in their actions. Many far right groups do in fact play upon the notion of freedom of expression on their websites (Chiang, Grant and Gerstenfeld 2003), promoting an environment more likely to support controversial views and offering the potential to draw more ‘extreme’ audiences that may not come into direct contact with like-minded others in daily life or who may feel some shame or timidity in such contexts.

Social alienation is of great importance to the far right as such movements have been adept at exploiting feelings of marginalisation based on racial, or cultural, grounds. In a study of white supremacists on the internet Adams and Roscigno (2005) addressed the question of how a sense of racial alienation which white supremacist movements have been adroit at taking advantage of leads to the ways in which important social and political grievances are often framed in terms of the oppression of white people. Such grievances become a central part of identity, which for the supremacists was interwoven with prevailing nationalist themes including the nation and religion in order to produce a strong collective sense of belonging, placing members of such groups on the moral high-ground as victims of racism. When it comes to the issue of race whites generally have the lowest sense of racial alienation (Adams and Roscigno 2005); however, in this instance the internet was used as a medium to propagate ideologies that offered a sense of the oppression of white people, to which Daniels has argued that “those on the right are waging a political and cultural battle by subverting knowledge claims and the internet is a valuable asset in such an effort” (Daniels 2009:673). The invention of truth claims is a technique utilised by the far right as it acts to construct its own worldview, based on a blend of far right values that define the specific group as well as through the production of those ‘others’, to which the group defines itself. Truth claims generated around the ‘other’ can facilitate the assignment of troubling characteristics that substantiate the notion of its ‘otherness’ and consolidate the in-group. In this respect, racialised discourse is concerned with “constructing and separating racial identities, in an attempt to create permanent contours between Self and Other” (Campbell 2006:290). The invention of the ‘other’ and the production of the in-group and out-group may help those members of the in-group overcome feelings of marginalisation and alienation through partaking in a collective derision of those they deem ‘different’ or ‘unwelcome’.

In addition to providing a shared space online for like-minded supporters to interact and produce identity, the far right may also attempt to appropriate this space as a tool for recruiting and mobilising activists and supporters within the physical sphere. As well as having a ‘borderless’ reach, the internet is highly efficient at sharing information quickly (Chiang, Grant and Gerstenfeld 2003), and so may assist the mobilisation and co-ordination of supporters’ activities on the ground. For example, in a study of white racist newsgroups, Mann, Sutton and Tuffin (2003) found that the newsgroups provided an enabling environment for racially motivated violence, which may lead to actual street violence ‘offline’. This highlights how the virtual and physical realms can be interdependent and it underlines how the internet has been used by far right groups to mobilise identity and provoke certain forms of behaviour on the ground, in this instance violent behaviour.

Some far right groups are more wary of using the internet as a space to construct extreme forms of identity, or in allowing supporters the freedom to construct controversial narratives online. So, for example, we can see in the BNP a useful case to examine since it offers a somewhat authoritarian approach to member interaction (Atton 2006) and, in effect, the production of identity through discourse within the BNP’s website. Atton (2006) identifies little opportunity for members to exchange views and no formal chat room on the website. The only prospect of user interaction is via the ‘policy forum’, which allows space for limited debate surrounding policy issues. There is, as a consequence, little space to hear the voices of the ‘oppressed’ culture which the organisation frames itself as being protector of. The reason for this authoritarian approach is likely to be to a significant extent associated with image control and how the organisation wishes to present itself to the public. The reality is that the BNP contains a cohort of ‘extreme’ supporters, as a consequence of its neo-fascist history (Copsey 2004). There is a distinct probability that such individuals and their opinions could be damaging to the populist image that the organisation was seeking to fashion for itself, if these supporters were given the freedom to share their controversial worldview under the BNP political brand. The balance between image control and allowing freedom for grassroots identity production between supporters on the internet is an important one for the far right. One can postulate that if a group is seeking ‘mainstream’ socio-political acceptance it must err on the side of caution in terms of image control and seek to silence, as best possible, potentially damaging elements from within. Therefore, the BNP’s authoritarian approach online appears to be carefully administered as a means of facilitating its drive for popular acceptance.

From a national perspective Germany and Italy both have a culture of far right groups using the internet in order to function. Caiani and Wageman (2009) note the prominence of the far right in Italy and its increasing use of the internet, noting the diverse range of types of far right groups – from political parties, to ‘cultural’ associations, music groups and soccer hooligans. A study of the Italian far right online which explored the relationship of 18 distinct groups using social network analysis uncovered the presence of a coherent network of far right websites, incorporating a loosely structured and interacting network of such groups (Tateo 2006). Whilst a similar study has not been conducted in Britain and Britain has relatively few far right groups online, it does have a culture of incompatibility and discord between (and indeed within) far right groups. This is to an extent a product of the varied range of extremist ideology that some groups and individuals may subscribe to. For example, those with a fascistic leaning will likely ally with anti-Semitic or overtly racist views, whilst those who favour national populism, appear to be less extreme, disassociating their beliefs from racist positions. Such schisms have tended to undermine the strength in unity of the British far right.

The German case is interesting from a legal perspective since there is significant legal regulation of far right groups in the country as a consequence of the country’s history. This inhibits the freedom of activism of German far right groups and causes problems in terms of finding offices and headquarters to site themselves (Caiani and Wageman 2009). There are, of course, no such legal restrictions and inhibitors within the virtual sphere. The German far right has as a result a much more noticeable online presence in comparison to offline and to compensate for a lack of organisational capacity in the physical sphere, these groups use websites as proxy organisational structures. The groups are able to ‘appear’ and ‘disappear’ quickly to keep ahead of the authorities (Caiani and Wageman 2009). This type of organisational structure, engendered around websites, is an emergent construct in the era of the internet, for those organisations that deem it more efficient to function online. This applies to all manner of organisations, including retailers, but in relation to the far right, the German case highlights the utility of online operations. Groups like the EDL can be structured, for example, around Facebook pages, with a central page that comprises the hub of the organisation. Additional pages that resemble spokes in the online structure can be quickly generated and used to give birth to new grassroots divisions, with the Facebook page used as a mobilising and organising tool.

## Identity approaches

We have already touched on notions of identity, but the concept requires a much deeper analysis to appreciate what it is and how it defines people and the groups to which they belong. In this section I will consider how identity is best conceptualised and how it is produced through narrative. Also of importance is the political and economic environment in which working class identity is produced in the contemporary era, as the effects of post-politics and processes such as neoliberalism are explored. Finally, I will delve deeper into how identity is produced in the global space of the internet.

There are various different approaches to conceptualising identity, which can help us to understand how it is produced. The 'primordial' view advanced by Geertz (1963) holds that identity is an innate manifestation, effectively ascribed at birth and, as such, rigid and permanent. Ethnicity in this view is an ancient and deeply irrational phenomenon, with the potential to instigate an intense inter-ethnic hatred. Nationalism is driven by intense group-oriented passions, whereby the nation is essentialised and attributed hardened characteristics that are perceived to have been omnipresent since its formation, grounded in a phantasmic history that defines its present glory. The ‘primordial drive’ may compel an individual to die as protector of the nation and its heritage, and do so in the belief he was defending the integrity of his forefathers. Alternatively, ‘constructivist' approaches regard identity not as fixed, but “as the protean outcome of the continuous and generally conflict-ridden interaction of political, economic and cultural forces” (Berman 1998:311). This position is useful to account for multiple, highly fluid and constantly changing identities, shaped by environmental factors. For example, political institutions and political entrepreneurs are two environmental influences that can have a profound effect on how ethnic identity might be configured in a benign or malign way toward ‘other’ such identities (Chandra 2001). The constructed nature of identity and its constant reconstitution leaves little place for glorious history and forefathers of the nation, although these are essences that may be woven into the identity, perhaps by political entrepreneurs, in order to legitimise the construct in the eyes of the nation. The biological determinism of the primordial approach is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the production of new identities within social networking environments.

The two approaches however offer the possibility of a middle-ground in which identities are not regarded as fixed, as primordialists would suggest, but may be durable and heartfelt, whilst also open to environmental influence and change (Smith 1986). In this respect situational factors are significant; for example, inter-ethnic hostility might serve to enhance the durability of an identity, and reconstitute it in an antagonistic manner. Alternatively inter-ethnic cooperation may diminish antagonism over time acting to soften the identity and make it more benign. The notion of ‘crisis’ helps us explore the theoretical hardening and softening of identity. To take 9/11 as a context, prior to the event ‘native’ identities in Britain may have been somewhat benign towards Muslims in local communities. The terrorist attack, however, gave rise to insecurities and fears in relation to the intentions of Muslims and the potential threat they posed to the safety of local populations. These insecurities would have functioned to harden identity and consolidate inter-ethnic boundaries, raising the troubling spectre of the Muslim ‘other’. Theoretically over time if no further terrorist attacks occurred and ‘native’ and Muslim populations began to mix in a more peaceful way this would contribute to the softening of identity. The process is therefore fluid and subject to situational adjustment with significant events that provoke inter-ethnic stress likely to act to rapidly harden identity and incite inter-ethnic hate. As Korostelina notes:

Strong social identities or feelings of belonging to a specific group… have existed for centuries, yet have rarely resulted in conflict. Consequentially, social identities themselves do not arise as a result of conflict among groups, but they do have the potential to become more salient and mobilised. Once a social identity gets involved in interest-based or instrumental conflict, it changes the nature of political or economic conflict in particular ways, making it protracted and deep-rooted (2007:147).

This argument underscores the role played by the environment in shaping conflict between groups, a conflict that is not otherwise an absolute, unquestionable outcome of inter-ethnic interaction, but as a consequence of an uneasy socio-political milieu may be experienced by the group as inevitable. In the context of the West and Islam, Huntington’s (1993) *Clash of civilisations* and a war between the Muslim and western civilisations has an air of inevitability, of irreconcilable identity, and it is conceivable that talk of such a clash is more resonant in times of crisis, such as following 9/11 or in a recession. The possibilities for elite manipulation appear to be enhanced in crisis, with the outcome for the collective likely to be a primordial type of worldview, defined in opposition to the ‘other’ (Berman 1998). Identity is therefore constructed through the interactions of people and is changeable over time, but it may engender a strong sense of belonging for an individual or a group that can make its adherents feel anchored in a deeply significant association that has historic connotations.

## Narrative and identity

In seeking to understand how identity is produced and indeed how it may be refashioned by members of identity groups it is important to consider the importance of narrative. Narratives are the frames through which an individual understands their being and their social existence. They are the life force of ethnic identity and facilitate the forging and consolidation of group boundaries. Groups are liable to produce their own dominant narrative, an overarching story, for example pertaining to the history of the group. Ochs and Capps explain that “Adherence to a dominant narrative is… community building in that it presumes that each member ascribes to a common story” (1996:32). Ochs and Capps, however, highlight potential problems linked to dominant narratives in that they can create a false sense of stability due to the fact they may not reflect reality. This is an interesting issue from the perspective of history, as a narrative might imbue a group with a mythological past. Isin (2012) makes reference to the nation as constructed through narrative and how this narrative can become a representation of the self and thus create a perceived genealogical tie between the person and their nation. Isin makes reference to ‘fictive ethnicity’, which has nations as imaginary constructs engendered around collective narrative with a mythological past. The mythology of a nation’s past is brought to life and experienced as a binding reality for a nation through the strength of narrative. If narrative determines that one nation’s mythological past is in fact entirely incommensurate with the mythological past constructed by a neighbouring group, this may become a site of inter-group conflict as they mobilise to protect their own version of history, to defend the group’s identity and ultimately the group members’ sense of selfhood.

Young (2007) reminds us that to create a good enemy we have to convince ourselves that ‘they’ are the cause of ‘our’ problems and ‘they’ are essentially different from ‘us’. Certainty of identity is produced through contrasts with the out-group’s identity. This means that it is important to observe how the emergence of dominant narratives that are discernibly prejudiced reinforce the negative and differing elements of the identities of out-groups while simultaneously re-affirming the positive characteristics of the in-group. Such narratives are central to the production of identity for the two groups in comparison and may be regarded as ‘extreme’ from particular points of view; however, the narrative would not be regarded as such from within the group which has adopted it as the dominant frame of reference for ‘self’ and ‘other’. If such a dominant narrative was to gain wider credence within a society, perhaps as a reaction to a social or political crisis, the concomitant identity or strands of that identity would spread to those willing to internalise them. The social creep, of what was previously regarded as a marginal and extreme mode of thought, potentially paves the way for the need to reassess its marginality and, more to the point, to reconsider how ‘extreme’ and socially unacceptable the mode of thought actually has become at this moment in time. This underlines the fluid nature of identity relating to the constructivist approach, as identity is spread and adopted via the internalisation of narratives.

Furthermore, dominant narratives are developed as a consequence of narratives disseminated through the media (Altheide 2002). Altheide (2002) suggests the news media produce dominant narratives based on fear and crisis as this appeals to consumers, but these narratives have the effect of structuring the worldview of the audience who may come to see the world as a more dangerous place. This highlights the role that the media may play in identity production as people adopt a fearful mind-set as a consequence of being exposed to these troubling media narratives. In addition, if one is to consider how decentralised media formats, such as networking sites, which allow for the unregulated production and dissemination of narratives it is possible to understand how these networking sites may be influential in the production of identity. For example, the narratives on a far right networking site may be ‘extreme’ as users produce a discourse that is nationalistic and hateful of Muslims, albeit this narrative is potentially engendered around a threatening framing of Muslims and Islamic terrorism that is propagated by news media agencies. This would facilitate in the collective construction of an ‘extreme’ identity. The production of the ‘other’ would prospectively become more fevered at a time of crisis, as the ‘extreme’ identity is constructed in contrast with its ‘other’, (Young 2007). Feelings of security may be achieved through exclusionary narratives that blame the ‘other’ and which potentially seek some sort of retribution. Young (2007) claims that to construct an enemy we must first convince ourselves that they are the source of our problems and then determine that they are in essence different from ‘us’ and inherently evil. This type of narrative would most definitely consolidate the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’, whilst raising the prospect of rationalising inter-group discord. Networking sites are therefore a unique space for these types of narratives to be produced by far right users and they allow for the sharing of news articles and videos that will feed into the ‘othering’ process if they conform to a negative framing of Muslims.

## Post-politics and the creation of antagonistic political identity

Environmental factors are influential in the production of identity and it is interesting to take a closer look at working class identity and how it has been shaped under political and economic pressures over the past few decades. The notion of post-politics is highly informative in helping us understand working class identity and how certain fractions of this group may be drawn towards the far right.

Post-politics is best explained with recourse to the post-war period and the structure of power between the working class, the state and the capitalists. As Mouffe (2000) explains, the relationship of power between large firms and the state was fundamentally one of the former conforming to the latter. The post-war period was defined by a strong collective spirit and it saw the institution and consolidation of various social democratic institutions, most prominently the welfare state; along with Keynesian macroeconomic planning, premised to safeguard society against cycles of high unemployment (Marquand 2004). Under the auspices of Fordism, capitalist production was fuelling the British economy, acting in what was a socially responsible manner in favour of the needs of workers and local communities. Employees working for industrial firms enjoyed favourable terms and conditions of employment alongside strong trade union representation. The working class was tied to the Labour party, which advocated working class interests and therefore there was a solid left of centre political identity associated with this prominent social group. That the post-war model would operate into the 1970s and provide a relatively stable politico-economic environment would become an afterthought by the end of that decade with the coming to power of Thatcher in 1979 and the rolling out of the neoliberal project (Peck and Tickell 2002). This had the effect of sending the Fordist model into a state of crisis and ultimately it would collapse (Negri 2003).

The neoliberalism unleashed during the 1980s and beyond would recalibrate the political and economic system to favour the interests of the wealthy (Crouch 2004). The populist ideology that drove this project was that the capitalist economy and the market would essentially be the arbiter of the common good, through wealth generation all would prosper. In order to achieve this Keynesian economic planning was discontinued, replaced by the logic of the free market. We have already touched on this situation in the previous chapter, as the power of trade unions was severely hampered through legislation diminishing the scope of their activities, thus weakening the position of the industrial base, which itself was slowly usurped by an ever expanding services sector. Ultimately, the interests of the people became second to those of capital and the working class suffered greatest as a consequence of mass redundancies and scant employment opportunities.

All of Britain’s main political parties would come to adopt a neoliberal outlook as they converged on a shared political ground (Mouffe 2000). The left versus right political distinction became increasingly invisible as New Labour emerged, concerned less with working class interests and more with the interests of capital. Heffernan (2000) outlines how New Labour was effectively a product of Thatcherism and had at its core a neoliberal ideology. Interestingly, Heffernan claims New Labour marked the onset of a consensus in British politics – essentially the neoliberal blurring of political ideological boundaries to which Mouffe (2000) alluded. This was a key moment for the consolidation of post-politics. Zizek (1998, 2002) regards this loss of the traditional ideological political divisions as a symptom of post-politics and that proper politics has been largely replaced by a politics concerned with the administration of social matters by technocrats. “The gap between political life and mere life is disappearing, and the control and administration of ‘mere life’ is directly asserted as the essence of politics itself” (Zizek 2002: 95). In effect politics has become depoliticised and reduced to a politics that is overtly concerned with protection and safeguarding of people’s lives through the generation of fears regarding health and safety. Most notably terrorism has been promoted by the political elite as being an existential threat to life that it is the job of the establishment to defend against. Foucault’s (1998) notion of biopower helps to illuminate this whereby he notes the manner in which a state exerts control over its citizens through the offer of both protecting and sustaining their lives. In an age of popular disengagement from politics, politicians have sought to communicate with and solicit the conformity of citizens through engendering fear and insecurity and through subtle forms of biopower the political elite can posit itself as the solution to these insecurities (Furedi 2005).

A useful conceptual component of post-politics is that of ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch 2004), which characterises democracy as a hollowed out ideal. The formal institutions of democracy remain in place; however, it is the economic interests of business elites that determine policymaking decisions. The scale of this issue is global as, in accordance with the dictates of capitalism, the bourgeoisie has become internationalised and omnipotent, its power based on capitalist self-interest (Negri 2003). The needs of the body politic have been effectively subjugated to the interests of the business elite, whilst the political elite has seemingly seen its own needs as defined by global capitalism. A perverse contradiction exists whereby politics is still enacted at a local and national level, while capitalism appears to be ever more managed and implemented globally (Gilbert 2009). This negates the significance of the ‘lived’ experience of politics at the local and national level, as influence has been sucked toward the global capitalist system while parliamentary politicians are fundamentally concerned with being returned to power for their own self-interests rather than on the basis of any strong ideological beliefs they hold or to uphold the interests of their constituents. The global component of politics can also be defined by the increasing role of supranational institutions, such as the European Union (EU), which influence or prescribe policy ‘from above’ with a popularly contentious democratic mandate (Dinan 1999). The EU has been responsible for precipitating a large flow of immigrants within its expanding borders and, as we addressed in the previous chapter, there is a prevailing opinion that such immigrants are settling in working class communities, with damaging consequences upon ‘native’ culture and employment.

To take a closer look at political identity under post-politics, the environment has been ripe for the rise in prominence of far right political parties and far right political ideology (Crouch 2004). Swyngedouw (2011) outlines the binary notions of agonistic and antagonistic politics. This is an instructive paradigm for helping to theorise how the shift to post-politics may have resulted in the embracement of the far right by sections of the working class. Agonistic politics is a natural form of adversarial politics, whereby ideologically dissimilar political parties pursue divergent political paths, therefore offering the citizenry genuine choice and a vehicle for a healthy form of democratic political confrontation that allows for the expression of strong attitudes, opinions and other political energies. We could associate this with the post-war era, where left and right were separately defined entities within British politics and their respective ideologies were innately incommensurate and would therefore produce a healthy form of political conflict and contestation between the bearers of left and right political identities. As a consequence of the ideological convergence of the mainstream British parties, post-politics has manifested, whereby such agonistic conflict is not catered for through natural democratic confrontation. This precipitates in the place of agonistic politics a less democratic, antagonistic type of politics and, as is noted by Mouffe (2000), antagonisms can take many forms. The latency for violent expressionism may intensify where agonism is not allowed to occur and this may produce, as opposed to a normal form of democratic political confrontation, a malign form of ‘othering’ (Springer 2011). It is into the antagonistic political void that the far right has shifted, as it functions to promote a sense of national solidarity through engendering ethnic hostilities, with Muslims and Islam in particular being the post-9/11 era object of vilification. Antagonistic political identity is therefore of an irrational nature, produced by a flawed political system that has disenfranchised large sections of the populace, most notably the working class, and may be engendered around nationalistic reverence and disposed to inter-ethnic conflict.

## Working class Identity, neoliberalism and deindustrialisation

In the decades that defined the post-war period working class identity was traditionally rooted in local communities, where people would work, socialise and raise families, enjoying a strong communal attachment (Jones 2011). We will now examine how this strong sense of local identity would be challenged by policies of neoliberalism and the effects of deindustrialisation.

Neoliberalism offers important ways of understanding changes to communities and contemporary identity, yet the ideology itself is often seen as a difficult concept to define and has many different conceptualisations; however, it is usefully characterised as being:

associated with the preference for a minimalist state. Markets are understood to be a better way of organizing economic activity because they are associated with competition, economic efficiency and choice. In conjunction with this general shift towards the neo-liberal tenet of "more market," deregulation and privatization have become central themes (Larner 2000:5).

It is through considering the impact of neoliberalism on working class identity that we can interpret identity at a local level within a British context. It was the orthodox of ‘economic efficiency’ that saw British industry suffer under the duress of neoliberalism, which had implications for working class identity and posed a significant challenge to working class communities that were directly affected by deindustrialisation (Charlesworth 2000, Jones 2011).In his book, *A brief history in neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) explains how, since its inception in the late 1970s neoliberalism has become ideologically hegemonic, to the extent it has become a frame of reference many people use to interpret and understand the world in which they live, both those who are dominant and those subordinated and excluded or damaged by its operations. Harvey explains that the effects of neoliberalism have far from conformed to its idealistic ideological underpinnings:

The process of neoliberalisation has… entailed much ‘creative destruction’, not only for prior institutional frameworks and powers (ever challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions… ways of life and thought (ibid:3).

This ‘creative destruction’ had a profound effect on working class communities in Britain, as neoliberal policies disrupted traditional ways of life and the institutions that had for so long supported these communities. Peck and Tickell (2006) develop this line of reasoning, outlining how Thatcher’s neoliberal economic transformation of Britain had disproportionately malign effects for the working class, as the nation’s industrial sector was forced into decline and the state was rolled back. Farrall (2006) also addresses the legacy of Thatcherism, and claims the outcome was a diminishing of social solidarity and the rise of individualism and insecurity, people became more competitive and self-motivated, whilst collective institutions, such as Trade Unions, were marginalised. The deindustrialisation process has regularly been held responsible for the breaking-down of social bonds and leading to identities becoming increasingly privatised as people socialised less commonly within the local community (Jones 2011). Interestingly, Farrall (2006) also identifies greater levels of intolerance that bubbled to the surface at the time, which manifested as hatred of certain groups, including homosexuals and criminals as a result of the kind of social fracturing and stresses that emerged from the imposition of key policy directives. The rise of popular narratives in the media and political discourse made sense of such groups were attributing them an ‘other’ identity with malign characteristics (Smith 1996).

Charlesworth addresses deindustrialisation in respect of working class communities in Rotherham and in effect highlights how this breaking-down process was initiated as a product of neoliberalism that Charlesworth claims acted to socially exclude the working class:

For the working class, themselves, for whom the economically marginal and socially excluded are family members and neighbours, they have to deal with in the most palpable way with the decline of their own economic role and social position. Since the early 1980s the gradual decline of the culture of the working class has been one of the most powerful, telling developments in British society (2000:2).

The outcome of the process was mass unemployment or more precarious forms of employment outside of traditional industry. This fundamentally acted to break the bond between work and community, whilst marginalising and stigmatising the working class. Those who could find work were often forced to travel further afield than had always been the case and took up roles within increasingly atomised workplaces. Charlesworth notes that the solidarities of family and of work and place that had been strengthened by the culture of trade unions and education were washed away through the institution of free market economics, producing a fractured anomie and concomitant social problems. What was left was a feeling of ambiguity and confusion for the working class. The result of these dramatic shifts was the emasculation of male members of the working class. Working class identity may well have been reconstructed as a consequence and would arguably herald less esteem for its adherents, who were no longer able to associate with the glory of their role as workers. Furthermore, the fact that they were no longer socialising at work implies that there would be less opportunity to consolidate working class identity. The notion of fractured anomie is interesting if we are to consider why some of the working class may be willing to associate with the far right as they seek to overcome feelings of alienation.

Evidence of alternative outcomes to the milieu of deindustrialisation can be found in the work of MacKenzie et al (2006) in their study of Welsh steel workers. This work found the maintenance and consolidation of collective identity, albeit alongside much demoralisation, during and following the crisis of redundancy which had befallen the workers. Working class identity in this case served as a form of collective resistance to the crisis that had been instigated by neoliberalism, functioning as:

a defence mechanism to afford some sense of protection against the changes affecting these communities, not just in terms of material loss, but also in broader social terms. Ultimately the assertion of this collective identity can be seen as a means of resistance against submergence in the life the external labour market had to offer, one characterized by low pay, lack of security, and a loss of identity (MacKenzie et al 2006: 848)

In this regard it was class and the continuing experience of solidarity amongst the steel workers that helped them negotiate the insecurities of deindustrialisation and the wider atomisation of society presaged through neoliberal policies.

The accounts of Charlesworth (2000) and MacKenzie et al (2006) demonstrate how the forces of neoliberalism have acted upon working class identity. What is notable, however, is that for some communities, although they experienced a sense of alienation from wider society and a sense of status degradation, the communities were able to maintain some sense of solidarity and did not fragment entirely. Such an account must be acknowledged and it highlights the divergent effects of neoliberalism based on the particularism of localities. Where communities have remained resilient in the face of insecurity and social change working class identity may remain seemingly strong, that is more resistant to change. In the case of the Welsh steel workers the collective experience of redundancy was a component of maintaining a sense of solidarity and for the generation which experienced the loss of work this remained strong, although there are questions regarding the durability of such bonds for subsequent generations who do not have the shared experience of deindustrialisation and mass redundancy.

On the other hand Jones (2012) offers an indication as to why the sense of rootedness to community was for many communities lost under the duress of deindustrialisation:

The old industries associated with working class identity were being destroyed. There no longer seemed anything to celebrate about being working class. But Thatcherism promised an alternative. Leave the working class behind, it said, and come and join the property-owning middle class instead (2012:60).

This was a fundamentally divisive ideology that whilst wielding the stick and breaking down the working class through mass redundancies offered these victims the carrot of capital and asset accumulation, most prominently with the opportunity to buy one’s own house. Those that were able to find alternative forms of work, often non-manual as a consequence of industrial decline, would likely find themselves in individualistic and competitive work environments that offered little sense of collective identity. The right-to-buy scheme resulted in the working class being able to purchase their council house, which changed the dynamic in terms of notions of public and private and likely fed into the privatisation of lifestyle as people came to feel more self-interested and less communally orientated:

Aspiration was no longer about people working together to improve their communities; it was being redefined as getting more for yourself as an individual, regardless of the social costs (Jones 2012:61).

The impact of these forces of individualisation facilitated in the fragmentation of many working class communities and in the context of the right-to-buy scheme some members of these communities could not afford to buy their own homes, which resulted in a situation whereby council housing was the preserve of the poorest members of the working class. This encouraged intra-communal stigmatisation as members of working class communities turned on each other, thus cementing the decline of the collective.

To return to a point made earlier about the particularism of localities, this notion can help us probe how traditionally white working class communities may perceive the inward migration of ethnic minorities. The work of Taylor, Evans and Fraser (1996) offer an insight, from a historical perspective, of the different manner in which immigration was symbolised by local populations, as informed by historically produced local identity. Taylor, Evans and Fraser compare Greater Manchester and Sheffield. Greater Manchester’s history as a city of commerce had connected it to ‘foreign’ culture as well as processes of immigration. In comparison Sheffield had no such history and therefore the dominant social narrative was not one that is familiar with the notion of immigration and was therefore not comfortable with the localised presence of migrants. The notion of narratives is important here as localities that have a history of immigrants living there may have created benevolent narratives toward immigrants and indeed immigrant populations may have been as a result incorporated into the in-group. Working class communities that have a positive history of the inward movement of minority populations will be more likely to perceive immigrants as non-threatening. In communities where there does not exist such a benevolent narrative of shared history we would more likely get negative interpretations of immigrants and perceptions of local decline associated with migrant populations (Garner 2011).

Hoggett et al (2008) in a study into the Hillfields community in Bristol highlight how narratives of minority populations can become tempered around issues such as resource allocation. Hillfields had a growing population of ethnic minorities, which was producing tensions with long term resident populations around access to local amenities, particularly council accommodation. This led to the production of rumours and hearsay amongst the local populations that was increasing ethnic tensions. It is these types of narrative that can quite quickly take hold and effectively give succour to the narratives that far right organisations mobilise around and recruit supporters from local communities. As was explained earlier this was the strategy of the BNP in Burnley as it exploited local inter-ethnic tensions in order to achieve electoral advantage. In what were once exclusively British white working class communities, the inward movement of ‘other’ ethnicities and races appears to disturb the traditional narrative of a given community and its perceived homogeneity. This may be regarded as being destructive to white working class identity. In such instances, community is defined by ‘sameness’ and by the absence of the ‘other’ (Bauman 2001), sameness being configured by prominent identity markers, such as skin colour.

Taylor, Evans and Fraser (1996) also discuss one key contemporary ingredient that has unquestionable influence in these working class areas – the interaction of local and global media:

even in the most well defined and proud locality or place, a great deal of everyday talk, popular knowledge and behaviour is scripted in terms of messages and themes derived from national and international media, and the idea we can speak of an autonomous ‘popular culture’ constructed primarily at the local level, uninfluenced by the global reach of international media, is clearly untenable (ibid:45).

Of course the mass media has an important influence over identity production, as well as in determining how an individual imagines their locality and their place within it. Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2005) claim that global flows, of which the media comprises a key element, enable people to conceptualise their neighbourhoods as different from ‘other’ neighbourhoods. The media can facilitate the construction of ‘self’ and ‘other’ narratives; for example, in how it deals with matters of immigration and race. Right of centre news media publications in Britain with an anti-Islam bias (Shadid and Van Koningsveld 2002) feed into the process of Islamophobic identity production. Within a context of immigration, when a specific community sees an influx of migrants moving in, the ‘native’ members of the community may rely on media interpretations in order to make sense of the ‘other’. Conceptualisations of Muslim migrants within a community may therefore partially rely upon media representations, representations which can often be highly troubling. For example, in work by Shadid and Van Koningsveld they argue that: “Islam is considered to be obsolete and a threat to British society… Muslims are described as divergent, irrational, and unable to integrate in society” (2002:188). If this type of framing is widely adopted within British society, then it is unsurprising that the communities which Muslims come to inhabit can become fragmented along ethnic lines and a lack of Muslim integration becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus perversely contributing to the decline of ‘traditional’ working class community.

## Identity online

In the previous two sections we have explored some of the global and local dynamics that impact on identity, such as the influence of neoliberal capitalism on the production of an antagonistic political identity and the destructive effects of neoliberalism on once robust working class communal ties. This section deals with what is another important globalised influence on identity, the internet.

The internet is a unique place for the production of identity. Chambers (2006) claims that the traditional markers of identity are being loosened and giving way to new opportunities for individual autonomy. The internet is at the heart of this move toward greater self-determination as it provides a space where individuals may be liberated from the norms of the physical world and where they are free to commune with people from around the globe who share similar interests. Wellman et al (2003) note that the internet supplements face-to-face interaction and that it has changed the nature of community, as traditional ties have been superseded by ‘networked individualism’, which puts each individual at the heart of a more boundless and shifting series of networks and new community formations, developed around the individual. As opposed to placing too much emphasis on the outcomes of perceived breakdowns in local community ties, this may well point to a reimagining in the way community is comprised in the late modern era, with the internet at the heart of this reconfiguration and the site of a new form of identity production.

We can see that the far right’s use of the internet has generated communal spaces for like-minded individuals to interact and (re)produce exaggerated, embattled and hostile identities. Such identity tends to be built in reference to the ‘other’. It is clearly important to understand more about how the internet provides an enabling environment for the formation of community and the production of identity. In particular, networking sites, with their capacity to bring people together from disparate locations into a shared forum, have effectively fashioned a new type of public space “even though the person might be communicating from a private space (e.g. home)” (Blanchard and Horan 1998:305). Earlier it was mentioned that neoliberalism may have contributed to a shift toward the privatisation of identity as communities were socialising to a lesser extent. However, the tendency toward reduced social interaction within the physical sphere has also been partially usurped by the means of communicating through online decentralised media platforms from home, or even whilst out and about within the community, via mobile phone.

In seeking to understand the typical psychological needs of individuals who tend to use networking sites, which are a hugely popular media platform, Gangadharbatla (2008) identifies the need for self-esteem, belonging and control. These needs are especially pertinent within a working class context, related to earlier. In this regard, if one considers for example how working class identity has been disturbed through neoliberalism and the communities to which identity is rooted have been transformed, it is easy to see the appeal of a mechanism that offers the satisfaction of needs that had been seriously undermined. Self-esteem, belonging and a sense of control were challenged as a consequence of the effective fall from grace of the working class as its once prominent socio-political status unravelled under the duress of Thatcher’s political policies, producing a marginal and stigmatised social group (Jones 2011). It is possible that attachment to online communities of interest would appeal to those affected by these issues and, more specifically, attachment to communities that offer a strong sense of identity and empowerment would be of unique interest. It is therefore unsurprising that some of the disaffected may become active within the networking sites of political groups that are concerned with challenging the authority of the mainstream political establishment.

As we witness the unravelling of the local through the breakdown of working class communities and the degradation of working class identity, we seem to be observing the rise of online communities and forms of identity. Wright (2004) claims that perceptions of similarity and shared interests are of greatest importance in determining who people associate with online, highlighting that location is no longer necessarily a key factor, as it was with the traditional local community, engendered around individuals living in relatively close proximity and through embodied interactions. Online community can therefore be rapidly generated around a single issue and draw its membership on a global scale. It could still, however, remain rooted in a local context; for example, if one envisages an anti-Islamic online community, some of whose members have been drawn into as a consequence of the unwanted and destabilising presence of Muslims within their own local communities. These individuals could be theorised to be seeking a new form of collective belonging in compensation for what appears to have been ‘lost’ at a local level. This new community can help to make sense of destabilising change that has befallen their lives, albeit within an Islamophobic framework.

The Internet therefore provides a unique space that straddles the public- private, local-global. It represents a kind of liminal space, “neither here nor there… betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and the ceremonial” (Turner 1969:95). As a consequence of this the standard rules and norms of interpersonal interaction and conduct can become somewhat blurred. Liminal space can therefore be liberating for those who are present within it who are no longer constrained by natural behavioural inhibitors that would apply within conventional space. This opens the prospect for more extreme forms of identity being fashioned within virtual space and the creation of extreme forms of community. Online interactions give rise to the production and reproduction of online selves (Rybas and Gajjala 2007) and it is the nature of these interactions that defines the identity and the online community construct. We will go on to explore the process of extreme identity production within groups, but as individuals – for example with a far right mind-set and who are disposed to the dislike of minority groups – converge within a liminal space online their interactions are likely to be engendered around ethnic and racial prejudice. Differentials of status and power that would normally regulate social relationships can become diminished in significance online, as depersonalisation serves to enhance the salience of the group one is interacting within online (Postmas and Brunsting 2002). With a lack of social inhibitors regulating these depersonalised interactions hatred will be maximised and normalised as such, thus giving way for the creation of an extreme form of identity (Sunstein 2009) that bonds a community that is forged around intolerance.

Turkle (1999:643) explains how internet users are offered the opportunity to express what are often unexplored aspects of the self. It is perhaps through this unregulated process of self-discovery that identity production is most pronounced as people’s inner-most insecurities may be realised and resisted. As Turkle also notes, for some people cyberspace is a place to act out unresolved inner-conflicts and to explore psychological difficulties. This is a key area for examination in relation to the social networking environment. As Young (2007) suggests, it is through the resort to ethnic particularism that a notional sense of security is sought by certain people or groups, through an empowering discourse of exclusion. Indeed the internet is a vehicle for empowerment that can be used to increase people’s feelings of security and sense of freedom (Castells 2012). In this regard networking sites may be used by individuals who are experiencing psycho-social difficulties, perhaps in terms of a low social status, which may ultimately be transcended in cyberspace within a community of similarly minded individuals. As a collective the group is consolidated and enjoys feelings of security and power through the production and vilification of an ‘other’.

Within the networked environments norms may become established through shared discourse. As Sunstein (2009) indicates extreme opinions and attitudes are engendered within groups of likeminded individuals and can become normatively ‘extreme’ under such conditions. Sunstein notes that “Much of the time, groups of people end up thinking and doing things that group members would never think or do on their own” (ibid:2). The group dynamic will invoke a polarisation of views based on the sharing of new information. Likeminded members of the group can easily follow a trajectory toward the extreme as they exchange views and endeavour to be regarded favourably by fellow members. The social networking environment is ripe for lurches toward ‘extreme’ views as there is little critique among like-minded community members. The associated norms would allow for the construction of an ‘extreme’ form of identity.

The internet is a vehicle through which far right organisations such as the EDL may appeal to a potentially wide ranging and expansive online audience. What Castells (2010) relates to as ‘political projects’ can effectively function to attract a potentially diverse array of members into a community, united under a single identity, engendered around a single issue. Indeed the EDL boasts a diverse cohort of supporters on Facebook, including Jews, English nationalists, members of the armed services, as well as LGBT, who all mobilise around their hatred of Islam. Social ties in online communities tend to be weak and conducive to bridging social capital (Williams 2006) that allows for the creation of social relations between otherwise removed and disparate individuals and groups. The weak social ties therefore have enabled the production of a certain sense of solidarity to manifest between certain sections of these diverse groups. It is possible that the nature of bridging social capital online may facilitate the encompassing character of Islamophobic identity, as an increasingly diverse range of people and groups subsume themselves under its banner.

It is therefore perceptions of ideological similarity that can become most salient online, allowing for a sense of unity to manifest (Wright 2004). The depersonalised nature of interaction will help in producing this sense of unity as interaction occurs solely through written discourse in an impersonal manner. Oliver and Myers (2003) make reference to the manner in which political projects may spread around the globe as a consequence of the diffusion of a particular movement issue, frame, or strategy between groups that comprise a network. Diffusion can occur rapidly within weakly tied social networks. This helps explain how social movements that organise and interact online act as an efficient vehicle for the production and spread of identity within the virtual sphere, forged around a movement specific issue or a combination of issues. Bennett (2003) claims that the strengths and weaknesses of such networked projects are inseparable: being built around weak social ties between activists makes them unstable and lacking in organisational coherence, but it also enables them to reconfigure following losses and disruptions. Instability is an important factor to recognise, as these networks allow for little control over participants acting from within whose actions tend to be inherently destabilising (Postmas and Brunsting 2002).

Whilst online communities are easily constructed within virtual space, they can potentially be quite volatile constructs lending to the lack of controls regarding who joins the group. As there are such a diverse range of people involved in the EDL online community tensions may arise as people interact. Virtual communities, due to the weak ties between members, allow for easy member detachment under the duress of internal conflict: “This ‘fractal’ aspect of virtual communities allows ideological / informational fragmentation to continue almost without limit, profoundly weakening the influence of the mainstream over their members” (Radlauer 2007:72). Due to the existence of other ideologically similar communities that disgruntled members may easily join, a strong sense of belonging to the EDL community may not manifest for certain individuals, particularly those who espouse views that are not popular with the wider community. The link between weak social ties and online community instability is significant, especially when one considers the far right since it has itself often been a fragmented movement. Fragmentation is particularly notable in the present day, whereby elements within the movement have sought to move into mainstream politics, often defying ‘traditional’ far right values and those activists who regard these values as inviolable. The EDL is comprised of a wide range of groups and individuals that range from the more moderate to the extreme. Therefore, the weak social ties that unite such an organisation may also promote volatility and a tendency to intra-organisational disharmony at times. This highlights that reconciling this range of community members under one identity is likely a difficult balancing act for the organisation. As a space where such a diverse community can be produced, and indeed rapidly fragment, the internet has become an important place to study identity constructs.

## Group dynamics: Conflict theories

Whilst we have been dealing throughout this chapter in terms of group dynamics – such as in relation to the breakdown of working class communities or the production of new online communities – and the ‘extreme’ identity that typifies the far right, it is instructive to delve deeper into the literature on group formation and ‘othering’. This will explain why certain social groups may end up opposed to one another.

Conflict theory is a useful starting point as it deals with the production of hostile relations between social groups. Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT) (Sherif 1966) was one of the first theories that addressed inter-group threat. The theory examines the development of extremist social behaviour occurring at group level within the context of conflicts engendered around a competitive dynamic. A key source of inter-group hostility is the competition for access to limited resources. When two groups are in what they deem to be zero-sum competition, there is an inherent threat that one group will benefit to the detriment of the other group. This elicits negative attitudes between groups and the perception of threat. Zarate et al (2004:100) explain that “as groups compete with other groups for limited resources, they learn to view the out-group as competition, which leads to prejudice.” It was suggested by Sherif (1966) that the relative goals of different groups would determine the nature of their relationship. When goals diverged, relations would likely be amicable; however, when goals were conflicting feelings of hostility would be likely to emerge. Sherif et al (1961) conducted research that supported the theory and other studies since have established the manifestation of negative attitudes and stereotyping occurring as a consequence of perceived competition between groups (for example Langford and Ponting 1995, Zarate et al 2004). Riek, Mania and Gaertner (2006) note that RGCT can be used to explain the negative attitudes of ‘host’ society groups toward immigrant groups. An example of this scenario is given in relation to jobs, whereby immigrants may be seen to be taking a disproportionate amount of job opportunities within a specific community and resultantly acting as a threat to the economic wellbeing of local residents.

RGCT is useful for outlining the socio-political environment in which more extreme attitudes and opinions are likely to prosper. It advances our understanding of the circumstances in which boundaries between the in-group and out-group may be drawn. Appadurai (2006) highlights how the issue of resource allocation between different groups can become tied to notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and as a consequence facilitate the hardening effect on group identity. The sense of disaffection in such circumstances would, on Appadurai’s terms, be amplified for the majority or ‘native’ group, based on a perceived sense of entitlement and a feeling that the ‘other’ group had comparatively little claim to the nation’s resources. In addition, apparent economic injustice may associate the affected group with a belief they are subject to relative deprivation, which can foment the demonisation of the ‘other’ (Young 2007), giving rise to prejudicial sentiment. However, this is an economically deterministic model that only really accounts for part of the story of group conflict. It does not account for the more abstract notions of culture and identity, which are removed from the economic domain and which, due to their abstractness may invoke ostensibly more irrational responses within people toward ‘others’. It is perhaps useful, however, for understanding the inter-group dynamic that is likely to occur when, for example, a state is enduring economic hardship and resources become strained. Such an environment is especially likely to generate concerns surrounding culture and identity and facilitate the development of more extremist mind-sets.

Conflicts are therefore likely to emerge not merely around issues of resource allocation, but also based on basic needs, such as security and group recognition. Protracted Group Conflict theory (Azar 1990:12) provides an account of how social conflict occurs around these deep-seated identity issues:

Protracted social conflicts occur when communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs on the basis of their? communal identity… the deprivation is the result of a complex causal chain involving the role of the state and the pattern of international linkages.

This is a theory with an emphasis on the developing world, incorporating dynamics such as colonial legacies; however, Azar identifies four themes that determine the strength of protracted social conflicts. *Communal content* linked to issues surrounding identity groups that determine social relations – such as ethnic, religious, and cultural. This may involve the dominance of one group over others causing social discord. *Deprivation of human needs*, for example security, which one group may feel is not being satisfied in comparison to an ‘other’ group. *The state and governance* based on the quality, type and fairness of the government and its relationship with communal groups. *International linkages* relates to external influences from outside the state, which have potentially deleterious impacts on the state, linked for example to security, autonomy or resource access. Conflict between groups may be triggered by a key event, which may follow from historic fears and grievances between groups, or actions of the state, such as repression.

Whilst Azar’s theory was derived for a developing world context, the four themes have utility when applied to the underlying tensions that manifest within developed societies, such as in a British white working class context. In terms of communal content Azar noted that societies that were multi-communal were more disposed to group conflict. This returns us to the notion of ‘white backlash’ in the face of multiculturalism (Hewitt 2005) within British working class communities and to the *fear of small numbers* (Appadurai 2006), as conflicts arise over threats to the ‘native’ ethnic identity that manifest as a consequence of the presence of ‘other’ ethnic identities that are incommensurate and perceived to be threatening. In terms of the deprivation of human needs, security concerns of the working class in the late modern era have already been foregrounded as pertaining to globalisation and neoliberalism, with the ‘other’ scapegoated as the source of the insecurity. The state and its governance regime is typically blamed for having abandoned the needs of the working class, which largely regards itself as being disenfranchised at the ballot box in terms of a party that represents the needs of this social group. Finally, in terms of international linkages, if we consider perceived threats to national sovereignty associated with membership of the European Union (Baker and Seawright 1998), it is easy to interpret that this supra-national institution is a direct or indirect progenitor of working class insecurity; for example, as a consequence of its open borders immigration policy that is perceived to have brought large numbers of poor, unskilled migrants into working class communities.

As opposed to addressing strictly group-based identity processes it is important also to consider the perspective of the individual and their psycho-social relationship with the group. Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory (SIT) predicts the circumstances whereby oppositional groups, defined by out-group hostility and in-group favouritism, would be most likely to form. Tajfel and Turner argue that people’s psychological needs are appeased through simply belonging to a group, such as the family, an educational institution, or a sporting club. Such groups are an essential source of identity and membership facilitates feelings of pride and self-esteem for the individual. Members of groups effectively have the power to become the authors of their own identity and the identity of ‘other’ groups as they assign characteristics to these groups. A positive self-conception can therefore be developed through the assigning of favourable characteristics to the in-group and this can be enhanced through simultaneously assigning the out-group mal-attributes. SIT posits that three interdependent processes occur which lead to the establishment of value attributed groups. Social categorisation pigeonholes groups in order to make sense of them, and is likely to rely on stereotyping to facilitate the process. The next stage is social identification, which involves identifying with a particular group and accepting the norms of the group. Social comparison is the final process that allows for the engendering of positive in-group identity and the development of discriminatory attitudes in relation to out-groups.

Grieve and Hogg (1999) discuss the outcome of inter-group discrimination as a response to uncertainty, within the context of SIT. The authors place greater emphasis on the reduction of subjective uncertainty, rather than regarding self-esteem as the motivational force behind discrimination. It has been argued (Hogg and Abrams 1993, Hogg and Mullin 1999) that many people seek to experience the certainty that their attitudes and behaviours are socially correct. This correctness is not in reality an objectively defined construct, but is to be found through membership of a group that has a relatively similarly constituted attitudinal set and social outlook as oneself. Through the process of self-categorisation during a situation of uncertainty, the differences between different groups are maximised, whilst the heterogeneity within the group is similarly minimised. Feelings of certainty are achieved as a consequence; however, the authors argue that this may occur through the production of ethnocentric and prejudiced attitudes and perceptions.

The literature on SIT and its theoretical derivatives is useful for understanding the formation of boundaries between social groups and for explaining the process and rationale behind the production of identity, particularly a nationalistic identity. For example Druckman argues that such theories can help us to explain:

how group membership becomes entangled with the way individuals perceive themselves in relation to their world. In-group bias helps individuals organize their world and place themselves in that world. In turn, such bias enhances their feelings about themselves and those in their group. Membership in a clan, religious group, or ethnic group, becomes part of the individual's self identity and critical to a sense of self-worth… Nationalism, patriotism, and group loyalty is threatened by information that calls into question the groups to which one belongs. People learn to react based on their loyalties; they defend those groups that are important to their definition of who they are. Moreover, these loyalties differentiate whom in their environment is appropriate to support and whom to avoid. And such loyalties can foster a consensus among members that becomes self-fulfilling and difficult to change…” (1994:48-49).

These notions of making sense of the world, group bias, self-esteem and indeed the general process of identity production posited by SIT chimes with key themes linked to those presented in Young’s *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (Young 2007). Fears of being ‘cast out’ that are the product of the unsettling forces of globalisation and social change have brought about an essentialising of identity and the production of the ‘other’, which is attributed a lower status than the in-group and assigned the blame for the otherwise inexplicable feelings of precariousness that have beset in-group members. The comparative construction of the ‘deviant’ scapegoat group promotes a form of self-esteem for the in-group and through objectifying diffuse anxieties within the ‘other’ there is likely an associated reduction in existential uncertainty. This is applicable to the far right, whose socio-political base is built upon inter-group bias associated with nationalism and xenophobia. The far right could be regarded as adept at engendering and exploiting feelings of self-esteem amongst its ‘nation’ of followers. To do this it must construct a paradigm of external threat – be that for example through immigration or cultural debasement – embodied in an ‘other’. Self-esteem and certainty is achieved through the idealisation of the nation and the denigration of the perceived threat to national integrity. In reality the nation may be regarded as a proxy for the self and it is fundamentally protecting against threats to the self that are at the core of the construction of this ‘extreme’ in-group. As with most situations of inter-group conflict there is likely to be an individual or cadre, with a divisive ideology, that is influential in the construction of boundaries between groups and driving the production of ‘otherness’ in relation to the perceived out-group.

## Psychoanalysis and inner-conflicts

Psychoanalysis offers an interpretation of how certain people may be propelled to adopt an ideology that promotes inter-group disharmony in order to transcend psychological difficulties and inner-conflicts.

Among the earliest theorists regarding group dynamics was Freud (1922) whose *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego* offers a psychoanalytic account of the individual’s motivations for entering a social collective. For Freud all of the relationships that have a bearing upon the individual’s psyche are inherently social and therefore the contrast between individual and group psychology indivisible. Freud suggests that:

an individual in a group is subjected through its influence to what is often a profound alteration in his mental activity. His emotions become extraordinarily intensified, while his intellectual ability becomes markedly reduced… both processes being evidently in the direction of an approximation to the other individuals in the group; and this result can only be reached by the removal of those inhibitions upon his instincts which are peculiar to each individual, and by his resigning those expressions of his inclinations which are especially his own (online version).

As is identified by Sunstein (2009) in relation to the polarisation of opinion, the individual is inclined toward conformity and suggestibility when in a group environment. Freud (1922) found that individuals are likely to act in such a manner as a consequence of the psychological ties that have formed to engender the group. This is a libidinal tie developed as a consequence of an inversion of the hostility an individual naturally feels toward the collective, which manifests as an identification first and foremost with the leader and also the other group members, who are from that point regarded as trusted equals, sharing in the same relationship of love toward the leader. In this process, the psychic energy, or libido, that is normally invested in the ego is transferred to the leader, who is idealised and submitted to. Submission to the group in this manner ultimately allows the individual to transgress the burdens of their oppressive conscience within a group environment.

Two key sociological themes arise from Freudian theory. The first relates to the cult of the leader and the significant bearing an influential individual leader may have over a group of people, along with the psychological appeasement that is achieved through surrendering to the will of this authority. It also teaches us about the emotion of the group and the group as a tool for transgression. Indeed, “transgressors are driven by the energies of humiliation” as they seek “a reassertion of manhood and identity” (Young 2007:54), as they transcend insecurities through identifying with the group. The individual therefore becomes absorbed into an entity that is greater than the sum of its parts and which acquires an exceptional energy. It is this force that can be responsible for inspiring extraordinary behaviour amongst its cohorts, behaviour a lone individual might find problematic. Through belonging to the collective such behaviour is, however, functional, a strangely liberating act for the individual, no longer constrained by the inhibitions of the psyche or debilitating anxieties. This group dynamic has explanatory value in a fascist context. Successful fascist movements, such as the Nazis, have tended to be developed around a cult of personality, the “fusion of the leader with the crowds as a symbolic mystical dramatization of the nation's unity, achieved through its supreme actor” (Gentile 1990:236). It follows that if a leader is able to garner significant and widespread public appeal constructed around a fascistic mind-set, the behaviour of members of this group will potentially be socially destructive. Identification with Hitler encouraged the most malign behaviour from ‘ordinary’ German citizens. It is interesting to note that following the removal of Hitler from power and the effective obliteration of his cult, identification of the masses with Hitler began to subside and some commentators have argued that this was followed by a pervasive guilt that caught hold of German society over its wrongdoing, as there was a realisation of what they had done as a collective (Rensmann 2004).

Psychoanalytic theory has also been applied as a tool to understand prejudicial thought and ‘othering’ at the level of the individual. A pioneering piece of research into this phenomenon was conducted by Adorno et al (1950) and as its title, *The Authoritarian Personality* suggests, it examined the development of an authoritarian mind-set. It is argued by the authors that this occurs in childhood as a consequence of the punitive and arbitrary punishment of a child by its parents. The child, denied any measure of dissention and confronted with the psychological conflict of hating the persons it most loves, is forced to repress any feelings of negativity toward the parent, in order to reduce anxiety and provide a (false) sense of mental stability. This is at the core of the authoritarian’s affliction upon reaching adulthood, driving its social attitudes. According to Adorno and his colleagues, an irrational fixation with aggression and submission manifests and overawes the individual’s cognitive processes.

The authoritarian looks up to authority with admiration, and down at minority groups with contempt, a manifestation of the repressed rage of childhood. Subconsciously it deems authority the bearer of essential security, whilst simultaneously detesting the conformity it demands – this is metaphorical of its childhood turmoil. Feelings of powerlessness and inferiority are externalised and projected upon marginal groups in society, along with retributive aggression for the social problems for which out-groups are perceived to be responsible. The scapegoating of such groups is a cognitively expedient manner of displacing repressed aggressive impulses. The authoritarian relies on self-glorification and a feeling of moral excellence to defend the ego from the prospective anxiety of reality, through grandiose thoughts. The authoritarian has a love of conventionality and tradition, associated with the group to which they belong. Furthermore, an outlet of aggression is offered in the form of any person or group not in strict adherence to these conventions, minority groups in particular.

Aside from the reductionist premise of the production of an authoritarian personality, which is based on a child’s arbitrarily violent upbringing by its father, *The Authoritarian Personality* underlines some interesting personality traits of individuals drawn to ‘extreme’ right wing ideology. The most prominent of which being the tendency to think in stereotypes and fixed categories that essentialises the characteristics of the ‘other’; as well as a ‘totalist’ ideology that is impervious to alternative information that may challenge the stereotyped worldview (Hagtvet 1994). Added to this, the tendency for self-glorification in order to transcend inner conflicts is also a defence likely used by supporters of far right organisations and indeed far right organisations offer the nation as a glorified construct that facilitates this transcendence. It could be that individuals with insecurities are drawn to far right organisations based on the norms, or conventions, that such groups offer. The prejudicial worldview that defines such organisations is suited to the authoritarian’s personality and acts as a vehicle for the externalisation of insecurities that the individual has become disposed to defending their ego from.

Rohter (1969) facilitates our understanding of the significance of externalisation in reference to the opinions and attitudes of individuals with an extreme right political persuasion. He addresses the role of communist conspiracy theories, which serve the psychological appeasement of ‘extrapunitiveness’, whereby inner aggression is directed outward at the environment. Thinking in a stereotypical manner is cognitively expedient for the rightist, the pre-defined rightist ideology determining the dynamics of thought for those who subscribe to its doctrine. This provides a vehicle for the psychological relief of inner anxieties and frustrations. Frustration and anxiety may be a consequence of, for example, an individual’s perceived downward social mobility occurring as a consequence of the upward mobility of ‘other’ groups in society, such as immigrants. Rohter (1969:231-232) outlines the concept of frustration-aggression displacement:

Frustration can be externalised by displacing hostility against some convenient target. Such behaviour, in general, reflects the personality trait ‘extrapunitiveness’. When confronted by frustrating situations, individuals who employ this mechanism typically react: 1) by manifesting anger; 2) by making judgments which blame others or the outer world for their personal difficulties; and 3) by directing aggression outward, against their environment.

Rohter claims that communism is not the actual cause of concern for the extreme rightist, but that it is merely a symbol of their frustrations. It is interesting to consider how the symbol of frustration and aggression has changed in the contemporary era. This issue is considered in Adam Curtis’s (2004) work on *The power of nightmares* which addresses the politics of fear. It addresses how the American government in the Cold War era had relied on constructing, to a large extent illusory, fears around the threat to Western society posed by Communism. The rationale of the government was to unite the American nation against this perceived threat, offering itself as protector of its people. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union a new enemy was required and the focus switched to Islamic terrorism, with al Qaeda constructed as the contemporary threat to the West. The international media is identified by Curtis as playing a key role in the strategy of the government. This highlights exactly how symbols of fear and distrust may be framed in a ‘top-down’ fashion by government, via the media. In a manner it helps legitimate far right ‘othering’ ideology as the figure of hate is broadened out from being merely a terrorist strand of Islam to being the religion in general and consequently all of its followers. As Rohter (1969) identifies, the figure of hate becomes an object for individuals to displace anger onto. Whilst this can occur at an individual level, a far right organisation acts as a vehicle for the collective displacement of anger; a kind of group therapy for the troubled and the dispossessed seeking an objectified outlet for their inner-turmoil.

## Death and group dynamics

There are theories that probe the relationship between fears regarding death (or mortality salience) and the creation of cultural groups. These theories usefully synthesise culture and psychoanalysis to advance an understanding of how fear of death may consolidate the in-group and lead to hateful attitudes toward groups that do not conform to the cultural norms and values of one’s own idealised culture.

Ernest Becker was the founder of this theoretical strand. In *The denial of death* Becker (1973) addresses the rationale behind the development of culture and claims it is the product of a fear of death that all humans are psychologically disposed to endure. For Becker (1973:49) the fear of death is tied to a fear of the uncertainty of life, as they face the “terror of the world, the feeling of overwhelming awe, wonder and fear in the face of creation.” In order to repress these anxieties it is claimed that humans have socially constructed culture as a means to occupy their lives. Culture exists as an adjunct of the self, and the individual therefore derives self-worth through cultural existence. Through participation in, and preoccupation with, culture the individual is able to avoid the invasion of fear into their consciousness.

Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski (2000), who are the key proponents of the related area of Terror Management Theory (TMT), explain that the theory was developed on the back of Becker’s theoretical framework of the fear of death and self-preservation. TMT has been concerned with understanding the psychological foundations of culture as well as addressing the nature and function of self-esteem. Through identifying with a social group the individual may engage in an entity that transcends mortality, projecting themselves beyond their own death (Castano et al 2002). The group is transcendental; a metaphysical entity larger than the sum of its parts and unconnected to notions of mortality. TMT integrates an interesting notion into Becker’s work, in that individuals who pose a threat to self-esteem or who adhere to inconsistent worldviews relative to oneself can have a destabilising and anxiety inducing effect. In order to counter this potentiality the threatened individual relies on the psychological defence of prejudiced attitudes and opinions of the ‘other’ and the ‘other’s’ worldview. In the most extreme cases violence and even genocide may result in order to protect self-esteem and sanctity of the worldview.

Rosenblatt et al (1989), however, posit that the individual, by maintaining the two components of his or her cultural anxiety buffer – the defence of their worldview and their self-esteem – are shielded from the intense anxiety or terror that is directly linked to an awareness of vulnerability or mortality. In effect, the buffer acts as a device for the continual repression of existential terror: “Thus we propose that terror management needs constantly guide behaviour, but that individuals are not necessarily consciously concerned with their own deaths on a day-today basis” (Rosenblatt et al 1989:688). This demonstrates that the individual need not experience direct cognition of the implications of mortality threats, but they may be disguised as other affects and anxieties. Additionally Castano et al argue that: “social identities rooted in group membership help to deal with the fear of annihilation, that is the loss of identity, rather than a more literal fear of death” (2002:140). With self-esteem and worldviews reinforced within the group to which one belongs, the group is inextricably tied to one’s sense of self and therefore maintaining the integrity of the group identity becomes a source of anxiety. ‘Other’ groups may therefore easily be identified as potential threats to group integrity maintenance.

This undoubtedly has a strong association with ‘far right’ ideology that seeks to demonise groups that are perceived not to conform to the values of the nation. Within this construct terrorism offers the ultimate threat to self-preservation, whilst Muslim culture is likely to be regarded as a destabilising threat to a ‘host’ culture and, by implication, a threat to the integrity of the ‘self’ of the ‘host’ culture’s individual members. Extreme attitudes and opinions of the Muslim ‘other’ and the consolidation of group boundaries would be a likely response in order to defend the self-concept of the individual and the purity of the cultural construct. An important question that arises from TMT in this regard is why humans would seek to actively enable the construction of a culture of fear, which incorporates the perception of constant destabilising threats to self-preservation and constant reminders of the prospect of death. In this regard this type of culture is therefore far from an idealised construct, as it invokes ubiquitous perceptions of mortality, which act to maximise anxiety levels, as opposed to rationalise such perceptions in another, less troubling context.

## Conclusion

In helping to understand the present it is informative to assess the past and a useful starting point is the rise to prominence of fascism in Europe following the First World War. This was a period defined by identity crisis for the German people, infused with economic crisis. The unfortunate outcome of this was the construction of a Jewish ‘other’, upon which the social, political and economic ills of the nation could be projected in outpourings of hate. The production of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was thus a source of empowerment and self-esteem for the in-group and enabled the transcendence of anxieties that may have manifested at an individual or collective level. Fascist ideology appeared as a vehicle for the production of disturbing attitudes and behaviour toward the ‘other’, providing a rationalising narrative for the creation of a perverse German identity construct that acquired a threatening essence. The German experience demonstrates the role of narratives, in refashioning identity into a hardened construct that is hostile to another ethnic group. In this case a dominant narrative emerged that produced a predatory identity (Appadurai 2006) that rationalised the extermination of the Jews. Psychoanalytic theory can help us understand how the salience of this German nationalistic identity enabled German nationals to condone atrocious acts against Jews, as individuals were subsumed into the national collective as an act of transgression that enabled them to overcome inner-conflicts and feelings of national humiliation associated with the fallout from the First World War. The role of the scapegoat is pertinent in this regard as it demonstrates how the ‘other’ may be defined in a troubling way as a comparative construct in relation to idealised notions of the nation and the self. In the present day the internet is a powerful tool that enables transgression to occur as it provides a unique space where the standard norms and social inhibitors that regulate face-to-face interpersonal interaction do not necessarily apply, especially within far right online networking communities, which may have a tendency toward extremeness.

Whilst Britain is not similarly historically embedded in a fascist past as was Germany, it has witnessed the growth in prominence of its own far right party, the BNP. This has to an extent been a 21st Century phenomenon, aided by the BNP’s redefinition of itself from a racist and violent street based neo-fascist organisation to one that was concerned with a national populist agenda. The BNP successfully exploited the post-political insecurities and disaffection of white working class communities to foment a ‘white backlash’ (Hewitt 2005), based on perceptions of political disenfranchisement, and to aid in the antagonistic construction of a Muslim ‘other’. This was to an extent engendered around moments of crisis, such as 9/11 and community riots, which had generated increased inter-ethnic tensions. The BNP added to the fashioning of boundaries between whites and ‘Asians’ through grassroots campaigning, with a narrative that defined the ‘other’ as a ‘risky’ presence and a threat to resources. This strategy resulted in increased support for the BNP within white working class areas with high ‘Asian’ populations and the appeal of far right ideology to some within these social groups. This raises questions regarding the tendency for some members of white working class communities to embrace far right politics.

A closer examination of these communities today offers a story of decline as a consequence of deindustrialisation. Identity attached to the group and the community has undoubtedly been affected as a result, be that through fragmentation or demoralisation. In addition to the effects of neoliberalism, immigration into some working class communities may have facilitated in their decline and to the weakening of white working class identity. Conflict theories provide an indication of various important dynamics that can stoke up inter-ethnic tensions, based on conflicts that manifest in relation to competition for resources, be they economic or socio-political resources. In effect, as the white working class has experienced disenfranchisement and a weakening of its status as a group in British society it has become concerned with its social position relative to migrant groups and has in particular become sensitive to how its needs are addressed by government relative to these other communities. The far right exploits and amplifies these inter-ethnic conflicts in order to engage with and enrage local populations of the white working class.

Alongside the story of community decline and the unravelling of traditional identity bases is an alternate story of the ascendancy of new forms of networked communities online. The internet has therefore acted as a platform for the production of identity and group formation. Instead of shared proximity, be that within the local community or at work, a definitive strand of online community is likely to be shared interest. The internet, networking sites in particular, offers to its users a liminal space with a unique set of norms, as well as providing a largely disembodied and depersonalised interactive experience with like-minded individuals. It is a space where the disenfranchised and disaffected may share their insecurities and attempt to resist or resolve them within a collective of like-minded cohorts. This environment has been a host to the far right movement, where groups are able to form in order to promulgate their ideology and therefore produce identity. In a situation of post-politics, the internet and social networks in particular act as a space where supporters of the far right can create communities of interest that function to construct and protect their own worldview – based on potentially extreme forms of English nationalism – and to define the worldview of the ‘other’ as incommensurate with and a fundamental threat to the English nation. At a deeper level the protection of this worldview and notions of protecting ‘English culture’ is symbolic for protecting the self from the ultimate threat of mortality. Ironically mortality salience within society will remain at an extremely high level when biopolitics is exercised as a key political tool by the government and its citizens are subjected to a ubiquitous narrative that constructs the social world as being inherently threatening. This only feeds into far right narratives of the ‘other’ and simultaneously makes citizens less trusting of the members of their physical communities, as well as more acquiescent to far right communities that can be accessed from the privacy (and seeming safety) of their own homes.

# 3/Design and methodology

Examining questions of globalisation, identity formation and politically extreme groups requires an approach capable of crossing these complex spatial and conceptual boundaries. This chapter details the methodological choices and elements of design incorporated into the study in order to make these connections. The predominant approach taken here was one of a virtual ethnography and so the choices and epistemological questions associated with this approach are made along with a defence of the approach in more general terms. The chapter is structured as follows: there will be an articulation of the ontological and epistemological questions relating to researching the issues at hand – what counts as knowledge here and what philosophical issues were salient when designing the study. There will be an account of virtual ethnography and some of the issues surrounding using this approach. The chapter will then focus on how the data analysis was carried on before outlining some of the key ethical issues and problems that were confronted along the way.

The broad focus of the research was to explore the non-corporeal elements of the English Defence League and, by doing so, examine the intersecting forces of new technology (social networking), social conditions (deindustrialisation and socio-political alienation) and the form of political extremism that emerges under these conditions. A major element of the research was a consideration of the links between stereotypes of Muslim identity that have arisen in particular under the conditions of the war on terror and broader questions about the link between global and local attachments among insecure and highly masculine elements of the class structure. In short, a methodological approach had to be devised that was capable of connecting these disparate processes and generate an understanding of the virtual content of politically extreme groups is propelled by, and itself feeds, forms of identity and communication that bridge multiple scales and social processes. A key objective here was the intention of developing an understanding of the far right organisation itself and its support base within the virtual sphere. The convergence of the destabilising products and processes of globalisation and neoliberalism with a maligned religion and the production of nationalistic fervour were seen as central aspects of this identity.

## Philosophical framework

In order to understand ‘reality’ within the context of this study an interpretativist framework was used. Interpretivism does not consider that a single objective reality exists and that this reality is separate from the researcher. Interpretivists believe reality is in essence mental and perceived (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). In this respect a social constructionist perspective is invoked in which reality does not exist outside of its social construction via human interaction. The approach is valued for enabling an exploration of the uniqueness of a particular social phenomenon through a wide-scoping exploration of the object and through this generating significant contextual depth (Myers 1997).

The data collected for this study was acquired from online networking sites and was largely comprised of interactions between human subjects. The focus of the research was to use the data to provide an interpretation of the identity that was collectively being produced through these interactions, to uncover prevailing security concerns that were experienced by EDL supporters and to explore the relationship between the global and the local in the lives of EDL supporters. As a consequence of the unpredictable character of the interactions between the users of the networking sites it is impossible to assume that there is one objective and measurable understanding of this phenomenon, as would be suggested by a positivist approach (Levin 1988). This ‘reality’ must therefore be seen as being socially constructed by the networking site users. The ontological position of the study is therefore that knowledge is socially constructed (Crotty 1988). This raises the central question of how can we go about uncovering and interpreting this specific source of knowledge methodologically?

Interpretivism is associated with qualitative research and the rich, detailed accounts of phenomena that qualitative researchers seek to develop. Being rooted in the anthropological discipline (Darabont 2010), interpretivism lends itself to an ethnographic approach, which would be the most appropriate means to observe this reality from an interpretive analysis of discourse collected from networking sites. Ethnography is concerned with defining the systems of meaning that prevail within cultural groups. These systems of meaning constituted a source of knowledge within the EDL online community that the research study was concerned with interpreting. The systems of meaning were constructed around salient dynamics in the lifeworlds of community members. For example, as the EDL community was a predominantly working class construct the systems of meaning that define it were engendered around the dynamics of the social, political and economic status of community members. Analysis of the discourse of networking site users was used to extract and interpret these value-laden systems of meaning and to ultimately offer an account of reality as constructed by this group. Notions such as social alienation and political disenfranchisement were important in helping to understand the worldview of EDL supporters, based on their working class association and the low status of this social category.

The disembodied nature of interaction within virtual space raised further questions regarding how the systems of meaning were constructed within this particular arena and the extent to which the interpretation of interactions between EDL supporters online might differ from those in an offline context. Paech (2009) highlights the proposition that virtual engagement offers anonymity to participants that is not possible offline and that this could be considered to artificialise interactions in an ‘unreal’ environment, thus diminishing the truth. From a research perspective this fed into an interest with regard to the nature of the EDL’s identity constructions within the networking sites as users may be prone to, for example, misrepresent themselves and their experiences within the discourse they share. Paech (2009), however, contends that it is possibly more likely that the disembodied and anonymous virtual environment would increase the openness and honesty of the users who interact within this space. Based on this account it is clear that the online interactions of EDL supporters may well constitute a unique representation of reality and the data collected from the networking sites would be hugely insightful for interpreting the social existence of these people as well as the identity they collectively produce within virtual space. It follows that a type of virtual ethnography would be the most appropriate methodological tool to interpret meaning from this EDL community construct. Virtual ethnography is simply an adaptation to the standard ethnographic study that is conducted within cyberspace (Ducheneaut, Yee and Bellotti 2010), the dynamics of which will be explored in the following section.

A central tenet of ethnography is the scope afforded to the researcher in interpreting the social situation they are researching and in analysing the data that has been collected. As a researcher it is always going to be difficult not to define the phenomenon one is researching in accordance with one’s own values and thus distort the representation of reality that has been interpreted through the research. Whilst researcher bias is an ethical issue (and is addressed in the ethics section below), it is also an ontological and epistemological issue as “If the researcher holds certain ontological positions or assumptions, these may influence the epistemological choices or conclusions drawn” (Flowers 2009:2). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) deny the importance of subjectivity in relation to the research approach as long as the researcher remains reflexive and self-aware of potential biases. It must be accepted that interpretation of the data was to an extent imbued with the subjective logic of the researcher and therefore this logic has had to be accounted for with evidence and justified throughout this written account of the research in order to legitimise the analytical approach.

In terms of the site of study the research was conducted within the EDL’s networking sites. From its origination as a street-based social movement in 2009, the EDL came to appropriate Facebook as a means of command and control from the central administration, but also as a tool to enable members to interact and discuss pertinent socio-political issues. In addition to Facebook, the EDL has its own forum attached to the central website. The organisation, as of late 2011 has reinstated its Twitter presence. Having in previous years used Twitter to communicate, at some point, it is unclear when, the EDL apparently decided to discontinue using the platform due to apparent subversion from anti-fascist elements. This decision for some reason was reversed and Twitter is once again being used. The EDL Facebook page and the forum were selected as sites where interactions may be monitored online and data could be quickly collected. Twitter was not adopted largely due to the fact it was not active at the time when data collection had commenced, but also it was decided not to incorporate Twitter at a later stage as the data available for collection, in the form of ‘Tweets’, was of limited value and depth due to the constrained size of these messages. Therefore a combination of Facebook and the EDL Forum networking platforms – both of which allow for a richer and inter-personal dynamic form of discourse generation to occur – was decided upon with regard to data collection. With these two networking sites effectively being the arena where the overall bulk of EDL supporter interaction occurs this is duly where the research was focused.

The study population was self-selecting. It was the cohort of EDL supporters active within the networking sites when data was collected that became the focus of attention and the source of raw data. It is difficult to specify a particular demographic profile for what was potentially a heterogeneous mix of social groups that comprise the EDL. In relation to demographics, a survey conducted by Bartlett and Littler (2011) on Facebook of 1,295 EDL sympathisers and supporters that used the platform. It found that 28 per cent of supporters were over 30 and 30 per cent were educated to university or college level. Of the sample, 81 per cent were male. Through a somewhat more crude interpretation of the shaven heads of those that attend events and the strong local accents of these activists, it is suggestive of a gathering of members of lower socio-economic groups. This is, however, merely an observation and it is difficult to tell the extent to which supporters at events also translated to the online support base, although it was very likely many did use the networking sites to acquire information regarding upcoming events and to share their experiences regarding events. This is an assertion supported by some of the data collected which involved supporters either anticipating upcoming events or relating to experiences following events. An important point to make, however, is that data analysis of user discourse within the networking sites identified a strong working class narrative, which indicated there was a significant cohort of working class supporters active online and it was this social group upon which the study fixated.

## Virtual ethnography

The study employed a virtual ethnographic approach in order to study the EDL online community and the interactions of the members of this community. This section examines important aspects of virtual ethnography and why this kind of approach was appropriate for the study.

Virtual ethnography is an extension of standard ethnographic approaches as applied to social existence on the internet. It attempts:

to find a way of taking seriously, as a sociological phenomenon, the kinds of things people did on the internet… We can use ethnography to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful (Hine 2004:1).

Unlike traditional ethnographies that take place in physical settings, and which to a large extent are focused on interpreting meaning from face-to-face interactions and through the exploration of tangible cultural artefacts, virtual ethnography has cyberspace as its research site. The depersonalised and disembodied interactions between individuals from potentially disparate locations are its primary focus (Ducheneaut, Yee and Bellotti 2010). An overriding issue that had to initially be addressed was deciphering whether the methodological approach to this study conformed entirely to that of a virtual ethnography. It has been suggested that studies that focus only on online space as the site of investigation and which do not in addition probe real life field sites to collect data should not be referred to as ethnographies as such (Wittel 2000). This paradigm therefore dictates that virtual ethnography requires a physical dimension, otherwise it is little other than a type of discourse analysis (Wittel 2000).

According to Kozinets (1999) virtual ethnography requires a combination of observation and participation. Since as a researcher I was not intending to spend significant amounts of time within the EDL online community actually observing in real-time the interactions between EDL supporters, and also I was not concerned with becoming an active participant within the community this, in addition to Wittel’s (2000) contentions regarding the need for a physical dimension to virtual ethnography, invoked a sense of ambiguity as to whether the approach I had adopted was exactly ethnographic. Hine suggests, however, that virtual ethnography “is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion… an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself” (Hine 2004:2). The idea that virtual ethnography can be reflexive in relation to the demands of the research setting indicates that it can take many forms and therefore the framework for this study could be incorporated into the category of virtual ethnography. Hine (2004) refers to “intermittent engagement” with the research object and, as will be made clear in the research design section below, engagement was fairly intermittent as data was collected once a week. Hine’s contextualisation, however, demonstrated that the virtual ethnographic approach could be wide ranging and tailored to the nature of the study and that it was indeed appropriate to relate to this particular study as a virtual ethnography.

Androutsopoulos (2008) identifies two types of virtual ethnography. The first type deals with the internet in everyday life and asks how communication technology is integrated into the culture of a particular community using an on and offline context. The second type is concerned with everyday life within online space and it theorises the internet as a site where culture and community are constructed. Whilst this study was conducted explicitly online and it is an exploration of a subcultural community construct within virtual space, it also asks questions of the local existence of EDL supporters within working class communities. It theorises the online presence of these individuals and the virtual community that they collectively produce as an outcome of social, political and economic forces that are having a deleterious effect upon the lives of these people and engendering insecurities, which propel them to engage with the far right online. Therefore, everyday life within this virtual community was strongly associated with the offline environment to which EDL supporters were exposed. Much of the discourse of the research population was focused on their local lives and issues occurring in the real world. It would be theoretically unsound to relate to this as an ethnography only of an abstract online world, when this world was evidently structured by offline dynamics and as a result the two realms were not easily differentiable. As Campbell found when conducting a virtual ethnography into online skinhead newsgroups, the internet is “a space which overlaps with other territories (online and offline spaces), which allows for the (re)constitution of identity” (2006:274). It follows that to properly come to terms with the identity of EDL supporters the ethnography had to interpret the relationship between the online and offline spaces that they inhabited.

Whilst virtual ethnography can to a large extent be regarded as an adaptation of traditional ethnography within online space, Ducheneaut, Yee and Bellotti (2010) highlight how this does not involve a direct transfer of ethnographic practices to the digital realm. There are two important logistical challenges that accompany virtual ethnography that differ from a standard ethnography. *Coverage* is affected based on the fact that the internet effectively eliminates the constraints placed on travel that might have a bearing on a standard ethnography and which may have time and expense implications if a researcher had to travel a great distance to conduct their research. The internet allows for immediate access to cultural groups, which being formed in cyberspace are non-geographical entities (Johns, Chen and Hall 2004). It is this that makes them effectively global in scope and they are structured around ideology, as was the case with the EDL’s social networking community, the membership of which was by no means limited to English nationals. As a researcher I was able to access this community from my own front room. *Generalisability* was another important issue highlighted by Ducheneaut, Yee and Bellotti (2010). In this regard it is argued that since the virtual realm is accessible to such a wide demographic group it is thus difficult to do a traditional ethnographic study of an entire community and it is more fruitful to focus a virtual ethnography on a specific demographic group within the community. This was a key concern as there were clearly other demographic groups in addition to the working class who were active within the EDL’s online community, which meant it was necessary to focus on the voices that told a working class story and indeed this story was a dominant narrative within the networking sites.

## The data collection process

Data collection involves gathering information that is to be used to address the research aims. In this section I will provide a detailed account of the process undertaken to collect data from the EDL’s networking sites, including any notable issues that were encountered during the data collection period.

It has been identified that social networking sites may provide in-depth autobiographical accounts of research populations (Murthy 2008). It is such accounts that offer a wealth of data to be mined. This data is in the form of discourse, or more appropriately ‘cybernarratives’ (Hughey 2008), that constitute discussion threads. It is important to emphasise that the two EDL networking sites represented two somewhat different types of platform. Aside from the more dynamic nature of interaction on Facebook and that it had a larger number of users, most likely linked to its easy accessibility via smartphone, in data collection terms it had a structurally different interface to the EDL Forum. On Facebook individual discussion threads were constructed as a continuous, vertical master thread, which scrolls down the screen. Threads, or status updates, were only initiated from the centre, via an EDL administrator, whose role was also to monitor the discussion that followed, as EDL supporters would respond to the status update and interact with one another. With regard to the Forum, the thread topic page was separate from the individual threads and merely listed each thread and a few other details, such as the name of the poster and the number of overall posts. On this platform EDL supporters were free to initiate their own discussions, although the nature of the thread and the discussions were again monitored by an administrator. In order to access a thread it has to be selected from this topic page and it will be displayed on its own page. Therefore, the approach to actually capturing the data was slightly different between the two platforms.

Mann, Sutton and Tuffin (2003) highlight the impracticalities of reading and assessing every single message posted within a networking site, in relation to their study of white racist online newsgroups. They therefore focused only on the threads that had subject headings that appeared relevant to their research. In a similar manner, for this study criteria were established from the outset in order to define a general rule for selecting appropriate threads to capture. Most importantly the thread must have related to one of the research aims. In addition, it was felt that a further filtering mechanism was required in order to eliminate threads that had generated only a low level volume of interaction and therefore lacked the requisite depth for meaningful analysis. A threshold of six responses was set, at and beyond which a thread would be captured, as long as it also related to the research aims. This threshold, though an arbitrary protocol, was necessary to allow data capture to be practical. There was one caveat in that if a post fell below the threshold, but it was felt that it was of too high a value to omit, then the post was still captured.

In relation to the method of actually capturing threads, this process was influenced by data analysis and, in particular, the software package Atlas.ti, which was to be used to conduct the core of analysis. In order that threads could be stored in one, easily accessible location, a spreadsheet was created, which would allow for an individual worksheet to be used to store one week’s threads taken from one of the platforms. For each week there was two new worksheets created. Each thread that appeared to be relevant was highlighted within the particular platform, copied and then pasted directly into the worksheet. This process was slightly more efficient with Facebook as it was not necessary to scroll between screens in order to view a thread, as was a requirement with the Forum. Any links that were displayed on Facebook were also copied straight over to the spreadsheet, whilst with the Forum the link was not always displayed in its entirety and, therefore, any important links had to be copied and pasted into the spreadsheet separately. In instances where a YouTube video had been embedded into a thread it was necessary to copy the link for the original video and paste it into the worksheet, which was possible by right clicking on the embedded video and selecting the “copy URL” option (this applied to both platforms).

Data was collected over a twelve month period in order to capture a sufficient amount of networking activity from the research population. It was not the intention that the full twelve month period would be subjected to rigorous data analysis; however, this ensured any significant material attributed to high profile events during this extensive timeframe would be available to access at a later point. A continuous period of six months of collected data would be subjected to data analysis, with the additional six months data available to dip into if necessary. It was decided at the data analysis stage that there was enough good quality data captured within the first six months phase of data collection so as not to require using any further material from the following six months.

Data capture occurred from both sites on a once weekly basis. It was possible just to scroll down the Facebook thread in order to view a full week of interaction. Similarly with the Forum, the threads were dated and it was uncomplicated to trawl back through the week. Collecting the data once a week did, admittedly, make me in a strange way feel slightly withdrawn from the data source that was being generated by EDL supporters, more so in terms of Facebook which promoted a more dynamic type of interaction. It would have been farcical, however, to spend large chunks of time sat observing conversations unfold on Facebook merely in order that I was able to engender a psychologically appeasing attachment – as an ‘insider’ – to the data that I was collecting. This highlights the curious world that networking sites inhabit: their disembodied and depersonalised nature can have the strange effect of making the researcher feel dissociated from the object of study while, on a practical level, the asynchronous manner of interaction can make for conversations that sprawl over periods of days and therefore precludes any realistic prospect of the researcher being present for its duration.

Another significant issue with this phase of data collection was the subversive acts of ‘hacktivists’. Hacktivism is effectively the meeting place of computer hackers and political activism, whereby hackers are acting in accordance with a political objective (Denning 2001). In this case, hacktivists have focused their efforts on the EDL website (which contains the Forum) as well as the Facebook page. In relation to the central website, throughout the period of data collection it was subject to several Denial of Service (DoS) attacks, whereby:

a malicious user exploits the connectivity of the Internet to cripple the services offered by a victim site, often simply by ﬂooding a victim with many requests. A DoS attack can be either a single-source attack, originating at only one host, or a multi-source, where multiple hosts coordinate to ﬂood the victim with a barrage of attack packets” (Hussain, Heidemann and Papadopoulos 2003:1).

The EDL website server, and therefore Forum access, was down for several days at a time on a number of occasions due to DoS attacks in the form of hacktivist swarming. At these times data collection could not take place until the attack subsided. Whilst this frustrated attempts to expeditiously collect data and had the effect of halting the production of threads as EDL supporters were unable to use the platform, it did not have any significant impact on the data collection process.

An alternative scenario unfolded on Facebook with several instances where the EDL Facebook page was hacked and taken over by hacktivists. The first time this occurred the hacktivists maintained the page and began posting threads that mocked the EDL. At the time of writing this page is still being used in this manner, which is likely very confusing to unwitting users of the page. The EDL were forced to create a new Facebook page, from scratch, with a new web address. This caused serious damage to the organisation as supporters clearly had difficulty finding the new page. Then within a week or so the exact same situation occurred, with a further hacktivist strike closing the new page down. Once again the damage done was stark and for several weeks the number of postings over a weekly period was at an astonishingly low level as supporters were clearly not getting back on board. The outcome of this for data collection was a more limited supply of discourse being captured for a period of four weeks.

On a personal level I began questioning whether these attacks had administered a fatal blow to an organisation that depended so heavily on Facebook in order to function. A period of stability soon followed during which there were no more attacks. There was over this period slow growth in the density of posts. The whole process was in the end rather interesting to observe as the organisation had seemed so helpless in the face of the cyber-attacks. A national demonstration that occurred not long after the attacks generated a boost to the support base using the platform; however, ironically it was a Channel 4 Dispatches documentary on the EDL that produced a notable surge in usage of the Facebook page. The oxygen of publicity had unequivocally revived the organisation and, perversely, enhanced the quality of the data being collected. It was perverse to the extent that this also felt like a much needed shot in the arm for my research.

## Documentary and video analysis of online interaction

The method designed to study the online world of the EDL was *documentary and video analysis of online interaction*. This is a type of content analysis approach that incorporates analysing large amounts of textual data as well as analysing the content of video and audio items. The method was newly developed for the present study due to the uniqueness of the research design in collecting and analysing data from networking sites. As has been noted, there are fundamentally two different aspects to the methodology; one that addresses documentary analysis of discourse, another that deals with analysis of video and audio material. In terms of discourse, this was primarily in the form of interaction between EDL members, which was subsequently copied into word documents for analysis. A researcher can essentially look back in time at discussion threads that are contained within the networking sites. This represented a rich source of raw data that could be cherry picked according to the needs of the study. The networking sites therefore offered a wealth of effectively already transcribed data (Wood, Griffiths and Eatough 2004), which once transferred to a Word document was immediately primed for analysis using Atlas.ti.

Also, as part of a standard documentary analysis approach, the method allowed for the analysis of media articles, websites and even some official reports that were shared by EDL members within the two networking sites. This was an important aspect because the sharing of knowledge and information in this manner was a key component of EDL behaviour online and the production of identity. Excluding this wider analysis would have inhibited the development of a holistic account of interaction within the online environment. For example, analysis of media articles from right of centre mass media brands, such as the *Daily Mail*, a highly popular source of information within the networking sites, helped to uncover a tacit relationship between EDL supporters and the anti-immigration worldview of this particular newspaper.

In terms of analysing video footage, similar to the sharing of media articles, EDL supporters would routinely share links to YouTube videos, or even embed such videos into threads. Integrating visual data into the study was an innovative methodological enhancement, rather than the study adopting a one dimensional focus on the textual data (Schrooten 2010). The method allowed for these videos to be analysed and assimilated into the wider analysis of discourse, again to acquire as full an interpretation of interaction as possible. Lange (2008:368) in a study into social networking on YouTube notes that the videos posted can “represent an emotional connecting point.” It follows that this method allowed for an exploration of the emotion generated through the sharing of YouTube videos.

An alternative approach to address the research aims would have been to conduct an online participant observation, which would have included the active participation of the researcher in discussions with EDL supporters. This would likely have been conducted with the identity of the researcher disclosed, with the intention that networking site discussions could be shaped by researcher intervention. However, there were concerns in relation to researcher effects on the discourse that was produced if intervention was to be adopted. Previous online ethnographic research (Paccagnella 1997, Blevins and Holt 2009, Sanders 2005) has attested that a hands-off approach is more appropriate, in order that the nature of interaction remains natural and unfettered from any potentially distorting biases linked to the study. It was also highly unrealistic to expect that I would be allowed by the EDL administration to roam freely in the networking sites in my capacity as a researcher.

The next option considered was to go for an online covert, invisible, non-participatory observation (see Pollock 2009). This would have engendered a ‘lurking’ approach within the SNS, whereby the researcher acts as a passive observer in a chat room or discussion group (Griffiths and Whitty 2010). Observation would have been conducted covertly and thus data would remain untainted by any researcher effects. After consideration, however, as was noted earlier it was felt that this approach was impractical, to the extent that it would require spending large amounts of time observing asynchronous conversations and interactions. No value would have been added to the study through doing this, as opposed to collecting the data in bulk once per week.

## Data analysis

In order to address the specific research aims the data that had been collected from the networking sites was analysed. This section outlines the process undertaken to conduct this analysis, including the software programme Atlas.ti that was used to assist in this process.

Spencer, Ritchie, and O’Connor (2003) identify that there are two key stages to data analysis: managing data and making sense of evidence. To an extent the first stage, managing data, began during data collection; for example, when data was selectively copied from the networking sites into a spread sheet. Furthermore, with regard to making sense of evidence, it is undeniable that analytical interpretation was in track whilst collecting data from the sites as the discourse threads had to be appropriately selected, which inevitably initiated analytical thought processes. It is therefore important to highlight that the analytical process was ubiquitous to the implementation of the study. This was important to the extent it promoted from the outset the continuous generation of ideas in relation to the data being collected – ideas and theories that could be challenged or developed later on in the analytical process.

The data collected from the two networking sites was transferred from the spreadsheet to Microsoft Word documents, as a precursor to uploading these documents to Atlas.ti, the software package used to perform the data analysis. A system of coding was devised in order to categorise the data in a robust way. It was acknowledged when designing this method that inductive (generating codes and theories from the data collected) and deductive (incorporating predetermined codes and theories into the analysis) systems of categorisation need not be mutually exclusive (Schilling 2006) and it was thus the case that both inductive and deductive logic was incorporated into the process. This meant that theories could emerge from the data and that pre-existing theories could be tested and grounded in the data. The hybrid approach effectively ensured no stone was left unturned when seeking to provide a rich evidence base of data, in respect of the research aims, which was made easily accessible via the Atlas.ti query and filtering tools, for deeper analysis at a later stage. A fundamental corresponding aspect of the coding phase was the creation and development of my initial ideas in relation to the data I was being exposed to. Ideas were recorded within Atlas.ti on memos, which could be attached to the appropriate data for later retrieval. Memos were an essential feature of the analytical process as they had been generated from the empirical data and the ideas contained within memos could be synthesised in order to generate and analyse broader theories relating to the data (Konopasek 2008).

With regard to sorting, filtering and querying the coded data, as a means to making sense of the evidence through deeper analysis, this was conducted in relation to emerging themes that bore relevance to the research aims. This comprised the deeper analytical component of the data analysis process. For example, a significant theme that was to surface in respect of the construction of the out-group was the attribution of perverse values, such as paedophilia and rape, to Muslims and the Islamic religion. Within the networking sites discussions on Islamic values could sometimes result in the expression of violence and aggression from certain EDL supporters, which would be accepted and unchallenged by the wider group. Therefore it was possible to run a query using the two codes *Values of Islam* and *Rationalised violence,* in order to retrieve the corresponding sets of data attached to these codes to take a closer look at the relationship and find evidence, in the form of quotes, that there were instances where violent and aggressive discourse was uncritically accepted within the group. Aside from doing focused multiple code searches, a more unstructured approach to interpreting themes within the data was applied. This involved merely working through all of the data attributed to a research aim, essentially immersing myself in the data, and developing and synthesising ideas from memos that I had made during the coding process. In this manner it was possible to develop emerging themes around a wide base of data and construct thematic narratives that would be combined and expanded into an all-encompassing story upon writing up the thesis.

Baptiste (2001) makes the salient point that analysts should avoid becoming wedded to their initial hunches and hypotheses and that premature commitment can inhibit the discovery of important new insights that may prove pivotal to the developing story. This proved to be important advice as in the early stages of analysis I occasionally found myself in the position of attempting to substantiate with quotes preconceptions acquired often during the scoping stage of the study. This has already been alluded to above as a limitation of the research and it bears emphasis, with the mass media constructing the EDL as by essence a pathological organisation, it was a particularly hard stereotype to move away from when constructing my own interpretation of the organisation and its supporters. Analysis uncovered a much more intricate story of internal tensions and what could be considered a theoretical sliding scale of pathology, with a fair proportion of supporters at the ‘un-pathological’ end. It was thus essential that the analysis acknowledged this cohort, overcoming the drive to offer a stereotyped and sensationalist interpretation of supporters.

With regard to digital media videos and media articles that were posted within the networking sites, it was felt that it would be more time efficient if these were not uploaded into Atlas.ti. Instead they were analysed from their original sources. It was not possible to analyse in detail every such video or article that was shared, as they were too numerous. Therefore, they were selected according to a judgment based on their likely relevance to the study. The links for videos and articles that were subjected to analysis were analysed from the source and coded within Atlas.ti as either “video” or “article” and any analytical notes were attached to the code via a memo. This ensured that the analysis was incorporated into the Atlas.ti interface and fused into the wider context of the thread of discourse from which it was originally derived.

## Networking site ethics

There were various ethical issues surrounding the study, some of which have already been addressed in discussion at varying stages during this chapter. Here I will explore some of the most prominent issues that had to be considered before collecting data in an appropriate way from the networking sites.

The main ethical concerns that surrounded collecting data from the two networking sites are foregrounded by Johns, Chen and Hall (2004), as being: gaining access to the research site, obtaining consent from a fluctuating population of site users, and making the findings available to the study population. The latter of these concerns was immediately discarded as a prospect, due to the fact that it was unlikely the research population would receive the findings particularly well, as this was likely to be a critical account of their behaviour. It made entirely no sense to effectively confront this population in this manner and potentially stoke up vitriol. With regard to gaining access to the research site, as has already been noted, it was manifest from the outset that to make an approach to the EDL central administration would be a futile gesture. Communities of disenfranchised persons tend to have a significant degree of distrust for researchers and other professionals (Sieber 1992), and therefore it felt like an inappropriate approach to announce my presence to the community in order to attempt to solicit some sort of acceptance for the research being conducted. Brotsky and Giles (2007), following an online investigation into a pro-anorexia community that contravened certain ethical principles, highlighted that such behaviour can be excused in respect of the importance and benefits of the research. This makes sense, especially when one considers the controversial subject matter that comprises this study.

The access issue also raised the complex distinction between public and private. If these sites were regarded as being public then by implication there would be no membership requirements and access should be unfettered, discounting the necessity to seek approved access (Johns, Chen and Hall 2004). This was a reassuring position to take on one level, but caused further confusion on another. With regard to Facebook, this was an entirely open community, therefore access and acquiring some sort of informed consent for the research, be it from EDL administrators or the wider community of supporters, could be regarded as avoidable. However, the Forum was much less clear cut as it required users to register their email address and they were attributed the moniker “members”. This indicated a private space and thus the problem of access and consent reared its head again. In the end it was decided, for the sake of maximising the quality of the study, both networking sites would be treated equally and no form of consent would be sought. An important safeguard was incorporated into the written thesis that ensured all names of EDL supporters would be omitted from any quotes used.

Aside from making a judgment on the public accessibility of the networking site, a researcher must also determine what information they are able to publicly disseminate which has been taken from these sites (Catterall and Maclaran 2001). On the other hand, it could be argued that discourse made publicly available within networking sites should be regarded as freely open for dissemination by researchers (Wilson and Peterson 2002). On this basis, an additional issue was whether the identities of those individuals whose quotes were incorporated into the thesis would potentially be traceable through a process of doing a Google search on the actual quote. This again forced a consideration of the public and private implications of the material that was being posted. Should it necessarily matter if the quotes were traceable? Particularly in the context of Facebook, the users were operating within an open space when they imparted their discourse. In the end this quandary was resolved by unforeseen occurrences. In terms of Facebook, the page from which I had collected data was hacked and closed down. This meant that a new page was created from scratch and all the data contained on the previous page was lost, thus precluding the prospect of a Google search linking to any of the Facebook data used in the thesis. With regard to the EDL Forum, the original platform from which I had collected data was overhauled by the organisation as it was deemed to be inefficient and outmoded. Therefore a completely new platform was introduced and, as had been the case with the Facebook page, all of the data attached to the page was removed from the internet and was as a consequence untraceable through a Google search.

## Conclusion

This chapter has offered an explanation and justification for the design and methodology of the research study. The research aims were developed from the philosophical position that ‘knowledge’ and ‘reality’ are social constructions which require qualitative interpretation. On this basis an ethnographic approach was adopted which it was determined would be best suited to interpreting the meaning systems that have been collectively produced by EDL supporters who are active within the organisation’s networking sites. With the research having an online focus it has been articulated that a type of virtual ethnography would be best suited to the process of interpreting and analysing the meaning systems constructed in the realm of cyberspace. The method used, documentary and video analysis of online interaction was developed around the aims of the research and the social networking platform from which data was collected in textual form and through video and audio formats. This ensured that reality, as constructed by this collective in virtual space through discourse and the sharing of media, could be suitably captured and analysed.

A fundamental limitation of the study relates to the abstractness of the notion of identity. The study was to a large extent designed to decipher the construction of an Islamophobic identity construct and identify its constituent system of beliefs, values and behaviours. The overall validity of the results of this approach may remain questionable, as this is indirectly obtained data, which excludes the direct input of the bearers of the identity, the EDL supporters, which could have been acquired through interviewing. It has, however, been argued that this type of virtual environment allows for a pure form of identity to be constructed as networking site users may be liberated from any inhibitions that might otherwise manifest in a face-to-face context (Paech 2009). In this instance the data collected from the networking sites would have provided a unique and unabashed account of the research population.

The thesis makes broad generalisations about the study population, which is generally a requirement of this type of qualitative research, although the accuracy of these generalisations remains contestable. It has already been noted that the research population was potentially diverse in nature, and a component of this diversity is the extremeness of ideology to which different segments of the EDL adhere. Some supporters were clearly authentic ‘far rightists’ whilst others were avowedly more liberal minded. The views of members of these poles will by implication tend to differ. It was always a concern that the views of those members that shouted the loudest, or who promulgated the most controversial discourse stream, would be upheld as representative of the wider organisation. It required a significant degree of focus and introspection not to let the research become enmeshed in a confirmation of already existing stereotypes and narratives of the far right. It was difficult to mitigate what may effectively be regarded as latent researcher bias influencing the research. Discussions with supervisors and peers were useful in terms of helping to justify my interpretation of the data, but aside from that it was a case of sharpening my techniques, whilst attempting to ensure the salience of my identity as an impartial researcher.

It is an intention of the research that it might be generalisable beyond the EDL, to other like-minded organisations or individuals, in order to understand Islamophobia from a wider base. However, it must be recognised that the study is restricted to just two networking sites. There are numerous other such sites and blogs that have an Islamophobic bent, some attached to specific organisations, many others not. These cater for a potentially huge population of users who can be regarded as Islamophobic. A sample of two sites attributed to one organisation is clearly not representative of the overall base and the outcome of analysis may in effect only produce results that are relevant to the one organisation and its supporters. In order to substantiate the claim of wider generalisability it could have been possible to incorporate a control far right networking site into the study, and subject it to the same analytical process as the two EDL sites. Results could have been compared and various lines of conclusion been drawn in relation to the identity construct.

# 4/ Forming global-national-local worldviews and extreme political identities online

This chapter traces a new search for identity, sparked by a search for belonging and community, which appears to have been facilitated by the potentialities of the internet and social networking sites (Castells 2010). In this context, Mouffe’s (2000) contention that certainty has been sought in nationalist identity is deployed. Here nationalism has been adopted by those who feel compelled to embrace more ‘extreme’ forms of identity that are easily accessible in the virtual arena. Being a fundamentally nationalistic organisation, professing to ‘defend’ the integrity of English identity and culture, the EDL has constructed its own identity around a perverse ‘othering’ of Islam and Muslims, who are deemed to be a key threat to local communities, to England, and indeed, to the rest of the world in a bleak and persecuted global imaginary that its members share in visceral terms. Scrape beneath the surface and one may uncover a much deeper dynamic at play among EDL supporters, based on class humiliations and their castigation by other, dominant groups.

The Islamophobic identity produced by the EDL support base within its networking sites can be explained by virtue of a range of features, in addition to its post-working class core membership. It is a construct built upon insecurity, especially low self-esteem generated in particular by the low social status attributed to the working class in contemporary Britain, the outcome of deindustrialisation. In particular we can see here how this identity is defined by a dynamic play of beliefs, imaginaries and interactions that flow across global-national-local scales and which have come to define the worldview of the EDL and its supporters. This allows members of the group to make seamless shifts in the focus of their discourse between these scales, which have the effect of constructing a worldview that generates feelings of psychic shelter and comradeship built on a resentment of what are seen as invasive ethnic and state practices. It will be shown that this identity is infused with a sense of persecution that the EDL attributes to the actions of an array of anti-EDL agents, including the government and the media.

The chapter is separated into four sections: the local and the breakdown of community which examines perceptions of the local and insecurities generated around the presence of Muslims. Second, the national, where there is an evaluation of how the EDL glorifies the nation and at the same time defines it as a threatened entity from minority populations. Third there is an examination of the global in terms of working class insecurities relating to globalisation. In the final section the unique global-national-local worldview of the EDL will be articulated and its relationship with the identity that was produced will be explored.

## The local and the breakdown of community

Notions of the local and community were an important feature of the narratives of EDL supporters within the networking sites. There was a notably low level of trust with regard to the presence of Muslim populations within local communities. Putnam (2007) identifies the dynamic whereby immigration and ethnic diversity have reduced levels of social trust and this feeds into Putnam’s (2000) wider thesis of community decline. Through exploring how the EDL supporters related to their local milieu we can begin to contextualise community decline and low levels of social trust that has come to define the local.

We will begin examining the question of community by looking at EDL supporters’ understanding of the ‘local’. Of fundamental importance here was the interconnection between issues of security, social class and resistance when trying to understand how the local was imagined and experienced by the networking site users. It is also important to consider how social class may help to inform our understanding of how community was defined by EDL supporters in relation to the localities they lived in. The logic of this lies in the deeper aims of the research, which was to consider how identity constructs and impressions of the structure of the world were influenced by the mediating force of social networking sites.

Many of those using the networking sites foregrounded the importance of class dynamics at the local level, highlighting feelings of community breakdown, or narratives of local decline commonly attached to immigration (Garner 2011):

its true that those who demonise us are usually middle class suburban types who have no idea what its like watching traditional working class areas being overrun and destroyed by mass islamic immigration and breeding.and to say all these muslims arnt radicals how often do you hear the muslim masses speak out or demonstrate against the hate preachers/peados and racists in there communities? (Forum user 1)

Here we can identify three social categories at work: notions of the working class as victims, of middle class ignorance and apathy, and of Muslim identity as hostile or antagonistic. At many points we can find examples of the working class being identified as a group suffering from misrecognition, in Young’s (2007) terms, by the middle classes, whereby the middle classes stigmatise the lower status working class groups. The product of this for those stigmatised is feelings of humiliation and perhaps also of neglect.

There was often an underlying sense of shame amongst EDL supporters, associated with perceptions of the weakness of the working class in trying to improve their situation. Shame and humiliation were often palpable, particularly in reference to the spatial disturbance and destruction of white working class communities, which was blamed on the influx of Muslims into these localities:

The uaf [Unite Against Fascism] have got to be the biggest idiotic hypocrites God put breath in are they really that blind and stupid that they cant see whats going on under their noses?! What utter sanctimonious, deluded fools. They havent got an ounce of common sense between them. They have no experience or knowledge of our grievances cos it's not their children or their communities being destroyed is it! Wait till islam spreads to the suburbs then we'll see how united against fascism u are u ignorant fools! (Forum user 2)

In this instance a typical tactic of defining UAF activists as middle class and as having no understanding of the plight of the working class and their communities is employed. The user derives satisfaction through imagining the moment when the middle classes will succumb to the spread of Islam when it finally encroaches upon middle class communities. In much of this kind of resentful discourse there is a tacit recognition that Muslim communities are the more homogenous, resilient entities, ascribing them, in negative terms, an implicitly greater strength in comparison to working class communities. Such sentiments appear to underline a broader narrative of white working class decline and helplessness. It will become clear that this narrative, imbued with working class weakness, could be turned into a site of resistance for the EDL as supporters were savvy at transforming feelings of weakness and persecution into feelings of empowerment and rage. It should also become clear, as is manifest in the above quotations, that a hierarchy of stigmatisation exists: the EDL were stigmatised by the middle classes (or they believed they were) and the EDL, in turn, stigmatised Muslims, in this regard as a threat to the traditional way of life at a local level. The theme that is emerging here is that the local was threatened by the presence of Muslims and that this was destructive to white working class communities.

A feeling of security was a key issue that informed perceptions of the nature of a particular local space and sometimes this linked to feelings of deep anxiety:

It is easy to become paraniod but that will not help. If you worry too much it will affect your every day life and you will not function properly. The only thing you can do is be vigillant ( learn first aid as that is important in any situation any how ). If you see something sus then dont be affraid to report it, better to attend 1000 false alarms than miss one!!!! We all know they will try something, its the when and where we dont know, worry too much about it and it will affect you mentaly, psycologicaly they win. (Forum user 3)

The local community was essentially deemed to be an unsafe space according to those using the networking sites. This illustrates some of the profound insecurities that were pervasive within the discourse of supporters. Conversations that addressed the local were usually explicit in the expression of anxieties and there was an undercurrent of paranoia in reference to the presence of Muslims. Indeed, the ‘risky’ status attributed to Muslims (Mythen, Walklate and Khan 2009) by EDL supporters constructed their ‘other’ as being inherently dangerous, particularly in the post-9/11 era whereby Muslims have become associated with religious extremism and terrorism, a ‘problem’ that is perceived by some ‘native’ populations to have been in effect localised as Muslims move into communities. Relating to Muslims in this way may have been a form of ‘othering’ appropriated by the networking site users to comparatively evaluate their in-group in a moral and positive light in relation to the immoral and dangerous out-group. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) would regard this as a process for boosting the self-esteem and homogeneity of the in-group, producing identity in contrast to the maligned ‘other’, and this was undoubtedly a driving force within the networking sites as users would mobilise opinion against Muslims.

On a deeper psychological level there did appear to be a genuine fearfulness of Muslims, so it seemed that fears were in a manner being collectively constructed by EDL supporters in the networking sites. Through constructing a threatening foe, the EDL supporters did appear to be complicit in the definition of their own fears. On one hand the construction of Muslim identity as a threat appears helpful here in generating feelings of positive self-esteem among users of the forums who would collectively mobilise opinion against the source of threat and, perhaps somewhat perversely, this helped to promote a collective sense of security. On the other hand a threatening mystique attributed to the ‘other’ seemingly acted to ramp up insecurities. Whilst it was functional (in terms of consolidating the in-group) to ascribe ‘risky’ traits to Muslims in order to define a troubling ‘other’ for the in-group to mobilise against, this process also generated anxiety regarding their intentions and dangerous capabilities.

This impression, of an unsettling and unsafe local, was exemplified in concerns about ‘no-go’ areas for non-Muslims: landscapes of exclusion (Lupton 1999) whereby EDL supporters through interacting within the networking sites were in a manner developing mental maps of places where it was deemed unsafe for non-Muslims (although it was quite often termed as being unsafe explicitly for whites) to be present:

tower hamlets is compleat shithole its over run and has been for years if your white and walk about it at night you will get done and not just by mussies any of the asian gangs will attack you i had 2 mates stabbed in shadwell about 10 year ago so fuck knows wot its like now . me i dont like none of em dont trust em dont wanna know em dont mix with em and i dont eat there grub i even drive 5 miles to go to a white newsagent this is my choice seen my country go down the pan (Forum user 39)

Tower Hamlets represented one of these no-go zones, an area that has become heavily populated by Muslims. The user above was typical in the respect he draws upon personal experience to make an emotive point, alleging that two of his friends were stabbed by Muslims (although he does note that other Asian gangs are prone to this type of violence) in Tower Hamlets the past. The user claims to avoid visiting the area, implying that he fears for his safety. The sharing of this kind of anecdotal experience was common amongst EDL supporters whose narratives fed into the construction of ‘no-go’ space from which whites were excluded.

Reference is being made here to a ‘no-go’ area where two white youths were allegedly attacked by Muslims:

Vigilante like movements would make things worse in the short term, As unlike the christian community who seem to prefer the head in the sand aproach the muslim community would unite together........ and from there i'm sure they would protest against the matters in a "peacefull and productive way" !?... For the moments, In areas like these what these people need to do is literally stick together, I know it sounds stupid that English people cant walk around their own country on their own..... But this is what the country has come to in some areas. (Forum user 4)

The user identifies differences between the apparent weakness of the ‘native’ (referred to here as ‘Christian’) community and the strength of the Muslim community, which is deemed resilient. There is a notable anxiety attached to the potential lack of resilience of the ‘native’ community in resisting an overbearing foe. This was indicative of an acknowledgment within the discourse of a few supporters in which a lack of ‘white’ community spirit or homogeneity at the local level had the effect of weakening the collective resistance against Islam. Unlike the processes of community decline outlined by Putnam (2000), precipitated to a significant extent by the privatisation of lifestyle, or as a consequence of the atomising effects of deindustrialisation, the kinds of observations made by EDL supporters online could be attributable to ideological ego-centrism on the part of the EDL. In this respect the idea of the weak ‘native’ community appears because members of the wider community are seen to have failed to embrace the principles and logic underpinning the EDL. This is somewhat narcissistic and it comes across as a kind of saviour mentality attributable to the EDL, which has manifested under apparently threatening social conditions.

A few EDL supporters would refer to ‘sheeple’, a synthesis of the words ‘sheep’ and ‘people’ to denote a body of the citizenry who are not resistant enough to Islam:

We have imported an enemy that only wait for our demise or bad luck but many still deny this simple fact.Wake up sheeple and fight to preserve own culture. (Forum user 5)

This terminology castigates as ‘other’ those outside the EDL way of thinking, defining them as weak and appeasing of Islam, a common theme in the analysis of the material. It also had the effect of evincing a sense of weakness in the ‘imagined community’ of the nation or the local community, which was not united behind the cause of defending the nation.

The Islamic community, both locally and globally, was frequently considered to have subversive objectives. Meer and Modood (2009) note there is a widespread perception of Muslims as being collectivist and fundamentalist and that this legitimises targeting them as a security threat. This attribution of exaggerated social collectivity and strength is seen as representing the troublesome antithesis of a Western, atomised, neo-liberal society. Within this context weakened communities, or at least the perception of weakened communities, provides ideological legitimation for the EDL’s cause in resisting Islamic expansionism and seeing the group as a response to failings in white communities generated by industrial restructuring and weak government support for this class fraction. Supporters, in construing the ‘other’ as communally invasive and potentially overpowering also promoted this fear dynamic as the threat was constructed as dangerously subversive and imminent, something which demanded the immediate attention of ‘native’ populations. Fears of the potential of Islamic subversion were palpable within the discourse of many of the networking site users, but as is noted by Svendsen (2008) in a fragmented society fear can be a unifying principle and in this regard fear of the ‘other’ appears to have united the in-group and provided the basis for a discourse of collective resistance.

Through a discourse of resistance, typically involving an aggressive rebuke to the ‘threat’ of Islam at the local level, subjective and collective weaknesses experienced by EDL supporters could be transformed into feelings of strength and power:

we are dealing with people who will blow themselves up who are brain washed to think they will be getting laid by 40 virgins for killing and maiming our people. people who hate and despise our way of life with a venom. people who rape abuse women kids slash cut and behead in the blink of an eye and you are worried about a few footie lads when it kicks off on our streets and trust me its comeing i would rather stand with 50 hooligans than 200 mugs who want to talk as these will be the people to save our arses. socially acceptable maybe not if you live in say Cheshire or some posh middle class gaff but if you live on a council housing estate surrounded by people who have nothing in common with your way of life then its a welcome relief. (Forum user 6)

In this example, the user outlines some of the violent traits that were commonly attributed to Muslims. Having established the threat, the user articulates that the core resistance will come from ‘footie lads’ (slang for football hooligans). As we already know, hooligans are an important group within the EDL, but they have a maligned reputation within wider society and are themselves associated with the violent propensities of the working class. It was not uncommon for EDL supporters to talk endearingly of the use of violence, sometimes in reference to hooliganism, and to instrumentalise such discourse as a means of resistance against perceived enemies of the organisation, especially Muslims. Through imagining this as a reaction to the immorality of Muslim violence, the counterpower (Castells 2012) of working class and hooligan violence is made moral, defensible and noble. This has a wider resonance in the context of the local, as the local was often inferred within EDL supporter discourse as a space for working class resistance and the expression of power. Later it will be explored how EDL supporters perceive they are to be central players in an impending clash of civilisations between the Muslim and non-Muslim world. This perception was often experienced as fundamentally empowering (as well as fear inducing) by members of the online groups. What is interesting here is that in many comments made online the locus of resistance is seen as something operating in and around local communities. Of course this resistance is already manifest at EDL demonstrations, often used as evidence that for the EDL the war is already underway in a concrete sense, as ‘problem’ Muslim areas are targeted by the organisation in order to mobilise local populations against Islamic expansionism.

Notions of morality and resistance appear to be central to EDL identity. The EDL as defender of local communities and (as we will go on to explore in the next section) defender of the nation, defines itself as chivalrous and this sense of chivalry is produced through a contrast to the Muslim ‘other’, whose ‘risky’ status symbolises the depravity that has been imported into England’s communities through immigration. The term ‘oppressive othering’ (Schwalbe et al 2000) is useful in this context, as one group is seeking advantage by defining another as morally inferior, seeking to subjugate the target group. For EDL supporters their identity, rooted in the esteem of aggressively defending the local, has its comparative lesser, in the shape of Muslim identity, to define itself against and reinforce feelings of purpose and solidarity within the diffuse EDL membership itself, comprising people who appear to imagine themselves as working-class, council estate residents stigmatised by mainstream and middle-class society (Young 2007).

## The nation(al) and its ‘original state’

Whilst the global-local nexus is a key theme within the literature on globalisation, the research uncovered a crucial third node that intersects it: the role of the national. In particular the theme of community, in respect of national community, was prominent in the discussions of networking site users. While this is not surprising given the founding focus of the EDL around national identity constructs it is important to consider how these issues were mobilised in the understandings of its supporters. These sentiments appeared to follow Anderson’s (1991) concept of the ‘imagined community’, which envisages a perceived shared history and a powerful sense of belonging that unites a collective of ideological adherents who together comprise a nation: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid:6). As opposed to the local community, where members may have embodied interactions on a frequent basis and inter-personal relationships, the national community is a more abstract construct.

Although an abstract construct, it was apparent that the nation was inextricably tied to territory for EDL supporters, be that England or the British Isles and at a lower level neighbourhoods and estates. Interestingly, the relative importance of Britain and England was not generally contested among EDL supporters, as some would often refer to Britain in a nostalgic sense and it would not be a cause of disagreement between users. These feelings could be linked to the strong sense of emotional attachment to the Queen who was a key figurehead for the EDL and also the monarchy’s association with empire:

We are britain and we fight to the end to show the east and others it cannot get away with walking all over us!!!! British empire ran the world during the crusades, we need to go back to our roots and regain international respect. (Facebook user 1)

Here we can see how the British Empire was defined as a symbol of nostalgic power and therefore imagined with pride (even when notions of Empire were misapplied and associated with the Crusades, as was highlighted in this instance). For a few supporters there was a notable sense of anxiety attributed to the demise of the British Empire and feelings of weakness. In a kind this is a feeling of defencelessness that can be attributed to a loss of sovereignty in the face of mass immigration and indeed to the wider forces of globalisation, as is implied here:

its ironic really that the british empire fell and now we let people simply move to england and take over our country (Facebook user 49)

Clearly there was an association of strength and control with Britain as it was in the era of Empire, but this nostalgia could also produce resentment in terms of how EDL supporters interpreted the modern day and Britain’s seeming loss of dominance and sovereignty:

It was, however, in balance the English nation that was the foremost concern of EDL supporters. Here the user is relating to the nation in a very typical way, through defining it as a glorified construct: THE EDL have the passion ..the people are the passion everyone .. there will come a time when it will be to late...me i will never let the passion fade to protect my country and i will die to make it a safe placefor my family to live..my problem is im getting more n more angry by the day because sometime i feel like were flogging a dead horse getting people to take notice..its like a plague suffocateing us sqeezeing the life out of our country..... i know plenty of non EDL friends who would love to be a part of the fight back...MAKE THE EDl GROW .....get a england flag and hang it outside your house and send a message ..im england this is my england and im proud. (Facebook user 2)

There is another important element running through the quote and in similar statements online –a frustration equated with the perception that there are forces acting against the realisation of the glory of the English nation. The realisation of this glory is deemed to be undermined as a consequence of the apathy of sections of the English nation in accepting the threat that is posed by Islam, which relates to the earlier discussion about ‘sheeple’, members of the public who did not conform to the EDL worldview. Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras (2006) address this phenomenon with the aid of Lacanian theory relating to nationalism. They argue that the source of anxiety among nationalists may be generated by the perception that the nation’s identity, a mythologised and once unspoiled thing, has become impaired in the present day. The source of this disturbance, or what Lacanian theory relates to as the ‘theft of enjoyment’ is a defined ‘other’ – external to the nation – which comes to be imagined as the source of unfettered antagonism. Similar observations are made by Appadurai (2006) in the idea of an ‘anxiety of incompleteness’*,* in which ‘native’ antagonism is driven by irrational fears regarding the presence of minority groups that are a fundamental threat to the nation. As we will explore later, such fears may be a precursor to a more hostile and violent reaction to those minorities that stand in the way of such projects.

Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras (2006) identify the importance of romantic national histories as part of a national glorification process, with regard to the ‘golden era’: an imagined period of happiness that has been destroyed by the ‘other’. This fantasy consolidates the collective identity of the group, animating national desire, and mobilising identity against the ‘other’. The ‘other’ is viewed as a critical obstruction between the nation and a return to its ‘original state’ of glory, a moment in history that predates the ‘other’s’ presence. Such issues were frequently evident within the discourse of EDL supporters, as in the above example, whereby one can sense pure love for the nation, but also a strong sense of antagonism that something is not quite right with it. Encapsulated in the idea of the nation we can see the opposing emotions of joy and disharmony and one can only imagine how these emotions interact and react in the psyche of the nation. It is understandable how this toxic mix of ideas and forces may help promote intense feelings of ethnic hatred. So what exactly is it that the EDL gains from exploiting affiliations to national identity? One answer may be that members feel able to transcend the forms of low recognition attributed to the working class and feelings of low self-esteem by joining such projects. Nationalists look to the nation to provide “them and their progeny with security and safety as well as status and prestige in return for their loyalty and commitment” (Druckman 1994:45). In a sense this relates to Terror Management Theory, as psychological conflicts that are generated around fear of death or wider security concerns are overcome through association with the nation, an entity that helps the individual transcend notions of mortality and helps to produce feelings of self-esteem as a consequence of embracing and ‘defending’ the national culture. Furthermore, national identity in all its divinity, to use Young’s (2007) phraseology, ‘disembeds’ the individual from the ‘moorings’ of the subjugation of their working class identity. This could potentially be liberating, as attachment to the nation engenders what Lowenberg (1992) refers to as a kind of grandeur to those who feel inadequate.

That is not to say that working class identity was simply shunned by EDL supporters in favour of national identity. Indeed, in many examples contributors online would defend their working class roots with pride and, for example, as will be shown in the next chapter, bemoan the abandonment of the working class by the political elite. This may, however, be symptomatic of the problem, in that being working class in the present day has become devalued by a combination of misrecognition from the middle class and disenfranchisement from the political class. The idea of the ‘working class’ represents a kind of ‘resistance identity’ (Castells 2012), but it has little positive socio-political value beyond the working class social group and is associated by its non-adherents, the non-working class groups, to be a form of weakness. Nevertheless, by attaching themselves to a project of national identity and fulfilment many members appear to feel that they become part of an emboldened imagined community that they perceive to be relatively free of the stigmas of social class they experience ordinarily. The irony of all this is that English identity remains rather weak within the wider population, one reason being a negative association with English nationalism that has undermined many people’s willingness to identify with the nation in such overt terms (Fenton 2007). Therefore, the weakness of this imagined community on one level could well be due to its association with the working class football hooligans.

In the previous quote from an EDL supporter, the individual expressed a typical frustration that an apathetic English population were simply not switched on to the cause of protecting the nation. The individual was eager for the imagined community to which they belonged to grow bigger. Indeed, the larger the community is imagined to be, by implication, the greater the collective sense of esteem. The paradox being that it is perhaps exactly because this type of working class individual belongs to the imagined community that it has become so weakened. Misrecognition that has been attributed to the working class from the middle class has likely acted to ‘contaminate’ the English national identity through its association with working class types. If it was the case that English identity had become a weakened construct through its working class and nationalistic connotations, it was not acknowledged by the networking site users, who revelled in their national identity.

An important final point to make regarding the role of the nation is with regard to resistance. In a similar vein to the local, the EDL are defending the nation(al), resisting the subversive forces of Islamic expansionism that they perceive to be an incontrovertible hindrance, inhibiting the nation’s return to its ‘original state’. As is manifest within the name of the organisation, it is ‘England’ which its supporters were concerned with ‘defending’ as is shown in these examples:

in truth when the government lets us down and they realize it's all gone to far and can't do anything to stop it who will the saviors of our beloved land and country be? E-E-EDL E-E-EDL! That's fucking who. Never surrender. (Facebook user 3)

What annoys me is people who don’t even pretend to assilimate and our Govt SUPPORTS their right not to assimilate! How pathetic, we are like dogs who have been kicked and then crawl on our bellies for more. (Forum user 7)

Such statements highlight the vigour with which many EDL supporters would defend their nation and fundamentally what they perceived to be its identity, under attack. EDL identity is in many ways defined in relation to and defensive of other identities, but there is an identifiable underlying reasoning behind this framing. As Castelli argues, the language of persecution can be used to “shut down political debate and critique… it routinely deploys the archetypal figure of the martyr as a source of unquestioned authority” (2007:154). The networking site users’ discourse was imbued with a persecutory framing and therefore EDL identity could be regarded as being driven by a persecution complex. This was not a debilitating neurosis, however, as according to the logic of persecution outlined by Castelli (2007), it enabled the EDL to make a martyr of itself and its cause, and through defining all anti-EDL elements as a pervasive threat to the nation, these perceived oppositional forces were delegitimised. The anti-fascist movement was one such target, but the British government was also a key player whom the EDL defined as its foe and, by implication the nation’s, persecuting ‘other’; a facilitator of Islam’s spread. Defending the nation against this persecution was seen to secure the EDL a moral high ground, reaffirming its morality and the ‘other’s’ immorality.

Another target of EDL persecution complex ‘othering’ was the British legal system:

i am prepared to face our unbalanced justice system,i don't think these mu\*\*ims … realise the kind of anger and reaction from us most of us Brits.I will kill to defend my Country and my way of life,not all of us brits are apathetic and weak you know. (Facebook user 4)

The legal system was deemed by many EDL supporters to no longer represent impartiality and to be skewed in favour of condoning Muslim criminality, whilst discriminating against English nationals, especially if they have committed indiscretions against Muslims or the Islamic faith. Concerns with the legal system were indicative of a prominent cultural threat that the EDL seeks to resist taking a hold, that being the creeping Islamisation of law and the importation of Sharia Law. At present this was regarded as an isolated issue, confined to the local level. There was, however, a prevailing fear that Sharia would subvert the national legal system and take hold of the country. The broader point here is of conspiracy, a theme that will be developed later within the context of the idea of a clash of civilisations that many users appear to subscribe to, whereby the nation has become the victim of a combined assault by anti-EDL agents. Through defining the situation in this way the EDL constructs itself as the only viable and trustworthy counterpower and protector of the nation. This self-justificatory drive defined and sustained the EDL’s cause and engendered copious positive esteem for supporters who internalised its ideology. As Brand notes (2008), identification with victimhood can justify extreme acts of retaliation and aggression – and never more so than in the defence of one’s nation.

## Global insecurities

The global was imagined in a troubling manner within the EDL’s networking sites. Here we will explore how global processes were central to the production of insecurities for EDL supporters. This had important implications in terms of how the organisation’s worldview was constructed.

As a consequence of experiences and processes such as mass immigration, the mass media and global consumerism the global is now part of most people’s imagined and actual worlds (Moore 2004) and it was indeed a crucial aspect of the Islamophobic identity construct. Unsurprisingly, aspects of the global such as immigration and the mass media were important to EDL supporters and in shaping their worldview. Whilst, for example, the media potentialities of the 21st Century have undoubtedly made the world a ‘smaller’ place, allowing instantaneous communication and the sharing of events from disparate locations, the global can be experienced as an inherently unsettling phenomenon, especially when placed within the context of perceived Islamic expansionism. Feelings of helplessness and fear may manifest upon digesting through media reports what may be interpreted as disturbing behaviour committed in the name of Islam, which informs the worldview of the audience in a skewed and potentially Islamophobic manner. Networking sites are therefore a place where the global may be imagined and contextualised by users through the sharing of media that can be used to help explain abstract processes such as immigration and the spread of religious ideology.

This highlights the kind of global imaginary adopted by many EDL, a space tainted with negative symbolism, violence and a skewed interpretation of Islam that is seen as an unsettling and spreading presence, as is evident here:

islam is evil . they murder throughout the world . they target children , and behead them . just look at thailand, for example where they target innocent peasant farmers and kill them and their kids , because they are not muslims . they promote peadophilia , which is the standard set by their founder , mohammad , who , at the age of 53 years , married a 6 year old girl , and had sex with this child at the age of 9 years . Mass murder is committed all over the world in the name of islam . And they do not just kill-- they do it in the most barbaric way they can . they are truly evil. Wake -up those who live in cloud cuckoo land . Look at Indonesia , where mass rapes are ocurring along with brutal murders . Look at Nigeria where muslims burn christian pastors to death , and of course many , many people , including children .islam is the worst evil the world has ever seen . it makes Stalin and Hitler look like a tea party , in comparison . And they want to dominate the world , by any means , including force . they are evil . end of . and they must be fought .(Facebook user 2)

As was common in the networking sites this user weaved a fear inducing discourse based upon unrelated geopolitical events, in order to define the Muslim ‘other’ as inherently depraved and acting on a global scale. There was often a focus specifically on Islam’s ‘evil’ that was being unleashed around the world. Therefore, the threat was framed in ideological terms, as though the religious ideology was diffusing around the globe and producing violent acts as it spread. As was so often the case, the quote ended with a statement of resistance, demanding the dangerous forces be fought. The attribution of immorality to globalised Islamic ideology defined resistance against it and by implication its resisters, in moral terms. By defining the threat as exceeding that posed by Hitler and Stalin a sense of immense self-importance is produced, but once again the negative outcome is likely the production of insecurity as the fearful discourse would be accepted by other networking site users as fact, generally without any critical evaluation.

The dynamic between networking site users was often such that they would mobilise around emotive issues such as the one outlined above and in such instances it would be unlikely that there would be any dissenting voices within the in-group. Sunstein (2009) outlines how opinion can become polarised and more extreme when there is insufficient critique within a group of people who share an opinion. Discourse, such as relating to the quote above, that imagined a pervasive global threat from Islam was uncritically accepted by EDL supporters. This may have had a radicalising effect on identity as the group became more extreme in how it perceived Islam as an insidious threat and how the group rationalised the need for a violent response to Islamic expansionism. This user encapsulates the sense of anxiety that has been attached to Islam through its global framing:

What I cant get a gripe on is , why? Why is this happening around the globe at this time in our history, why? Any one single answer wont do of course, there is a confluence of interests coming together with the aim of , what? World domination ? An islamic state on a global scale? If so good luck convincing the great unwashed that it’s no more than conspiracy and good t.v. Again, why is this happening, I cant see it. (Facebook user 4)

The user could be regarded to be representative of what Young (2007) refers to as the ‘insecure citizen’, who has been affected by the forces of globalisation and social change, struggling to come to terms with the global spread of Islam. In such cases Islam becomes symbolic of diffuse and opaque forces that are unfathomable and fundamentally discomforting. The user wonders why this is happening at the present time in history and this was indicative of EDL supporters’ sense of nationalistic nostalgia for an imagined bygone era of certainty, which predates the present moment of massive social change occurring as a consequence of globalisation.

That the global was a significant source of anxiety for the networking site users was further highlighted in perceptions regarding immigration and cultural threat. In a similar form to fears pertaining to Islamic ideology, the intersection between immigration and cultural threat promoted insecurity within the networking site users as in this example:

Today, we are experiencing a new invasion, not just from one tribe or race of people but with people from all over the world, particularly from Africa and the Indian sub continent. Many of those come from failed states such as Somalia and Ethiopia and they are recreating similar conditions to those they left. (Forum user 8)

In instances such as this we can see that there was a perception that a global movement of Muslims is taking place. The trajectory of this movement was typically defined to be targeting England. Culture itself tended not to be regarded as flowing independently around the globe and hybridising with existing cultures (as social science literature would suggest), but was indivisibly attached to the movement of people.

It has often been a general approach of the far right in Europe to transform immigration into a cultural question in order to solicit popular appeal (Yilmaz 2012), and there was certainly evidence of the acceptance of such a paradigm amongst EDL supporters. Here we might also argue that this perception could be regarded as a simplification in interpreting the complexities of global processes, through attributing culture an embodied form. This could be regarded as an attempt to simplify the processes of globalisation, or appropriating the Muslim body as a scapegoat for the uncertainties of the present era. Furthermore, it perhaps offers those who subscribe to its logic the prospect of prohibiting cultural ‘contagion’ through inhibiting the inward movement of bodies to a territory, via immigration control. Characterised by perverse cultural values these bodies are imagined as a fundamentally threatening force of globalisation, as Appadurai (2006:47) argues:

The body, especially the minoritised body, can simultaneously be the mirror and the instrument of those abstractions we fear the most… allowing fears of the global to be embodied within it and, when specific situations become overcharged with anxiety, for that body to be annihilated.

What we have here is a situation whereby globalisation has given rise to certain fears and anxieties within the social psyche. This has clearly had an impact on certain populations at a local level; for example, through the massive change that has occurred within working class communities due to deindustrialisation and as a consequence of the globalisation of production and global sourcing of industrial goods; or the changing face of once predominantly white English working class areas, due to the 21st Century influx of immigrants.

Young (2007) claims that key bases of identity have become uncertain in the late modern world, producing ontological insecurity, a precariousness of being. Within a working class context, if we take the deleterious effects that the products and processes of the global have had on working class identity, alongside the misrecognition this social group may experience, we have the basis for hatred toward minority ethnic groups. From a psychoanalytical perspective the insecurities that are fomented by globalisation and the misrecognition of the working class by the political elite and the middle class, which may give rise to a feeling of lack of self-worth, are potentially projected onto minorities, or specifically in this instance, Muslims. This could act as a psychological mechanism to relieve anxiety as is suggested by Rohter’s (1969) displacement theory as inner-frustrations are externalised through extreme opinions. This would result in the production of an irrational hatred of the ‘other’ which – acting as a projection screen for inner anxieties – itself then becomes intense source of anxiety for those who are instrumentalising it in this way.

The ‘other’ and its cultural formations can therefore become a source of anxiety and the perception prevails that its ‘removal’ will purge the incomprehensible agitation that has manifested in relation to working class identity, and of course the English nation today:

I await the day that all the words I have had to hear over the last few years like : Illegal immigrant,asylum-seeker,multi-cultural,ethnic community,arranged-marriage,forced-marriage,beheadings,female genital mutilation, jihad, imam, mosque, ramadan,etc.etc. will just disappear from our lands never to be heard or spoken again.These words have no part to play in our civilised society. (Forum user 40)

The above quote was typical of many sentiments relayed online about social and cultural change, as it contains an idealised future scenario in which a day will come when all of the perversions associated with Muslims may be expunged from ‘civilised’ society, and by implication the ‘other’ removed. In Lacanian terms, the ‘original state’ – a time of untainted national glory – will be returned to when Islam is purged from the nation. This notional ‘original state’, a time of national and cultural purity, is however incommensurate with the forces of globalisation that bring about ubiquitous social change and cultural transformation. There will consequently always remain an insurmountable tension between nationalist ideology and globalisation and globalisation will likely always remain a process that acts to produce insecurities for nationalists.

## The global-national-local worldview

In this section I want to focus on the EDL’s perspective, the worldview of its supporters, which in many ways was fundamentally ‘glocal’ (Robertson 1995), to the extent the organisation and its supporters had a notable tendency to interpret events and phenomena that occurred around the world through the same lens as that which was occurring at the local level and vice-versa. The national was also a key component of this construct. Through exploring the relationship between the global-national-local it is possible to interrogate the nature of the Islamophobic identity construct more clearly.

The EDL’s worldview was most notably promoted from the centre, by the EDL’s leadership and its administrators. The following is emblematic of such feelings:

Hope when the new year starts you all look back at the highs and lows in a year of the E D L and keep the fight in your bellies its one war united we will win and one that we will never shirk for the sake of future generations there is no place for islamic extremists and the spread of sharia law on our islands as brits its our duty to stand up and be counted our forces are doing the job in far off lands its ours to do it in our towns and cities let 2012 begin with Barking and move on to different locations throughout britain spreading the E D L word.(Facebook administrator 1)

In this case, the EDL administrator made reference to the ‘war’ that the organisation was embroiled in. The ‘War on Terror’ is evoked to advance an imagining of the global fight against Islamic terrorism being waged in “far off lands” by British armed services. The unique EDL perspective frames the resistance activities of its supporters, which take place in the towns and cities of England, as indivisible from the “War on Terror”. This was an ideological perspective to the extent it conflated these two unrelated undertakings in order to suggest a synergy between them. That the armed services were held in such high regard by the EDL indicates exactly what is happening here. Firstly, the association with the ‘War on Terror’ imbued the EDL’s activities with legitimacy, as well as a powerful sense of moral (moral on the EDL’s own terms) worthiness. The second important aspect relates to the production of self-esteem, as through the organisation’s efforts to glorify the nation’s servicemen and the ‘heroic’ job they perform, the EDL was active in its own self-glorification. This has fundamental implications for the identity construct, as it exemplifies a mechanism for generating self-esteem. As has been discussed, low self-esteem could be a typical trait of EDL supporters; therefore, such mechanisms that yield increased self-esteem would appeal to, and be avidly adopted, by such individuals. As a consequence, conflating through a global-local perspective the fight against Islamic terrorism, EDL supporters were able to imagine themselves as the ‘home-front’ in the fight against their foe, in the process generating positive self-regard.

The sense of self-contentment that Young (2007) explains has been undermined in late modern capitalist society, whereby people struggle to achieve a meaningful existence, could potentially be transcended through belonging to an organisation like the EDL which has a purposeful agenda. To this we can add what Loewenberg (1992) refers to as the narcissistic aspect of nationalism and the grandeur of associating with the nation which engenders a sense of reverence for the self. We noted earlier how belonging to a national entity may help diminish fears of mortality and this sense of narcissism is perhaps the transformation of such fears into a powerful sense of self-worth, transcending the nihilism that is associated with death through attachment to the national project. This is, however, more than mere association with the nation; it is effectively defending the nation’s identity. The meld of global-national-local can be a powerful compound in the production of a positive identity for the EDL. It is exactly this ideological lure which was promulgated by the organisation in order to recruit new supporters.

So how did the perspective of supporters equate with that promoted from the centre of the organisation? What follows was indicative of the seamless flow between matters of the global-national-local that often defined the discourse of EDL supporters:

Already, now, the world is wrapped up in issues pertaining to Islamic conquest. The main mistake made was to cast off the wisdom of our fathers, and initiate large scale Muslim immigration. Right now, we can simply return Muslims to their rightful countries, and avoid what is certain to be a plague for generations, not only for us, but for Muslims as well. At the same time, by making the right moves, we may avoid continued terror attacks on the streets and the risk of a terrible confrontation, within our own borders… The Islamics have nothing to lose. At the same time, they are actively recruiting and influencing residents to join their cause. Many English people see the response of the British government and the population as the choice to surrender rather than to resist. Some people choosing to side with the Jihad simply feel that the Jihad will be successful. (Forum user 9)

To assess the scale transitions evident within this particular quote we can see that it begins focusing on the global, with concern regarding “Islamic conquest.” Through making reference to curtailing Muslim immigration the focus switches to the local and defending the streets against terror attacks as well as the prospect of local people being recruited as terrorists. Finally, the discourse switches to the national scale and the perceived acquiescence of the British government and the people in facilitating the efforts of Islamic ‘Jihad’. Such examples highlight how the three scales were often used to construct a sense of threat, be that from terrorism or government subservience. On one level this is a reiteration of the kind of insecurities that were ubiquitous within the discourse of the networking site users and thus inherent within the identity construct.

There was, however, another notable ideological dynamic that was consistent across discourse of this nature. Through defining the threat in such a seamless fashion, instantaneously shifting the scale of focus and then shifting it again, the scale differentiation between global, national and local is rendered insignificant and different phenomena can be conflated. The effect this has is to promote the perception that, for example, the global flow of Muslims is an inseparable issue from terrorist activity within local communities. Or, alternatively, that the prospect the national government is not engaging with the EDL’s agenda is attributable to a global Islamic expansionist conspiracy. In each instance there is a notional Islamic threat deployed that unifies the three scales and the discourse functions to stoke up sentiment against the source of this threat.

What follows comprised part of a discussion between EDL supporters regarding the turnout at one of the EDL’s demonstrations and it embraces this kind of scale shifting logic, whilst also demonstrating the sense of purpose and self-esteem engendered through an association with the EDL:

it dosnt matter if we had 5 or 500 the fact is enough people came to show we are awake to the threat implied by islam.and willing to stand up and take the flack on their behalf. because at the end of the day we do this for the whole country. many people around the islamic world wish they too had made a stand,but alas its too late for them. but we will never allow this evil to gain a foothold upon our nation.NS [no surrender] the fight continues. (Facebook user 5)

Here the user starts with the local level, referring to EDL supporters active in resisting Islam within a community. The focus then switches between the global and the national as the user addresses the Islamic world’s failure to tackle extremism, with claims the English nation will be protected from a similar fate through the intervention of the EDL. There is an overwhelming sense of destiny manifest within the user’s discourse, as the EDL is defined as the nation’s primary bulwark against “evil”.

Also included in the quote is the abbreviation “NS”, which denotes “no surrender”, a defiant slogan frequently used by the networking site users and borrowed from the Northern Irish Loyalist movement, which often used it as an exclamation of defiance toward the IRA. The slogan was also adopted by English football hooligans as an expression of support for the English nation through disavowing the threat posed by the IRA. It is understandable that such a slogan, with its historical connotations, is inspiring and unifying for its adherents, who simultaneously invoke the Loyalist spirit in waging war against Irish nationalism, with the belief they are waging a war that transcends nationalism against forces operating on a global scale. “No surrender” is a brazen expression of resistance, but in this light it also had other connotations, to the extent it implies victimhood, with Islam constructed as a capable aggressor that will ‘never be surrendered to.’ Once again we can see evidence of a victim mentality in the face of Islam, and the EDL concurrently claiming the moral high ground, attributing to itself a moral superior status.

Young (2007) acknowledges that self-esteem may be sought through belonging to a resistance subculture that has established itself in defiance of a subjugating body of power. That the EDL had constructed as its ‘other’ not just Muslims, but all anti-EDL agents, in particular the British government and the police, it had duly fashioned an anti-EDL pseudo-hegemony that it is the EDL’s destiny to try to tackle. According to this thought process, the EDL is the proverbial ‘David’ to its ‘Goliath’ ‘other’ and EDL supporters wallow in the fantasy of their impending victory over this leviathan. Their actions now are a precursor to actually slaying their Goliath, setting the nation free, and returning it to its ‘original state’, untainted by difference. It is hard not to see how this fantasy would have a significant benefit on the self-esteem of its believers, promoting feelings of security through hope.

The fantasies of the EDL members were often sustained through a persecution complex and were laden with esteem boosting truth claims that had for most of the networking site users succeeded in constructing an ego-centric worldview, where global-national-local intermingles to ostensibly propel the EDL above its station as a modestly supported local and national movement into a defining feature of the geo-political, as we see here:

5 years ago almost nobody knew about the threat of Islam. Nowadays it seems like you can’t get people to stop talking about it, if not in public then at least in their homes and their close-knit social circles. The EDL isn’t a British organization. It’s far too large to just be limited to one island. It’s message has spread all across Europe, and is making tremendous headway in North America (Forum user 10).

There were often discussions amongst EDL supporters regarding the extent to which there is popular understanding within British society regarding the threat posed by Islam. The first notable theme inherent within the discourse above was that the user conflated Islam with threat, which is an unsurprising inference given the EDL’s Islamophobic outlook. However, as was common within the networking sites, the user credited the EDL with having played a key role in informing a growing popular understanding of the Islamic threat. The implication was that popular Islamophobic sentiment has been produced as a consequence of the EDL’s activities and its ideological spread. Regardless of the fact that such sentiment significantly pre-dated the EDL’s existence this can be regarded as a truth claim, instrumentalised to construct an ideologically appeasing reality in which the EDL has immense strength and social significance. Within the discourse we can see that the user deployed a familiar trick with seamless transitions across the scales. Starting with how people at the local level have been roused to discuss the threat in public or at home. The focus then becomes the national, with Britain taking centre stage. Through making reference to the EDL’s ideology the user makes a truth claim regarding the growing significance of the EDL and infers its potentially global significance. The intention was more than likely to engender positive self-regard by imagining the organisation as globally influential and thus, on an individual level, users were able to imagine themselves and their own activities associated with the organisation in a manner that was imbued with a feeling of global prominence. Users therefore liked to imagine themselves as being at the heart of this ideological movement that is engendering a proliferating global cognisance of the Islamic threat and mobilising against it. The threat was undoubtedly real and imminent in the eyes of the networking site users and to be able to place themselves as integral to its global ideological resistance would produce a substantial payload for their self-esteem.

The exploitation of the internet, particularly with regard to the use of networking sites, enabled the EDL to link its local activities, especially its demonstrations in towns and cities, with a theoretically limitless global population online. To invoke a central tenet of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), the in-group that engendered self-esteem for and by its members potentially had a global membership. There is little wonder why EDL supporters were so enthusiastic about imagining the globalisation of their ideological legitimacy and a concomitant expanding pool of supporters from around the world. This urges us to extend our previous understanding of Anderson’s (1991) ‘imagined community’ as “Imagined Communities… which show the common ground through shared ideology or interests can be related to cyberspace communities as well” (Neumayer and Raffl 2008:5). It is possible to envisage an expansive imagined community that extends beyond the English nation. This community transcends English culture, identity and values. It is woven through shared ideology that imagines a global Islamic threat and has as its ‘other’ Muslims. Appadurai’s (2006) anxiety of incompleteness is therefore theoretically extended to a global scale, with Muslim populations around the world comprising the troubling minority that threatens the supremacy of the non-Muslim majority. The common goal that unifies the members of the majority is resisting this threat, be that at a global-national-local level. The networking sites enable EDL supporters a sense of power and affiliation that they cannot otherwise find in the localities and social positions they ordinarily inhabit, a kind of phantasmic identity that is bolstered by performing their activities in a depersonalised manner from behind a computer or mobile phone screen, as they wade in to flex virtual muscles in online forums.

The notion of a prospective global anti-Islamic imagined community is satiated, in particular, through the social networking platform in both an abstract and objective way. It is abstract to the extent the Internet is global in its scope and, of course, the EDL’s Facebook page is available to any individual around the world with internet access and the will to access the page. Therefore, through sharing ideas and opinions within this space an individual may be inspired by the prospect such ideas and opinions, through the medium of social media, are theoretically traversing the globe, being retrieved and even influencing like-minded persons, regardless of their location. There was a lot of international support for the EDL expressed via the networking sites; Facebook in particular, probably due to its worldwide popularity, as follows:

You will prevail! We did not expend our American lives, in WWI and WWII to see this happen in either of our Countries! NSE, Keep fighting my British Brothers! We will defeat the Commies, and Muzzies!!!! (American Facebook user)

Don't give up and don't loose your hope. Also I want you to know that you have really lots of support from Poland (ignore our immigrants, majority are bastards. But in Poland everyone is amazed at your bravery in fighting the Muslims). NS. (Polish Facebook user)

Never tell a pom 'don't do something' cos you know what's gonna happen! Take back the streets my cousins....YOU OWN THEM! (Australian Facebook user)

i wish we had a group like u here in India. hate those muzzies! (Indian Facebook user)

Good luck from israel...!!! England 4 the English*.* (Israeli Facebook user)

Clearly it is difficult to confirm that the users were in fact from the locations they claimed. However, regardless of the authenticity of the users, a stark perception was fashioned through the presence of international users that stimulates the imaginations of networking site users and the belief that the EDL is much more than a locally and nationally confined entity. It was confirmation to EDL supporters that their struggle is global and that their imagined community is commensurate with the Islamic threat. This thought, and the implication that the EDL has a global ‘army’ of ideological affiliates that will mobilise when the anticipated ‘war’ comes, as well as boosting the collective sense of esteem, would probably function to diminish anxieties generated in relation to the ‘other’s’ imagined global expansionism.

Indeed, it would seem that there was a shadow, binary ‘imagined community’ constructed by networking site users, which was the antithesis of the national and global EDL imagined community. Its values were the polar opposite of the morally refined values of the EDL’s imagined community and based on notions of aggression and oppression, as opposed to a more passive or distanced form of resistance. Its presence in the imagination of EDL supporters was a source of irritation. It was constructed and perpetuated to a significant extent through the sharing, within the networking sites, of media articles and videos that portrayed the immoral acts of Muslims from around the world – a modern take on Anderson’s (1991) imagined community of old, premised on print capitalism. In accordance with the tenets of Lacanian theory, however, the sense of dissatisfaction it produced would be pivotal to consolidating the value of the moral imagined community to which the EDL supporters perceived they belonged: the existence of this fantasy functioned to foster the solidarity of the community (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006).

## Conclusion

This chapter, through exploring several dimensions on which community was definitive for the networking site users, probes some of the key components of the identity, produced within the EDL’s networking sites, to which they adhered as supporters of the organisation, but also as members of the working class. Community here can be located as both a spatial, territorially defined construct and as an imagined association between like-minded individuals who shared an identity. Furthermore, this identity was informed by a unique global-national-local dynamic that generated a more valued identity for its adherents. In both its spatial and imagined contexts, this community was inextricably tied to issues pertaining to security and resistance that were influential in the construction of identity by ‘othering’ groups seen to be antagonistic to an imagined way of life that contained historical romanticism and aggressive rejection of inflated impressions of deviance and radicalism among Muslims, who were seen to be a threat to a national way of life.

In relation to the local, community incorporated a discernibly spatial characteristic, alluding to the proximity and physical nature of social relationships. There was a notable perception among EDL supporters that their ‘native’ communities were threatened due to the presence of the Muslim ‘other’, which was colonising these once white working class areas. The ostensible homogeneity and unity of Muslim communities was an unsettling trait in the eyes of EDL supporters and this could be linked to problems regarding the rolling back of traditional community in the present era and the realities of communal disengagement, charted by writers like Putnam (2000). Putnam (2007) also claims that immigration and ethnic diversity have functioned to diminish social trust and this undoubtedly relates rather strongly to the narrative of EDL supporters. The local community, ‘as it was’, has thus become severely weakened and simultaneously usurped by an ‘alien’ communal formation. That this has been a visible social transformation, with increasing numbers of brown skinned bodies inhabiting once white working class territory, emphasises a sense of change that has likely come to haunt the existence of this once proud and united social group.

In a process identified by Allen (2011:291), the networking site users identified themselves as “who we are not.” The EDL’s identity was engendered through comparison with its ‘other’ and therefore Muslims were fervently characterised in the most malign terms, regarded as immoral, perverse and dangerous. This paved the way for defining the in-group in the most moral terms, satiating a much demanded positive self-concept. This was potentially much demanded due to an underlying deficit of self-esteem that motivated the identity’s production. The low self-esteem would possibly have been, to a large extent, transposed from the working class identity possessed by many of the EDL supporters. It may be instructive to consider the working class identity as the ‘primary’ identity (Castells 2010), around which other identities, including the Islamophobic identity, are formed. This would explain how attributes such as self-esteem may cut across multiple identities held by the networking site users. Through constructing their ‘other’ in such maligned terms EDL supporters were active in infusing their own identity with insecurities based on the ‘risky’ characteristics they ascribed to Muslims; ironically those characteristics their own identity was fashioned as a binary to. As a consequence ‘what we are not’ became experienced as a highly threatening entity. This in itself may promote feelings of weakness, thus further negatively impinging on self-esteem.

Within this mire of low self-esteem and insecurity, a transcendence of sorts is achieved through identification with the EDL’s imagined community. This is a dual community fundamentally premised on the nation, but also with a global dynamic, with the networking sites offering the prospect of a global membership. Membership provides a sense of purpose and narcissism that may help to suppress low self-esteem. The merging of the global-national-local scales within their discourse was utilised by the EDL and its supporters. This helped to frame the threat posed by Islamic expansionism as universally manifest. In subsequently defining themselves as persecuted and the only counterpower ready and willing to defend against this pervasive threat there was an evident ego-centrism that undoubtedly engendered a powerful sense of purpose for those associated with the EDL. Therefore, resistance was another key component inherent to the identity construct, as the networking site users were motivated to oppose the spread of ‘evil’, holding the belief that an army of supporters is willing to mobilise locally and globally.

Upon the realisation of this objective and the purging of the ‘other’ it is likely anticipated that national identity, which the EDL is outwardly premised upon ‘defending’, will be liberated from the Muslim ‘other’s’ troubling presence. Theoretically there could be wider implications if this were to happen. The sub-strata of society, below the working class, that Muslims were imagined to compose would be removed and the conceptual buffer between EDL supporters and the bottom of society withdrawn, with significant anxiety inducing effects. In such a hypothetical circumstance perhaps a new, replacement ‘other’, would be required?

# 5/ Post-politics and the rage response

In the previous chapter we explored the EDL Islamophobic identity construct as well as the worldview of the organisation and its supporters. This chapter applies a socio-political perspective in relation to the networking site users and will situate the EDL and its supporters within a post-political frame, in order to probe in greater detail the identity construct. The chapter will examine further aspects of the identity’s relationship with insecurities appertaining to what can be defined as a politically disenfranchised and socially weak collection of working class supporters, and how the nihilism of post-politics (Diken 2009) propels them to transcend these insecurities. We will explore how a certain psychological appeasement – which promotes feelings of empowerment – is achieved by supporters in response to these insecurities, which are projected onto the EDL’s ‘other’, often through a violent and dehumanising discourse.

By the end of the chapter we will see how the EDL has become a unique product within the post-political landscape, simultaneously embodying the characteristics of the paradigm and while appearing to resist them from the organisation’s own ‘moral’ standpoint. It will be clear that, as a consequence of perceived disenfranchisement, the EDL has shunned and defied the traditional working class association with the left in order to embrace an empowering far right identity. The British far right, however, will be defined as an inherently inharmonious movement profoundly at odds with itself, and as a consequence incapable of achieving any significant electoral success. The networking sites in which Islamophobic identity is constructed are understood here as a space that allows for extreme political expression, which functions to relieve insecurities of users.

## Post-political framings

In order to set the scene, it is appropriate to start with an exploration of how EDL supporters regarded the political elite and mainstream politics in general. This will provide a useful starting point in positioning the EDL within a post-political frame.

It is important to note from the outset that there were elements of the political identity of EDL supporters that were concrete and largely agreed upon. There were also, however, some fundamentally contested components of identity that could prove intensely divisive within discussions in the networking sites. One such contentious theme was the political party allegiance of supporters, which will be explored in detail in due course. I will focus for the moment upon the agreed elements of this political identity. A central component of this was how supporters perceived, in the sense that Mouffe (2000) outlines, a blurring of the boundaries between left and right on the political spectrum, as ideology has forged a (neo-liberal) consensus:

I think the political system (and voting system) in this country is corrupt and rotten to the core. The odds of any small party making a major breakthrough are remote. Certainly not in the timescale it needs to happen now. Even just getting into a position in Westminster where they could become an effective and viable opposition party or opposition government, the odds are stacked against it. The mainstream political parties are just too entrenched, too powerful and too big now. They control the establishment and have too much influence over voters. (Forum user 11)

This was indicative of how the networking site users viewed Britain’s main three political parties: the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Labour, in the same negative light. To EDL supporters, as we shall see, the consensus was seemingly largely based on a style of pork-barrel politics, whereby the mainstream political elite is solely concerned with creaming the system for its own advantage. The citizens are therefore of little concern other than to return the political elite to power. There were frequent declarations by EDL supporters that the political system presently more resembles a dictatorship rather than democracy. Essentially, the defining contention was that the system was structured in a top-down arrangement, with influence inertly amassed at the top.

This is in accord with the notion of post-democracy (Crouch 2004), which asserts that, whilst democratic institutions remain in place in the present era, they have become to a significant degree redundant of worth. To expand momentarily on the concept of post-democracy, it refers to a political system that has been annexed by a self-serving elite, with business interests at its heart. It was notable that, whilst the political elite was ubiquitously castigated, the capitalist elite and its relationship with the political elite was not a significant concern of EDL supporters. Crucially, the systemic failure of democracy was therefore not directly attributed to the influence of neoliberalism over the policies of the main political parties or indeed wider capitalist influences over the political elite.

There was possibly an element of capitalist realism here (Fisher 2011) in which capitalism’s ill effects have acquired an ideologically imperceptible status so that resistance to its negative social, political and economic effects or the location of alternatives to the capitalist system becomes invisible to society. EDL supporters would seemingly displace their frustrations on to ‘other’ objects. It may be the case that on one level Muslims, widely regarded as the antithesis of Western capitalist values, paradoxically act as a scapegoat for the socially, politically and economically damaging consequences of capitalism. The speed of social and cultural change that has been presaged by the global ascendancy of capitalism in the late modern period equates with the discomforting and intangible sense of destabilisation that has come to define the era. This has promoted the need for an ‘other’ that can be blamed as the source of social deterioration in order to bolster the in-group’s feelings of certainty and social coherence (Young 2007).

Here we can identify a perception that equates with post-democracy and the worthlessness of the electoral system:

I vote for none of the main stream parties, they have proven themselves unworthy and all corrupt!... If someone put the Teletubbies on my ballot paper, I would vote for them, they speak more sense than politicians! (Facebook user 6)

we are slaves to our own democracy!!! (Facebook user 7)

As was often the case when addressing such issues there was a notably nihilistic outlook in reference to politics and British democracy. Diken (2009) equates nihilism in a post-political context as comprising feelings of powerlessness, and an inability to accept the world as it is. These are two criteria that chime heavily with the outlook of EDL supporters, with feelings of powerlessness rooted in their working class identity, engendering low self-esteem. However, as was related in the previous chapter, this was not a passive form of nihilism which accepts the uncomfortable reality of the world that it perceives to be imperilled. Rather it propels EDL supporters to overcome low self-esteem, to figuratively challenge and resist the forces that were seemingly responsible for this nihilistic outlook. I will return to develop this point below, but it is important for the moment to reiterate the dynamic of powerlessness and the response to feelings of powerlessness.

As has been noted, from a political perspective, a key element in defining feelings of powerlessness for the working class may be a perception of political disenfranchisement and the abandonment of the working class by the political elite. This was a manifest frustration within the discourse of the networking site users as is demonstrated here:

I think many ordinary working-class people are starting to become completely disillusioned with big party government and even politics all together. They just don’t bother voting anymore. The big parties are increasingly exploiting this and relying on their core voter support and even gerrymandering voting areas by importing ethnics and pandering to them.(Forum user 12)

Such examples underline the class dynamic pertaining to a belief that the mainstream British parties had abandoned the interests of the working class, as the political class pursued its own interests. This quote is notable for its nihilistic tone, with the assertion that working class people had become so disillusioned that they have been effectively complicit in acquiescing to their own disenfranchisement through not participating in elections. The implication here is that the working class has helped in consolidating the status quo of post-politics and the further entrenchment of the power of the elite by not holding the politicians accountable at the ballot box for their policies.

One is urged to compare and contrast this situation with that of post-war Britain, where working class interests were placed at the heart of the political system. It is clear that this perceived abandonment of the working class would likely be a key source of Nietzschean ressentiment*,* which mobilises perceptions of ‘difference’ between social groups (Young 2007).Newman (2000) explains that ressentiment constitutes the moral prejudice of the powerless towards the powerful. It is characterised by the construction of one’s own identity in opposition to an identified ’other’. This is a dynamic that we started to explore in the previous chapter as EDL supporters constructed their identity in contrast to Muslims and any other perceived anti-EDL agents. The vengeful rage that is produced by ressentiment is the product of feelings of weakness and offended pride that accompanies being socially and politically marginalised and which is transformed into an expression of power from the powerless (Sloterdijk 2010).

Here we can identify some of the characteristics of ressentiment:

i aint no brain box i just see as a working class lad what has happened to this country… we are fed up with people coming here thinking they can get everything they want and build there stupid mosques and then try and dictate to us, why should we tolerate this some people might sit back and say nothing, only because they are scared to speak up, well the members of the EDL are not frightend to and we belive our country is worth fighting for like so many of EDL members here amsterdam etc so call us what you want we wont go down without a fight (Forum user 46)

As with much of the discourse of EDL supporters there was a notable mixture of weakness and a sense of shame as to what is deemed to have befallen the nation as a consequence of the growing prominence of Islam. This user touches upon another important issue for EDL supporters in that there was a common perception that Muslims were deemed to be prioritised over ‘natives’ in terms of access to state resources, such as welfare and housing, and that they basically got what they wanted at the expense of everyone else. This was indicative of the economic threat that immigrant groups may pose in a society where there are limited resources, which may lead to prejudicial inter-ethnic attitudes (Zarate et al 2004). This general context is suited to the production of ressentiment and the expression of power, clearly as a means to transcend feelings of weakness and shame, as is evident within the discourse, as the user imagines taking the fight to Islam.

As political ideology has converged under the auspices of a neoliberal consensus and the relations of power between citizens, the state and capitalist corporations reconfigured (Mouffe 2000), this can only have proved to be a thoroughly disempowering process for the body politic. In particular, for the British working class, which during the post-war period had enjoyed significant political authority and a prominent social status. In the British context, the effects of neoliberalism and capitalism can thus be regarded to have weakened the foundations of pride and power held by the once prominent working class as its power has been ceded to other agents. This is the basis for the manifestation of rage. Here there is an acknowledgement that there is a lack of working class political representation and that the political elite will act to protect its own interests. Again the statement closes with a statement of vengeful resistance that symbolises the recapturing of the glory of the English nation:

This country needs a party to represent the massive working class vote there is to be had… Whatever party arises out of all this, it will be bombarded by mud slinging form the old main three parties. They are not going to let their gravy train go without a fight. We can do it, and we can storm the political stage in the UK, so let’s get cracking. WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK!!(Forum user 13)

The status quo of post-politics is notionally challenged as a consequence of the presence of the EDL which, according to the user, will facilitate the rise of a political party that will democratically displace the corrupt mainstream parties. Therefore, we may regard the political elite and furthermore, the situation of post-politics as inimical to the return to the ‘original state’, another impediment to the realisation of true happiness for the imagined community, alongside the presence of minority groups. As was ever the case, EDL supporters were savvy at constructing a worldview that homogenised and simplified the threat posed by both Islam and the political elite to justify their own ideological ends. The political elite was constructed as a figure of hate, as were Muslims, as being a threat to the nation, a threat which required the attention of the EDL in order to confront it.

It has been shown that moral indignation and strong negative emotion were two significant features of EDL identity. This was exploited by the organisation’s leaders and its supporters and channelled both ‘upward’ toward the political elite and ‘downward’ toward Muslims. The use of networking sites as a forum for the disaffected clearly facilitated this process and opened it up to a potentially global audience and, as was touched on earlier, there were individuals who participated from all around the world, expressing similar grievances to those of English nationals. As, in a situation of post-politics, politics is becoming increasingly invisible, shifting from the citizen at local or national level, toward the global (Bourdieu 2000), as was referred to in the previous chapter, the EDL seemingly acted as a power base, allowing its supporters the opportunity to critique and resist various globalised forms of power and processes that were regarded to have a deleterious effect at local level. This highlights the utility of the EDL’s global-national-local worldview as it can construct itself as functioning on any of these three scales as a vehicle of resistance to a perceived threat. These threats were typically focused on issues surrounding immigration, terrorism and abstract notions of cultural contagion.

To address Muslim immigration in a post-politics context, this was widely regarded by EDL supporters as part of a master-plan, enabled by an acquiescent political elite, whereby Muslims were seeking to gradually realise a demographic shift in their favour that will leave them electorally dominant:

Islam's conquest is not through violent Jihad only. Demographic (population) explosion through immigration and high birth rate is a cheaper and a fail safe method. Once numerical superiority is achieved, Muslim's can achieve power through the ballot-box without firing a single shot. After the instruments of power (the Police, the Courts, the Army etc.) are captured and become transformed into Islamic tools then, the true Islamic killing fields will start(Forum user 9).

Such a position highlights the suspicion attributed to immigration by EDL supporters. The perverse logic inherent within this discourse implies a further stage to a future post-political state in which democratic institutions are subverted and a violent Islamic regime takes power. This invokes notions of a Foucauldian (1998) biopolitical state in Britain, in its most extreme form, which places the English as the Islamic state’s ‘other’ and implies the potential annihilation of the nation. That Islam is regarded to be seeking world domination in such a manner imbues this type of thinking with a global-local dynamic, in that it constructs the socio-political threat perceived to be associated with Islamic immigration as occurring simultaneously on a global and local level. This was manifest within supporters’ discourse and, as was noted in the previous chapter, enabled them to interpret events linked to Islamic expansionism that occur around the globe through the same lens, and undifferentiated from, what is occurring at a national level or within local communities. For example, through sharing media reports and video media of violent Islam from around the world, Muslims were attributed violent and oppressive characteristics and blamed for conducting similar such acts within England’s local communities.

It was notable that the temporal triad of past, present, and future invoked a differentiated intensity of (in)security within the discourse of EDL supporters. Nostalgia for the past promoted profound feelings of security. The present was a period of uncertainty infused with latent and manifest expressions of insecurity. The future was vehemently feared for what it will bring to bear on the English nation and its culture, as is evidenced here:

i thank i grew up in the seventis and eightis, marrid in the nineties , but now i hav kids and i feel despair for there future,keep ur kids away from muzzis. (Forum user 14)

Doesn't it say it all about this country today when a person born and raisied here would wish they lived there life in the early 20th century,Two world wars,but more respect and love of Britian than there will ever be,what the hell have my kids got to look forward to,(watching there back).This is our country,but for how long. (Facebook user 8)

I am a Grandmother and I am leading my family to the fight some agree some think I am an alarmist, I fight on because it is them that I am fighting for my parents fought in WW11 to give me a beautiful country and I will do EVERYTHING I can to do the same for my children. (Facebook user 9)

This can all be made sense of within a post-politics framework, based on what has been set out above. In terms of the past, members hark back to the era of working-class prominence and socio-political strength, as well as an abstract belief in the era of the ‘original state’ and glory of a past England. The present uncertainty may be regarded as a representation of the insecurity of post-politics and a latent unease with the current phase of capitalism. The future invokes visions of a feared biopower, which will tear down the structures of capitalism and Western values. It appears that it is this projected future that the EDL fundamentally seeks to resist.

## Theorising the English Defence League as an entity of post-politics

In the previous section we focused on how the EDL’s supporters rejected the present political system and how in a manner this placed them within a context of post-politics. Here we will consider the EDL from a perspective whereby the organisation is feeding into and functioning to consolidate post-politics as it attempts to challenge the forces it defines as responsible for working class subjugation.

Perhaps the best way to theorise the EDL is as a perverse by-product of the apparent disenfranchisement that the political system has come to represent for sections of the working class. The EDL seeks to resist post-politics, but at the same time it is a fundamentally anti-democratic force that seeks to oppress a minority. Although it has been suggested that the EDL fears a future Islamist biopower, the EDL itself could be regarded as being an aspirant biopower that would offer security to the nation through controlling the presence of Muslims within national borders. The networking sites were a place where EDL supporters could gather and collectively imagine asserting some ‘control’ over what was perceived to be an increasingly threatening minority population:

The source of our trouble is political correctness and spineless politicians who cave in to any muslim demands.Free speech must restored and protected by law as in the USA.The benefit system needs to be reformed in a way that it discourages muslims from waging “baby jihad”.Any muslims caught on preaching hatred should be immediately removed from the country along with his family without a right to return.The cops need to get some balls and the judges should apply very harsh sentences.Building of new mosques must be stopped as they are main breeding grounds for terrorists. (Forum user 15)

The EDL therefore theoretically functions as a dialectical entity that simultaneously challenges and consolidates post-politics. The sense of socio-political powerlessness that is a feature of post-politics for the working class, and which is a defining feature of EDL identity, motivates a desire for an emancipatory type of security that is fixated on liberating the identity’s adherents from their oppression through displacing it onto a defined ‘other’. The user above articulates a typical post-political antagonism based on the perception that the political class has been facilitating Muslim interests, which is implied to be oppressive to non-Muslims. The user then goes on to proffer how Muslims may be constrained in their apparent subjugation of non-Muslims with the implementation of policies that would be popular with Islamophobes and which would effectively bring about the persecution of Muslims. This was a typical framing within the networking sites that rationalised greater control over Muslims as a legitimate defence against the sense of endangerment they posed to the nation; be that endangerment through the influence they have over the political elite or through the notional ‘anxiety of incompleteness’ (Appadurai 2006), which their presence poses with regard to damaging the purity of the nation and inhibiting the nation’s return to its ‘original state’.

Castells (2012) articulates how the emergence of social movements has been facilitated by internet social networks, which act as spaces of autonomy beyond the control of governments. Castells also implicitly acknowledges the milieu of post-politics that will likely produce organisations intent on challenging the status quo, based on what he defines as a deep distrust of the political institutions managing society. People may be compelled to take matters into their own hands and partake in other forms of collective action outside the traditional institutional channels to achieve their political goals. Castells cites the convergence of the emotions of outrage and hope as a spur to the formation of social movements. Indeed from its very outset the EDL was premised on an antagonistic outrage at the acts of Muslim extremists toward British servicemen and the hope that the creation of the EDL would ultimately defend the brilliance of the nation. Here we can capture the contrasting emotions of outrage and hope that were frequently evident within the discourse of EDL supporters:

Take a read of "Londonistan", you'll see how successive governments have caused and allowed and encouraged this situation. Never in the history of Britain has such a small demographic of people expected to be allowed to ride rough shod over the majority! Wake up and face the fact that there are no "Moderate" Muslims and that is the reason that they will never sort their own manor out. I'll stand shoulder to shoulder with my fellow EDL members against this scourge for as long as it takes! (Facebook user 10)

To aid in the expression of outrage the user references a book, *Londonistan*, written by Melanie Phillips (2006), a columnist for the *Daily Mail* who offers a somewhat sensationalist critique of London as a haven for Islamic extremism. The book is used as evidence by the user to indicate a conspiring relationship between the government and Islam to facilitate the dominance of the Islamic minority. All Muslims, including moderates, are deemed to be part of this conspiracy. Outrage at the relationship between Islam and the British government is infused with hope when the user makes reference to the EDL in fighting the alleged threat. Therefore, as Castells (2012) would likely anticipate, these were two prominent emotions that were often present within the discourse of networking site users and which functioned to fuel the production of the EDL’s Islamophobic ideology and its distorted worldview.

One can understand how these emotions interact with the low self-esteem and persecution-complex that was central to EDL identity. The low self-esteem generated within an EDL post-politics context – whereby the interests of the political class have ostensibly converged with the interests of Islamic expansionism to the detriment and persecution of the disenfranchised working class – would provoke a sense of outrage. However, as was noted earlier, persecution is also likely to act as a basis for a reaction of resistance. Being seemingly subjected to persecution will have promoted the production of ressentiment and provided the motivational drive for EDL supporters to fight the source of their persecution. This was a driving force of the EDL as the organisation constantly sought to invert its sense of victimhood into concerted action. Of course, Castells (2012) was relating to a more progressive type of social movement – for example such as those that emerged to fire the Arab Spring – as opposed to a far right movement such as the EDL that was driven by an irrational hatred of Muslims. Young (2007) makes the pertinent assertion that some manifestations of resistance to political hegemony we may not like, and this most certainly chimes with widespread perceptions of the EDL, especially those that are frequently articulated within the mainstream media. From a moralistic point of view, the EDL even regarded its own cause as on a par with other such outwardly progressive movements as those that railed against dictatorial regimes in Africa and the Middle-East, as is hinted at here:

…will our political elite ever listen to the British people ! ! They haven't for the last 50 years , if they still don't I think its gearing up for a western winter to try and get some democracy back into our country. (Forum user 16)

It is clear that the user above saw the worthiness of the EDL’s agenda, through framing the British government in the same light as Arab dictators, and therefore claiming the moral high ground. It was a somewhat precarious framing that presented the EDL as freedom fighters, but it was once again a way of boosting self-esteem through legitimising the EDL as a commanding force challenging post-politics.

## Political allegiance

An important issue that undermined the EDL’s (and more broadly the British far right’s) resistance to working class subjugation under post-politics was the organisation’s formal political allegiance. In terms of political allegiances it is crucial to highlight that this was a fundamentally contested component of identity for EDL supporters who had divergent political loyalties. In this section we will take a look at the parties with which EDL supporters would tend to affiliate and the internal tensions these affiliations would produce.

During the data collection period the EDL made a formal association with an emergent political party, the British Freedom Party (BFP). This was a typical far right party concerned with policies surrounding the preservation of national culture and identity as well as withdrawal from the European Union (EU). This alliance proved controversial for some members due to the fact the BFP was established by former members of the British National Party (BNP). Any association with the BNP was a contentious matter for some EDL supporters, due to the perception that the BNP was popularly regarded as a racist organisation, as was expressed here:

It is very important that you leave the whole BNP stuff be 100%. I know footie people and I know most of you aren’t racist, neither am I… The BNP, apart from being vile, has been around for ages and has achieved nothing (luckily). Why would you expect that to change?(Forum user 17)

In fact the EDL, in order to present itself as an anti-racist organisation, distanced itself from the BNP and therefore there was animosity between the two organisations. This of course did not inhibit many EDL supporters from championing the BNP within the networking sites and it was clear that this could provoke some of the more ‘purist’ supporters who regarded themselves as anti-racist and who clearly did not want the EDL to associate with the BNP. Another party that was popular, but contentious, with EDL supporters was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP, which is becoming an increasingly mainstream party due to its electoral success has concerned itself with rejecting the credibility of the EDL, as UKIP regarded the EDL as racist and clearly felt an association with the EDL would be damaging for its future electoral prospects. There existed, however, a significant amount of support for UKIP from EDL supporters. The National Front (NF) received a small amount of support within the networking sites, but due to its overtly violent and racist history and associated lack of electoral success, the NF brand was relatively weak amongst the overwhelming majority of EDL supporters.

Suffice it to say the three mainstream political parties were to a large extent spurned by the EDL, with little support being expressed for them within the networking sites. It was interesting that the Labour party in particular was a reviled entity, a point that is worth dwelling on for a moment:

Communists have infiltrated every level of society and… demoralised people just cannot except reality even when the evidence is stuffed under their noses. That is how the British people are today - ignorant because they’ve become demoralised under the labour administration of Blair and Brown. Fortunately for Britain, a few of us, - The EDL, March for England and like minded groups have seen the insidious danger of Islam and their leftist allies. (Forum user 5)

This was indicative of the EDL’s rejectionist view of the Labour party. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were particular figures of hate in this regard. It underlines that it was the ‘New’ Labour strain of politics that was the focus of contempt. This is an issue touched on in previous chapters, but which requires reiteration in order to place it within a post-political context. With the Labour party of old having occupied the left of the political spectrum, the genesis of New Labour would severely rework this relationship (Jones 2012). Through adopting neoliberal ideology New Labour engendered a huge shift away from the British political left, which had damaging implications for working class identity and helped promote feelings of working class disenfranchisement (Cruddas 2006). This had perverse implications in terms of how the EDL supporters related to the left. The EDL denigrated all of its opponents as leftists, as if belonging to the left had become ignoble and anti-English. As is clear here, the left was defined as a threat to the nation through its association with Islam:

Fortunately for Britain, a few of us, - The EDL, March for England and like minded groups have seen the insidious danger of Islam and their leftist allies. Thank God for Tommy, Kev and the rest! (Forum user 41)

The rejection and vilification of the left may be in part symbolic, related to the emasculation that has been attributed to working class identity. Through castigating ‘others’ as leftist and as a threat to the nation EDL supporters distanced themselves from their traditional left working class association. At the same time they latently self-deprecated in reference to their own working class identity that was a weakened construct, defined as such by long established ties to the left and trade unions. As a consequence this working class association with the far right could be interpreted on the level of post-politics as the product of working class political alienation that has propelled EDL supporters to the polar opposite of the political spectrum as a means of ‘othering’ unwanted aspects of their own traditional working class identity, projecting the weaknesses of the working class leftist association onto their ‘other’. At the same time, this functioned to aid in the construction of an ostensibly ‘strong’, right-wing, nationalist identity forged in comparison to their ‘other’.

The withdrawal of working class representation by the Labour party and the traditional left was rationalised by the networking site users within an Islamophobic context; this being that the left had switched its allegiance to supporting Islam and Islamic interests:

Many of us are from families with socialist backgrounds, socialism forgot about us whilst concentrating on islamic "issues", so maybe I will have an active interest in the BFP [British Freedom Party],I just need fundamental answers of how they are going to achieve and threaten the big 3. (Facebook user 11)

It was therefore the case that EDL supporters had found themselves favouring political parties of the far right (UKIP’s position as a far-right party is becoming increasingly contestable as it shifts away from the fringe of British politics), the popularity of such parties being a consequence of the political vacuum engendered by post-political life that encourages people to engage with populist parties that offer a different message from the mainstream parties (Crouch 2004). That there was no consensus regarding which political party the EDL should formally take to its heart and incorporate into its political identity was seemingly damaging to the organisation’s homogeneity, promoting instability in relation to its identity as it would provoke tensions between supporters in the networking sites.

It also spoke volumes about the homogeneity of the far right in Britain generally and its failure to make significant electoral progress, due to its fragmented and internally inharmonious nature:

if we cant unite under a single party we are f\*\*ked, we cant even come to a concensus on here where we are broadly of a similar opinion, we are a joke in this country and our kids are going to pay dearly for it, sorry but anyone who doesnt vote BNP or BFP at the next election you are the problem not the muslims. (Forum user 18)

Such examples highlighted the fragmentary politics of the far right, which were exhibited by the networking site users. The user above typified the anger of many EDL supporters relating to the inability of the organisation to agree on a shared and unified political path. There was a deep sense of insecurity attached to the fact that the nation had not awoken to the Muslim threat and united behind the BNP or BFP. The user invokes a common paradigm of threat focused on the nation’s children as being in danger as a consequence of this complacency. Undoubtedly, through framing the threat in such emotive terms, as endangering the nation’s next generation, fear for the nation’s future was inculcated, and to a maximal extent. This could also be regarded as a subtle mobilisation approach, which seeks to mobilise opinion and provoke action to resist the prospective threat.

Some users recognised the equivalence of political agendas across the main far right political parties and the EDL, declaring the need for a combined effort in order to overcome the corrupt mainstream parties:

The bnp bfp ukip and edl need to come together as they all want the same basic things us out of Europe end of politics as we know it (corrupt) end of stupid pc laws and the coutry back on its feet with its traditions and history upheld and intact that's the only was the big 3 can be defeated. (Facebook user 12)

The implied cure for post-politics here is simple in that all British far right organisations must unite in order to challenge the corrupt form of politics that is being promulgated by the three mainstream parties and to restore the nation to its former state of glory.

At a deeper level the factionalism and the inability of the British far right to mobilise as a homogenous entity may be related to a certain confusion regarding the nature of the ‘hated’ object. The diffuse and often intangible forces of globalisation are worthwhile considering in this regard, as its destabilising tendencies may invoke a crisis of identity (Young 2007). The contemporary far right seems to a significant degree functioning to resist the forces of globalisation, but is perhaps impaired in this task by their incorporeal nature. As the far right rails against notions of ‘cultural threat’ and ‘loss of identity’ it is itself debilitated by a destabilising crisis of identity, the product of confusion regarding the nature of the war it is waging and, most importantly, the enemy it is opposing. This confusion is divisive and has culminated in the creation of a range of political parties and groups that profess to have the ultimate solution; however, each of these groups has its own identity and they are incommensurate. As a consequence we see different groups emerge with their own agendas in tacking the perceived threat to the nation; these are agendas of differing levels of extremeness with differing approaches to dealing with the problem, which acts to split the far right audience and consolidate the lines of division. For example, the EDL is fixated on Muslims and the threat of terrorism. The organisation takes to the streets and is willing to use violence in order to resist the spread of Muslims and Islamic ideology in England. On the other hand there is UKIP, which is more overtly concerned with the broader issue of immigration, not through fixating on one ethnic group in a manner that would imply ethno-racial victimisation, and UKIP does not partake in street demonstrations or condone any form of violent resistance. These two organisation’s identities are entirely incommensurate and no formal association between the two could ever be established as a consequence, thus demonstrating how differentiated political allegiances amongst EDL supporters was an inherently fractious reality for the organisation

## The European Union

The EU was often discussed by EDL supporters within the networking sites. It was unsurprisingly a reviled political entity in their eyes, in particular in terms of the free movement of people having had a large impact on inward migration to Britain. Here the EU is explored from the perspective of post-politics.

The production of EU hatred could be broadly considered to fall into two categories: corruption and sovereignty. With regard to corruption, as we can see below, the EU suffered from being ascribed the same dishonest motives as the main three British political parties:

our duty is too our country and our people not the e.u or the 3main political party,s who are only init for what they can get,each and everyone of them have nothing but contempt for the electorate and only pretend to show concern when they are after your vote. (Facebook user 13)

The right-wing British press has a tendency to portray the EU as a means for European politicians to extort money and privilege for their own ends, whilst contributing little to the common good of Britain. This notion of corruption and lack of representation was unsurprisingly endorsed by many EDL supporters. It is not difficult, therefore, to theorise the EU as sitting comfortably within a post-politics frame.

Hermann (2007) claims that the EU has acted to institute neoliberal policies, promoting a shift away from the notion of a European social model that was fundamentally intended to protect the interests of EU citizenry. This is an interesting contention if one considers that Greece and Italy recently had technocrats undemocratically imposed in the role of Prime Minister as part of a process of driving through economic austerity measures that were enacted from above by the EU and which were unpopular with electorates. Through resistant expressionism in the networking sites against the practices of the EU, especially those in relation to immigration, EDL supporters could again be theorised as implicitly resisting the popularly disempowering forces of post-politics, in this instance at a supra-national scale. Through challenging the credentials of this powerful institution they were active in its ‘othering’, defining it as an enemy of the nation.

With regard to sovereignty, as is clear here, a key issue for EDL supporters in relation to the EU and British sovereignty was border control and immigration:

All those sacrifices were may in vain only for the polititions to sell us out to the eu and open the floodgates to millions of migrants to invade our once great land slowly turning it into a 3 world country. (Facebook user 14)

Islamic centres of this nature are undermining the religous stability of the country. They dont want chohesion they want division so that they can get sessesion. The EU is preventing Britain from controling its borders so it is inevitable that the government whether left wing or right wing will lose control of islamic areas of the county.The police and army are already vastly outnumberd. (Facebook user 15)

British membership of the EU was regarded as having precipitated a substantial diminution in authority regarding how the government may control the inward movement of people from certain EU countries, due to the policy of free movement of people between member states. The perception of uncontrolled borders therefore generated significant anxiety. Irrespective of the fact that there were no Muslim member states within the EU, the notion of unknown and uncontrolled bodies moving across the border was defined by a few networking site users as a critical security threat. Whilst some EDL supporters were generally anti-immigration, regardless of the ‘type’ of immigrant, many would conflate immigration and border control with Islamic expansionism and a clash of civilisations between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. For a large number of users, the fact that it was largely only white bodies that were free to move under the auspices of the EU was an irrelevant reality.

The following was typical of a demographic concern regarding the percentage of Muslims in Britain and the user notes that at present the British population is currently three per cent Muslim whilst expressing worry about what will happen if that figure reaches twenty per cent:

god help us if they get too 20% theres 3 % now god help us they do not conform to our society they do not believe in what we believe in yet they move here stay here use our resources take our benefits use our nhs yet spit in the faces of our troops and burn poppys that remind familys of there loss about time this government put up or shipped out them selves with these extremists and left it to someone who is prepared to go against the eu beuacrats who we are listening too even though we dont use the euro we use pound notes with the queens head on about time we stood as a nation against these extremists simple as. (Forum user 19)

The fact that there was no substance in associating the non-Muslim EU with a Muslim-generated demographic shift and the threat of Islamic extremism was a matter aside. The truth claims of EDL supporters were used to fashion an egocentric reality that denigrated Muslims and the EU as a combined threat to the nation.

Sunstein (2009) recognises the utility of conspiracy theories as providing a simple explanatory narrative of a phenomenon. Whilst the above quote was not a conspiracy theory as such, there was an identifiable process at work that was inherent within much of the discourse collected from the networking sites. This involved the conflation of two or multiple discussion themes to construct an integrated grand narrative that was ideologically appealing for the EDL and its cause. The utility of conflating things in this manner was that it would make sense of an otherwise complex world, thus diminishing the feelings of destabilisation and insecurity that were produced to an extent by globalisation (Young 2007). If we return to the quote above as an example, we see there were multiple themes alluded to, including: population demographics, the EU, extremism, resource allocation, and the ‘War on Terror’. These themes have global, national, local contexts and they were ideologically woven into the discourse in a manner that conformed to the EDL’s Islamophobic worldview, through relating to underlying notions of threat and persecution posed by Muslims to ‘natives’. Additionally, the narrative aided in the construction of the ‘other’; incorporating the British government that was regarded to be indifferent to the national interest, Muslims that were an ‘extreme’ threat to the national interest, and the EU which appears to be protecting the interests of Muslims. In effect the ‘other’ was defined as being intrinsically against the interests of the nation and therefore could be regarded as an inhibitor to the realisation of working class emancipation from its post-political oppression.

## Rage

Earlier on reference was made to the notion of ressentiment and the production of rage and this is an idea that should be explored in greater detail as it could be regarded as an important feature of the Islamophobic identity. As will be discussed, the networking sites were a tool for promoting a sense of social disorder attributable to the influence of Muslims. However, the sites also allowed for the production of an empowering type of rage that transcended insecurities, such as those associated with feeling a loss of control.

If one considers that ressentiment engenders an anger and bitterness that mobilises feelings of difference between groups (Young 2007), it is not surprising that violent and racist discourse was an important feature of the EDL networking sites. It must, however, be noted that these themes were often subject to contestation and internal debate among supporters, with the EDL’s official position defining violence and racism as unacceptable. Nevertheless, such discourse was often subtly and overtly present within the discourse of the networking site users. The frequent use of extreme discourse is an excellent measure to determine the salience of insecure rage within the lives of EDL supporters.

To focus first on the production and expression of rage, the following example was typical of how EDL supporters would express antagonism about the impact of Islamic values on the national culture. The tone of the statement becomes increasingly agitated as the user reflects on the relative freedoms enjoyed by Muslims in this country:

They give us fuck all in their land, u cant even practice your religion their for fucks sake, and even though we get sweet FA [fuck all] in their part of the world they demand and succeed to get all they want in the UK. how about a church in the middle east? haha u gotta be fuckin kiddin me mate, not a hope in hell, yet we are using up British land space for god damn mosks ( cant be arsed to spell it properly) which we know are used to promote and educated extremists, im not against foreigners i live in Shanghai at least the chinese work hard and dont suck on welfare and in general dont cause trouble but what im against 100% is EVIL ISLAMIFICATION IF ENGLAND. a muslim guy pushed my gf onto the ground in a club last week im proud to say i gave him a good kick in, oh yeah sue me! god save the queen! (Facebook user 17)

Interestingly, the user was not resident in Britain, but in China, and therefore could be regarded as an overseas member of the imagined community. This did not lessen the user’s dissatisfaction with the perceived state of affairs in his homeland, thus highlighting the strength of the imagined tie that EDL supporters felt. The user recounts an encounter during which he alleges to have assaulted a Muslim and through expressing this theoretical act of resistance the anger that is associated with the discourse turns to a sort of cathartic triumphalism. Using the concept of ressentimentand Newman’s (2000) notion of the moral prejudice of the powerless against the powerful, the underlying dynamic of this quote which accorded with much of the discourse of the networking site users was that the powers that be in this country, often in reference to the government, were responsible for creating a two-tier socio-political system that favours the interests of Muslims and persecutes and disempowers ‘natives’. This belief would appear to be a significant catalyst for the manifestation of ressentiment. It would to a large extent help with the process of infusing EDL identity with a persecution complex, based on the ideology that the people of the nation are oppressed and discriminated against. On one level it rationalises hatred of the powerful, but it also forms the basis for the expression of rage, which was often focused on Muslims who, as was acknowledged in the previous chapter, are effectively a weaker social group than the largely white working class EDL. That is not to say rage was not expressed upward toward the powerful – it frequently was – but the type of rage levelled downward at Muslims was notably more intense and perverse and often more aggressive.

One particular topic of conversation that was highly effective at producing an ‘othering’ rage was in relation to ‘Asian’ paedophile gangs. During the data collection phase the number of such gangs being exposed within the media appeared to proliferate and consequently the overall media coverage attending to the issue was substantial. It was unsurprising that these incidences became a key topic of conversation within the networking sites, and media articles covering the stories were fervently posted and shared. It has been found that the media tend to present a negative image of Islam and Muslims as deviant and a troubling influence within society (Shadid and Van Koningsveld 2002). This negative framing of Muslims was clearly exploited by the EDL within the networking sites, as they shared media articles and often used the content of the articles as a tool to aid in the construction of the Muslim ‘other’ as they interacted and collectively imagined their foe. The influence of the EDL administrators was also important in this respect, as they played a key role in constructing and regulating the social networking environment in which the users interacted, through initiating discussions (often with the use of media articles and videos) and controlling the norms of user interaction. This is a topic that will be covered when we discuss mobilisation later on, but it is important to highlight how this environment could become primed for the production of rage.

Facebook was especially well suited to the stoking up of negative sentiment as it was a dynamic platform and was heavily used by EDL supporters. To return to the issue of grooming gangs, the proliferation of cases and the intense media attention was seized upon by the EDL, as its administrators would post on Facebook a succession of status updates relating to the issue, often including source links to media articles or YouTube videos. The strategy was clearly to provoke moral panic, fear and ultimately rage. The following series of quotes is typical of what would unfold:

Bolton take-away at centre of grooming claim , only 300yds from a school! Locals confronted these scum, we are in contact and will be watching . Peado scum off our streets! (Facebook administrator 2)

This was a status update from an EDL administrator initiating a discussion concerning a food vendor allegedly at the centre of a child grooming case. For added emotiveness the vendor was noted to be situated near to a school, the implication being that there were plenty of nearby children to be preyed upon. The quote closes with an actual chant “Peado scum off our streets!”, which is in fact what supporters attending EDL demonstrations would collectively sing. The use of chants was a standard mobilisation strategy, appropriated within the networking sites, which in effect emotionally connected users within the virtual sphere to the physical sphere of the event. It could be theoretically equated with an invocation of the imagined community, whereby the chant allowed users to imagine themselves at an event as part of the gloried collective and singing with fellow supporters. It was therefore an identity and emotion mobilising tactic.

The emotive nature of the status update succeeded in provoking a similarly emotive response from EDL supporters, including:

these take aways are fronts for things more sinister, like illegal courts, terror funding and child grooming and trafficking. (Facebook user 18)

Here the user stokes up the fear levels through linking local takeaways with “sinister” global phenomena, such as terrorism and child trafficking; another example of the undifferentiated scaling of the EDL’s worldview, addressed in the previous chapter. Castells (2012) notes that social movements may overcome fear with the expression of anger and the following quote evidences this process, following on from the fear context of the quote above:

Chop their dicks off and sew them to their foreheads, bastards! (Facebook user 19)

This was a typically perverse response from a user epitomising the violent rage expressed from many users. Following the logic of psychoanalytic projection outlined by Adorno et al (1950), the networking sites were used by EDL supporters to externalise feelings of powerlessness and inferiority as well as subconscious perversions , which were projected onto Muslims, a socially marginal group; this occurred along with the expression of a retributive form of aggression in response to the social problems Muslims were blamed as being responsible for .The threat and weakness associated with the alleged presence of child rapists, traffickers and terrorists, was transformed within the networking sites into an expression of sadistic power, through imagining the mutilation and humiliation of an offending groomer.

Although outwardly perverse, such imaginings were clearly cathartic within the networking sites as users were able to gratifyingly imagine themselves meting out their own form of justice. Again this is something Castells (2012) highlights as central to social movements, that being they tend to be rooted in notions of injustice and aspire for justice. It remains the case that the EDL’s notions of justice and injustice were highly subjective and skewed to the organisation’s Islamophobic ideology, and also to the psychological needs of its support base which was clearly disposed to a need to overcome feelings of weakness with violent fantasies of Muslim oppression.

Attempts to diminish fear and threat through the expression of rage were, however, constantly undermined by the production of further threat and fear scenarios that enhanced feelings of insecurity, as was demonstrated by the comment that followed the previous response:

so how many of these cases is that now? Put them all together its an epidemic. (Facebook user 20)

It was this ‘epidemic’ impression that the EDL administrators were clearly seeking to construct through their constant status updates with stories and comments relating to the subject and concomitant shaping of the social networking environment to propagate the idea. As a consequence there was a coercive cycle of fear production and rage displacement within the networking sites, as administrators and other users would fuel fears and then express a resistant form of rage toward the perceived source of threat.

Altheide (2003) notes that the media uses a ‘discourse of fear’ to grab the attention of its audience, but also notes that this discourse can promote a sense that things are out of control. Such a discourse of fear was collectively produced within the networking sites, aided by the sharing of media articles that had an anti-Muslim framing, with the associated effect being a perceived sense of social instability associated with the presence of Muslims within local communities. A feeling of a loss of control is of course an important context for post-politics, associated with working class disenfranchisement and the loss of control this group has experienced in relation to its political destiny, and also through feelings of destabilisation produced by globalisation*.* It was clear that the networking sites functioned to promote the perception of socio-political disorder precipitated by Muslims, thus functioning to legitimise the beliefs of EDL supporters; however, the networking sites were also a device for challenging and resisting the perceived source of destabilisation, that being Muslims, in a collective manner.

It is a reality of late modern society that we have a fascination with fear and that we use cultural artefacts, such as films, books and computers in order to experience fear by proxy; allowing us to endure the emotional investment from a safe distance in our otherwise risk averse culture (Svendsen 2008). This is an aberrant fascination that is relevant to what was occurring within the networking sites, as EDL supporters constructed and confronted their own fears from behind their own computer screen or mobile phone. The majority will never attend an actual demonstration and directly confront the object of their disdain. The networking sites were effectively a safe arena for the experiencing of their inner fears and insecurities, as well as the cathartic release of rage. The Muslim ‘other’ may well be itself a proxy object in this process, an embodiment of the hegemonic forces of globalisation, which have brought a demeaning loss of control of the national and the local for EDL supporters, precipitating a diminishing sense of collective and personal worth.

Foucault’s (1998) concept of biopower helps us understand ultimately how a feeling of control was apprehended by the networking site users. In a political context this was ultimately engendered around controlling the bodies of Muslims; for example, from controlling their access into the state or removing them from it, as is highlighted here:

they should be made to sign a declaration on arrival if they dont like our ways send them straight back to their mud huts in shitland. (Forum user 42)

Unless the growth of the muslim population is slowed and halted, our certainty of losing our entire life culture will be unstoppable. (Forum user 10)

Britain’s ‘far right’ political parties offer the prospect of controlling migrant populations in their manifestos, with strict immigration controls and this was a message that clearly resonated with disaffected working class populations who likely saw this as a way of generating a greater sense of control in their lives.

## Dehumanisation and genocide

At the ‘extreme’ fringe of the EDL the control of bodies had much more disturbing connotations and the drive to protect the nation from Islam resulted in dehumanising and, most disturbingly, genocidal discourse; the product of a ‘predatory identity’. Predatory identities are those “whose social construction and mobilisation require extinction of other categories, defined as threats to the existence of some group defined as we” (Appadurai 2006:51). Such an identity is mobilised based on an interpretation of itself as a threatened majority and the fear of becoming a minority. Appadurai claims that this is the reason why predatory groups will often appropriate pseudo-demographic arguments about the proliferation of their minority enemies. Therefore we can see that this poses a significant symbolic threat to the longevity and integrity of the imagined community – a threat that must be resisted.

Dehumanisation was used by a minority of EDL supporters as a means of resistance to this seeming threat to the nation and it was often manifest within the discourse of the networking site users. In the context of biopower this was theoretically the ultimate tool of bodily control. Through using discourse to deny the ‘other’ its humanity it allowed for maximum hatred to be poured upon Muslims. As they no longer conformed to the typical characteristics of humans, they could be treated as an inhuman aberration within society, which demanded an utter lack of respect. This could be regarded as another manifestation of producing identity in contrast, as through dehumanising the ‘other’ the EDL supporters could legitimise their Islamophobic identity as a positive construct, as it contends with a loathsome enemy not just of the nation but of humanity in general. It emphasised the need to resist the presence of this deviant entity, based on the premise ‘it’ does not belong with ‘us’. As will be shown, this ultimately facilitated the rationalisation of calls to genocide within the networking sites.

The most frequently used object with which Muslims were associated in the dehumanisation process was rats. The following quote was typical of how Muslims were constructed in this dehumanising context:

its time as a nation we made a stand and stop this madness before our country is taken over by these extremist rats if we was over there country building curchs and reading the bible we would be dead we need to stop these muzrat towl heads before its to late and at the same time get rid of this bullshit goverment THIS ENGLAND THIS IS OUR STREETS WE NEED TO TAKE THEM BACK. (Facebook user 21)

Here we can identify the customary threat frame, whereby the ‘other’, regarded as inherently violent, was perceived to be moving closer to the precipice of taking over the nation. The user utilises the notion of “muzrat”, a not uncommon expression within the networking sites. It could be interpreted from the term that this is not a comprehensively dehumanising label for Muslims, as it retains a reference to the Muslim identity, through fixing “muz”, short for Muslim, to the word rat, thus acknowledging this component of Muslim humanness. However, this hybrid Muslim-rat construct is clearly no less demeaning and defines the ‘other’ as a lowly sub-species that is spreading within the glorified nation and evincing a perception of a loss of control of the local, in terms of neighbourhoods and communities.

The following quote addresses the perceived increase in the Muslim population, using somewhat more stark terms:

It is already to late we have let them in an now they breed likes rats. This is why we need to stick together,carry on growing and make a stand.No Surrender. (Facebook user 22)

In line with Appadurai (2006), the user was concerned with the intrusion of the ‘other’ into the nation, and used a pseudo-demographic framing of breeding rats in order not only to dehumanise, but also likely to produce insecurity regarding the ‘other’s’ minority status within the nation, as ‘it’s’ numbers proliferate. Indeed, the use of threatening, endgame type, discourse frames such as “it is already too late…” was often present within the discourse of EDL supporters. It functioned to maximise threat levels and feelings of persecution and ultimately to mobilise a resistance response.

In order to help us properly understand what was occurring within the discourse of dehumanisation, and fundamentally where this kind of discourse can lead, we should consider for a moment Nazi Germany and its relationship with the Jews. In this instance the rat carried the powerful message that Jews were not really human, and this rendered them worthy of annihilation (Hartman 2000). In this situation a predatory identity was salient in legitimising dehumanisation of the Jews so that genocide could be rationalised as a means to the end of defending the purity of the German nation, and of returning the nation to its ‘original state.’ A fringe of EDL supporters would relate in a similar way to Muslims and this is in accord with Appadurai’s (2006:43) contention that minorities are merely “metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project… rooted in the failure of the nation state to preserve its promise to be the guarantor of national sovereignty.” Appadurai claims it is this sense of betrayal that produces the desire to exclude or eliminate these minorities. There was an undeniable sense of betrayal infused within the discourse of networking site users, particularly in how they related to politicians concerning issues such as immigration.

This can be interpreted within a post-politics context as relating to the manner in which globalisation has acted to undermine the powers of the nation state, shifting political power away from the local and national level to the global, as was suggested by Bourdieu (2000). The insecurity this produced for the networking site users, in terms of feelings of defencelessness against diffuse and seemingly uncontrollable external forces affecting the nation, was concomitantly exorcised upon minorities, with a primary fixation on Muslims, in the belief that controlling them would engender a broader sense of control over the fate of the nation and, at an individual level, over their own lives.

Whilst calls to genocide were a notable phenomenon within the networking sites, it is an important precursor to note that the parallels with Nazi Germany are on an entirely theoretical level to aid analysis of the scenario. Extreme discourse captured within a disembodied social networking environment is obviously not consistent with what actually unfolded at the hands of the Nazis and I am making no insinuation that this would be the likely outcome of the genocidal discourse of a few EDL supporters. Nevertheless the discourse was occasionally of a deeply troubling nature:

I would murder the lot of them. Discusting creatures!!! (Facebook user 23)

I'm sick of them there a fucking plague kill em all. (Facebook user 24)

lets just wipe the whole lot out. (Facebook user 25)

In what was the ultimate expression of rage and the ultimate expression of biopower, calls for the annihilation of the ‘other’ were notably present within the discourse of some networking site users. Whilst this could be regarded as an extreme fringe mentality, it was nevertheless an important component of the Islamophobic identity. Such expression often went unchallenged within the networking sites by other users and administrators, and was by implication normatively legitimised. The three examples above were typical of discourse at its most extreme. The first and second users typify the relationship between dehumanisation and rationalised calls for annihilation as the ‘other’ is referred to as ’creatures’ or a ‘plague‘. In this instance, one easily summons up in the mind images of a ghastly plague of rats, which would ordinarily require extermination to prohibit disease.

The point should be made, however, that genocidal expressionism was not solely dependent on the initial presence of dehumanisation, but could be rationalised and popularly accepted in specific contexts. One such context, which has been explored above, was with regard to the grooming of children. The rage generated by this topic alone was enough to rationalise intense hatred of the ‘other’, seemingly based on the fact that abhorrent acts committed against children demanded a vitriolic response of the highest order. This will have acted as a legitimating device for the negative feelings already projected onto the ‘other’. From an identity perspective, it was postulated in the previous chapter that the networking site users constructed the Islamophobic identity in relation to “what it was not”. Therefore, by defining child grooming as an inherently Muslim problem, this immoral characteristic was etched into the ‘other’s’ identity. By contrast the Islamophobic identity was moralised and derived further moral worth through defining itself as a resistance identity (Castells 2010) in respect of its depraved ‘other’; the ultimate act of resistance of course being to demand the nullification of its shadow identity.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the EDL represents a product of the antagonism of post-politics, the organisation being a vehicle that is premised upon a fundamental rejection of the British political mainstream that it sees as ideologically un-differentiable and corruptly self-interested. With the breakdown in adversarial agonistic politics as Britain’s main political parties have adopted a neoliberal political outlook, the EDL has brought a more aggressive brand of politics that is premised on hate and social division. As opposed to extolling the virtues of democratic participation the EDL has satisfied itself through constructing a figure of hate, which could be blamed for the perceived breakdown of the political system and the sense of instability that is the product of globalisation. Perceived disenfranchisement has motivated the EDL’s working class support base to repress its traditional leftist political identity in order to embrace an ostensibly empowering right-wing identity, which ‘others’ as weak and dishonourable any association with the left; the paradox being that supporters were latently ‘othering’ aspects of their own working class identity in a self-purgatory fashion.

The EDL implicitly purports to reject the milieu of post-politics and avers to demand a return to a ‘fair’ political system that serves the needs of the people. However, ‘the people’ is an exclusive category in an EDL context, which on one level engenders the ‘imagined community’ of the English nation, but on a deeper level is predominantly concerned with the representation of white, working class interests. The angry rejection of the interests of Muslims through oppressive ‘othering’ lays out bare the inherently antagonistic reality of the EDL’s politics. This theoretically situates the organisation and its followers as both rejectionists and consolidators of post-politics, in denial of the damaging implications of their socially and politically divisive Islamophobic ideology. The ‘original state’ that the EDL envisages a return to, in the minds of supporters may bring about a pure form of democracy, but on the EDL’s terms it could only thus function upon the removal of Muslims from the equation. The prospect of purging Muslims and setting the nation free from Islam’s troubling influence rationalises rage of the most extreme type, which is acquiescent to the literal destruction of the ‘other’.

It was therefore likely the case that the neoliberal induced blurring of mainstream political identities which has discouraged political participation and encouraged the rise of new collective identities – including those premised upon nationalism (Mouffe 2000) – has been partly responsible for the creation of this antagonistic social movement. With an ideologically defunct political system infected by neoliberalism and a political elite that has abandoned the interests of its electorate – in this case specifically the working-class – a debilitating sense of weakness has consumed a once-proud social group, producing low self-esteem. This has been amplified by other products and processes of globalisation, as well as deindustrialisation, which has brought profound change at a local level; for example, through the influx of migrants into local communities, which has harboured a destabilising sense of socio-cultural change. The EDL is a vehicle of empowerment to challenge these threatening products and processes, be they at a global, national or local level; however, it has done so in a perverse manner through targeting a Muslim scapegoat.

This scapegoat has become the focus of intense hatred and fear, borne of insecurities relating to the present and future, and moral indignation toward the political elite. In this case, the networking sites represent a deviant and liminal public space that caters for the collective expression of strong emotion, most pertinently, rage; this within a fundamentally safe environment for the user who need never directly confront their foe. Through violent and dehumanising expression a troubling identity is constructed that likely evinces an empowering catharsis effect, but which has disturbing implications attributed to the sentiment that is wired into it. Chambers (2005) notes that individuals are likely to be less constrained by their social characteristics in an online context than they would be in an offline one. This raises searching questions as to whether these liberating aspects of the social networking environment have a radicalising effect on the identity construct, thus maximising antagonistic hate and the psychological step toward “distilling a will to negation, a ‘radical nihilism’, from the cynicism or ‘passive nihilism’ of post-politics” (Diken 2009:98). This radical form of nihilism is willing to challenge the seeming source of meaningless of life – a corrupt political system and minorities that threaten the national way of life – and the associated feelings of worthlessness that would otherwise produce an apathetic type of subjectivity. It therefore helps its adherents to transcend the debilitating condition of powerlessness that defines post-politics and which is inherent within working class identity.

# 6/ The ‘other’ and the clash of civilisations

This chapter will build on important themes that have been related to in the previous chapters, most prominently security and the production of the ‘other’ and the non-corporeal production of the EDL’s worldview within the networking sites. The issue of racism within the context of Islamophobia will be addressed through examining the power dynamic that exists between the EDL and its Muslim ‘other’. It will become clear that the narratives produced by EDL supporters within the networking sites are oppressive and thus racialised. The chapter will ultimately explore how EDL supporters perceive a clash of civilisations between the Muslim and non-Muslim world to be unfolding, currently in a subtle manner but with disastrous future implications as it transitions to a more overt conflict. On the side of the Muslim world EDL supporters imagine a hegemonic range of anti-EDL agents – including the government, police and trade unions – which is conspiring against the EDL and the English nation in favour of the interests of Islamic expansionism. The notion of conspiracy is central to this chapter as we take a deeper look into how EDL supporters construct the world around them as being on the cusp of inter-civilisational war. The role of conspiracy theories and most pertinently the Eurabian conspiracy theory – which envisages the European continent as threatened by growing numbers of Muslims within its borders – will be explored as well as how the conspiracy theory receives mainstream legitimation through the mainstream media. Conspiracy theories relieve strong emotions and provide a simple explanation of what can be complex issues in the world (Sunstein 2009). The EDL’s social networking environment, as a space infused with insecurity and anger, will therefore be foregrounded as ripe for the sharing in and consolidation of conspiracy theories that confirm the worldview of users active within the space. It will be shown that at the same time this is a space where narratives of conspiracy help networking site users apprehend a sense of control and stability through the process of ‘othering’ Muslims and a range of perceived enemies of the EDL.

## Exploring the racial dynamic

We have touched on issues regarding race and Islamophobia and I would like to delve deeper into this theme as racialised discourse was commonplace within the networking sites. There was a notably racial dynamic in terms of how EDL supporters related to Muslims that is interesting to look at in relation to the clash of civilisations.

In seeking to imagine a scenario of a clash between the Muslim and non-Muslim world, the EDL supporters were active in constructing their own culture and values as fundamentally distinct from that of their Muslim ‘other’. It has been noted how the EDL’s Islamophobic identity was fashioned as a moral binary in relation to ‘what we are not’, and this fashioning was a key feature in determining cultural incommensurateness between Islamic and English cultures. This perception of ‘difference’ fed into feelings of distrust between ‘native’ and Muslim groups and ultimately the possibility of inter-ethnic conflict, a conflict which was imagined by EDL supporters as extending beyond the national level to the global level. So in order to understand how the clash of civilisations was constructed within the networking sites, it is once again worthwhile probing further the ‘othering’ process, with regard to Muslims, partaken in by the networking site users.

Here the user is focused on the perceived local threat posed by Muslims, structuring a discourse that pathologises Muslims, using racialised and at the same time dehumanising discourse:

ive being saying all this for years, freinds of mine hve had to pick there dughters up from the age of 10 onwards from school , and even still the paks stalk slowly in ther cars taunting em as like you cant watch your girls all the time, do as i do and tell ur kids ther is all good in this world except muslims and drill it into them, never go near a muzzi, if one goes toyour school ignore it, if it talks to you ignore it, if it pulls up in a car next to you and opens the window punch it, iv it comes up to u in the street kick it in the nackers gauge its eyes and shout perv as loud as you can,dirty peado muzzi scum, blair, labour and all that allowed uncontrolled muzzi immigration into this country should be tried for treason the \*\*\*\*bags*.* (Forum user 21)

This racialised tone was often inherent within the discourse of EDL supporters. The user appropriates the terms “paks” and “muzzie”. The former is an attempted sanitisation of the word “paki”, a well-known racist referent to Pakistani, and which has an uncomfortable history of racist violence, being associated with “Paki-bashing”, violent attacks meted out often by white people against Pakistani immigrants that came to the fore in the UK from the 1960s (Poynting and Mason 2007). That the term “paki” is often applied in a derogatory fashion toward people with the appropriately coloured brown skin, who are stereotyped as being of Pakistani origin, underlines the racist connotations of this word. The word “muzzie” was often used by the networking site users and its use could in fact be regarded as a notable finding of the research as the word appears to be emergent racist terminology. It was a word that was always steeped in negative symbolism, as highlighted in the quotation, relating to “dirty peado muzzie scum”. Stolcke (1995) notes that racism is engendered around a power dynamic, and indeed, just as with the word “paki”, the word “muzzie” infers a demeaning power dynamic between the protagonist using the term and the intended target.

This power dynamic that existed between EDL supporters and their Muslim ‘other’ was, however, at times ambiguously constructed. The Islamophobic identity was seemingly constructed around profound insecurities and a pervasive sense of fear with regard to the presence and intentions of Muslims. The power dynamic was therefore complex and could on a certain level be interpreted as Muslims oppressing English nationals, as they are perceived by EDL supporters to be acquiring social and political dominance in Britain. In reality envisaging the oppression of white nationals served a purpose of feeding the sense of persecution imagined by EDL supporters that functioned to mobilise opinion against their perceived Muslim oppressor.

The malign characteristics and intentions that were attributed to Muslims as part of the process of their ‘othering’ by the EDL and its supporters, were imagined as thus in order to suit the overall agenda of the organisation and ultimately to appease the socio-psychological insecurities of its working class support base, largely engendered around a disempowering feeling of alienation. Through the expression of Islamophobia and the assertion of nationalist identity a transcendental sense of control could be experienced. ‘Othering’ of Muslims was an expression of power for EDL supporters as they constructed the identity of their ‘other’ in a manner that suited the EDL’s Islamophobic worldview, attributing troubling characteristics to Muslim identity. However, such was the extent of insecurity that was manifest within the discourse of the networking site users – engendered around the perceived threat of Muslims and incorporated into the EDL’s sense of persecution and victimhood – the fear of the ‘other’ would to an extent have been experienced as real and would have likely had a deleterious and threatening effect to self-esteem. Alongside the feelings of power, therefore, there existed feelings of weakness that undermined the positive regard that EDL supporters felt about themselves and the organisation to which they belonged.

It has been documented in the previous chapters how users were savvy at transforming weakness into expressions of strength, as is evident here, as we return to the issue of non-Muslim no-go areas within English communities:

…can i just add about these so called 'no go white areas'. So if an englishman walks into these (your areas might i add as this is your country) where it is muslim community, they get beat up by the muslims. And the edl r suppose to stand there and b peaceful??? At the end of the day if all this hatred continues because of these muslims (not just in this country but every in europe and accross the world) then it is goint to turn into world war 3, i gurantee there wont b any peacefull protesting happening then!!! Nxt march should b in a 'no go white area'.(Facebook user 26)

The user adopts the standard global-national-local scale shifting perspective that seamlessly moves the focus between the scales, initially focusing on Muslim violence at the local level and then implying it is a global problem that might spark a world war due to the inherently violent nature of Muslims. The EDL supporters imagined Muslims as supremacists, motivated to achieve their own global ethno-religious domination. In fact it was the prospect of resisting this threat that had clearly drawn many of the networking site users toward the ostensible collective security that they believed was offered through association with the EDL, an organisation that they believed would eventually liberate the nation from Islam’s influence. EDL supporters could most certainly be defined as victims of their own misshaped and paranoid subjectivity. They imagined a racialised relationship of power that had the ‘other’ as the dominant force. This helped to inform their sense of weakness and victimhood and produced fears pertaining to a future scenario that had the outright subjugation of white and non-Muslim populations locally, nationally and globally, as Muslims were imagined to have annexed local communities, acquired a majority status within the nation and moved aggressively around the world. Paradoxically this imagining resulted in the production of a sense of power for the networking site users, turning the seeming power dynamic on its head through twisting the paranoiac fear into a sense of existential dominance through resistant and often perverse discourse that functioned to demean Muslims and in doing so consolidate the Islamophobic identity construct, legitimating the prevailing perception that Muslim populations should be controlled to avoid their spread.

Gender was another important issue that fed into the ‘othering’ process. In imagining the ‘suspect community’, this user contrasts male and female Muslim behaviour:

Ok am out tonight and I was thinking you never see a muslim woman after dark. Not a burkha or headscarf to be seen. Fine upstanding teetotallers you may think at home looking after their kids? Maybe. So why are the men OUT by the hundred walking around aimlessly in pairs and often alone. Not frequenting any bars so what are they up to? Makes you wonder when you look around your city with a new eye.(Facebook user 2)

Women were largely portrayed by networking site users as unthreatening and domesticated, whilst men were attributed a shady and untrustworthy urban existence after dark. This was a common binary theme promoted by EDL supporters, who sought to define the threatening ‘other’ as the oppressor male. On one level it functioned to attribute Muslim men a misogynistic status and define Islam as paternalistic – misogyny and paternalism being further values that can be negatively contrasted with liberal ‘Western values’ that defined the Islamophobic identity. At a deeper level, however, the construction of a credible narrative of fear is reliant upon the threat that can be imagined emanating from the violent and predatory sexual impulses of the male. Let us remember that this was to a large extent a narrative determined by male EDL supporters.

What could be interpreted as occurring here is an attempt to maximise the sense of threat from Muslims through the construction of a hypermasculine (Mosher and Sirkin 1984) ‘other’, with exaggerated dominant male characteristics based on physicality, sexuality and aggression. In doing this EDL supporters were active in the comparative construction of their own masculinity, as they determined themselves the only willing and able force that could confront this dangerous foe. In reality, on a psychoanalytic level, these aggressive and sexual impulses that were attributed to male Muslims, as we touched on earlier, could be regarded as being projections of hostile impulses from the male ego of EDL supporters onto the male ‘other’, an external object. The anger felt toward Muslims could therefore be seen to be deep-seated fears held by EDL supporters in relation to their own predatory sexuality, which was occasionally evident within their discourse, as in this example where the user imagines the rape of a Muslim who has been sent to prison for child grooming:

I hope he gets gang rapped in the showers , and his \*\*\*\*ter is the size of a \*\*\*\*in bllod orange! … Its called Karma you \*\*\*\*in utter \*\*\*\* ! and there is pleanty more where that came from!! (forum user 43)

Furthermore, the projection of predatory sexual impulses may relate to a denial on the part of EDL supporters that these harms also emanate from within their own communities, as Muslim communities are essentialised as being dangerously perverse constructs and the sole source of child grooming and rape. The hostile impulses that are projected onto the ‘other’ acquire an embodied form in the shape of a Muslim male, where they may be racialised as inherent traits of these populations and ultimately where they can be attacked by users within the networking sites.

The hypermasculine characteristics attributed to the Muslim male feed into an impression of the clash of civilisations as being ‘good’ versus ‘evil’, with ‘evil’ symbolising a predatory Islamic civilisation. EDL supporters defined themselves as ‘good’ in this war as they take the fight to this dangerous civilisation and resist the threat which they saw as the aggressive sexual impulses of Muslim males. Indeed, there was often a significant amount of hysteria within the EDL’s networking sites surrounding this threat, as has been detailed in relation to child grooming gangs. This would produce a frenzied rage within the networking sites and, as was demonstrated above in the user’s perverse discourse, rationalised the imagining of sexually violent acts of retribution against Muslims.

## Conspiracy theories

An additional important component of the persecution-paranoia compound referred to above, allied to the clash of civilisations paradigm, was the role that conspiracy theories played in structuring the worldview of the EDL and its supporters. The notion of Muslim conspiracy was a prevailing subtext to many discussions within the networking sites and this functioned to facilitate the process of categorising Muslims as ‘evil’ and predatory. Here we will consider how conspiracy theories consolidated the in-group and offered psychological appeasement to EDL supporters. Having the benefit of consolidating group boundaries, enhancing self-esteem and providing a means of externalising negative impulses (Sunstein 2009), conspiracy theories proved to be heavily utilised by EDL supporters, constituting a bonding mechanism for this online community. Indeed, the networking sites were clearly an excellent means by which supporters could construct and affirm with a large like-minded audience their ideologically imbued visions of the world.

Paranoid tales of persecution, subversive forces, and impending war constituted a mainstay of discussion. The notion of a clash of civilisations, although not necessarily explicitly named as such by members, was a noticeable overarching discourse framework. To briefly reiterate how the clash of civilisations could be regarded as a conspiracy theory in the context of the EDL, a number of EDL supporters were anticipating a moment in history when the Muslim and non-Muslim world would become embroiled in an overt civilizational conflict. This had significant resonance with the research of Goodwin and Evans (2011), which found that a large proportion of far right supporters surveyed online were expecting some sort of inter-ethnic conflict to occur in Britain in the near future. Across a wide range of contexts fears surrounding the ‘true’ intentions of Muslims were a driving force behind interactions between EDL supporters.

As the user below highlights, the inference of some sort of conspiracy was appropriated by networking site users in order to ascribe meaning to and to help understand various socio-political phenomena, this case immigration, which was deemed to be part of a plan for Muslims to acquire demographic ascendancy in Britain through exponential population growth and to ultimately realise increased political and cultural dominance:

One of the important issues to the islamic problem is immigration. The percentage of muslims grows on an increasing scale even if immigration simply continues level. The birth rate amongst muslim immigrants is not usually mentioned when immigration is talked about. The sheer number of muslims in the country is a focus only to the politicians and local governemnt officials who see their very careers being destroyed if they fail to accomodate this massivly growing section of society. Their prominence in our cities affect the local officers which in turn have inflated control of influence on higher government. Unless the growth of the muslim population is slowed and halted, our certainty of losing our entire life culture will be unstoppable. (Forum user 23)

Fekete (2012) notes that in relation to this kind of Muslim conspiracy theory, even moderate Muslims or those that do not overtly express their ‘Muslimness’ are regarded by those that subscribe to the conspiracy to be ‘camouflaged’ fundamentalists, and thus extremely dangerous. Therefore, the problem was constructed around Muslim immigration in general, as all of the followers of Islam were tarred with the fundamentalist brush and were by implication a threat to the nation.

The Arabic term *Taquiyya*, a religious doctrine whereby a Muslim, if being subject to persecution, may lie and conceal their religious identity (Ibrahim 2010), was often appropriated or inferred by a large number of EDL supporters as evidence that even moderate Muslims could not be trusted. As such it is these moderates that comprise a fundamental threat to the local and national way of life, as is highlighted here:

i'm against islamic extremists 100% but i do have a problem with some moderate muslims in this country aswell. the reason im saying this is cuz its true, they take over local communities and turn all the shops into islamic shops, arab clothing shops, halal food in all the fast food shops, turn places into islamic schools and build more than 1 mosque in the whole area. so why cant they do things the way other people do from a different religious background instead of trying to force us out of our areas and trying to change our way of life. sorry if i offened anyone or people dont want to read this but its true and u can see it with ur own eyes. SORRY BUT ITS TRUE. (Facebook user 27)

Not only does this highlight that for the EDL the source of threat was not confined to militant Islamists, it also questions the intentions of every single Muslim. This has a racial dynamic that collectively degrades all Muslims as inherently treacherous. It consolidates the notion of a ‘suspect’ population that is colonising local communities with subversive intent. Furthermore, in terms of post-politics, it implies Western structures of democracy – in this case the electoral system – are being exploited by these moderates whose democratic participation is disingenuous and a precursor to tearing down these very institutions of freedom in the name of Islam.

Another technique in the collective ‘othering’ of Muslims that was more commonly appropriated was to define the moderates as being intentionally ignorant toward the precarious activities of the extremists in their communities, or even of directly facilitating the extremists:

For all of us who are aware of the dangers of Islam, there is nothing more perilous to our Civilization than this cult and it is extremely surprising how many people tend to ignore or overlook this threat, while some are even too blind to even consider it dangerous. The pseudo Moderates of this cult will try to mask the extremism and violence in Islam under poverty and ignorance even to misinterpretation of Koran, but even they know that you can either be a Moderate or a Muslim. (Forum user 5)

Here the user makes reference to “pseudo Moderates”, a notion which effectively negates the prospect of moderate Muslims and which also relates to the deceitfulness that is regarded as inherent to Muslim identity through *Taquiyya*. The user refers to these moderates as attempting to provide a congenial front for the “extremism and violence” that is inherent to Islam and the user goes on to essentially deny the relevance of moderates within Islam through inferring that all Muslims are extremist. Such truth claims were frequently made by EDL supporters and were never apparently moderated out by the organisation’s networking site administrators. This, as with regard to many other controversial contexts, acted as a useful yardstick to interpret whether such a view was normative and accepted by the EDL, regardless of the fact that it was not in accord with the main tenets of the organisation’s codified mission statement.

In relation to EDL supporters Taquiyya could be defined as playing a central role in promoting fearful perceptions and mistrust of Muslims. It has local connotations, as the clandestine threat is potentially concealed within local communities, where the ‘suspect’ populations of Muslims are located. Indeed, as conspiracy theories prey on believers’ insecurity and distrust (Fenster 2008), a term such as *Taquiyya* appear to offer real substance to the nature of the conspiracy as it enhances inter-ethnic tensions. Under the terms of *Taquiyya,* as interpreted by EDL supporters, a latent clash of civilisations is occurring at present, as Muslims are deviously consolidating their power over non-Muslims. On one level this is happening through local democracy as Muslims are quietly exploiting the democratic system to gain increasing control within political institutions such as local councils. As Muslims pose as moderates and seemingly non-threatening to the ‘natives’ people have become complacent about their true intentions. A kind of ‘soft’ power that is not directly forceful or confrontational (Nye 2004) is being used by the so called moderates in this current clash of civilisations to gain influence within the nation, and Islamic culture is becoming dominant within local communities. The implication is that the national and ‘traditional’ local cultures are being carefully erased by Islamic culture in a cleverly orchestrated prelude to Islam eventually achieving cultural hegemony as it slowly purges the symbols of Western civilisation.

Another, more widely understood Arabic term linked to the clash of civilisations was *Jihad*, a religious diktat that has come to be “associated (by most non-Muslims) with unrestrained, unreasoning, total warfare” (Cook 1995:1). Whilst the reality of the term *Jihad* is not necessarily violent and warmongering it was most certainly defined as such by EDL supporters. In contradistinction to the latent clash of civilisations under *Taquiyya, Jihad* had a more overt and global context, whereby ‘holy war’ is taken to states that have not conformed to Islam; for example, through international terrorism.

Here we can see the typically negative application of the concept of *Jihad* by the networking site users:

Academics with specialities in arabic or islamic studies have acted like hundreds of years of evidence about jihad, genocide and slavery by muslims does not exist… We cannot simply stand by whilst everyone else fails to do anything. Even if we try and fail, we know at least we were not amongst those who colluded in the events that brought about the civil war in 40 years time. (Forum user 25)

*Jihad* was occasionally associated with other pernicious phenomena, including genocide and slavery, associating the history of Muslims with such practises. As usual, this association between Muslims and violence and oppression, was a device that characterised Muslim identity in the most crudely immoral terms. As was often the case, fears that were stoked up regarding a forthcoming war with Muslims were intended to provoke a need amongst the networking site users to resist these malign forces at the present moment in history. The implication was that a civil war is a likely future eventuality and those who acquiesce to Islam ‘today’ will be culpable in facilitating its violent upsurge in pursuit of power in the years to come. To probe deeper into what was being suggested in these kind of instances we can relate to how the clash of civilisations is being waged in two stages: as we have noted, at present in a covert form with the use of ‘soft’ power; and in the future through outright war, as the *Jihad* will bring violence to the entire non-Muslim world through the barrel of a gun.

Within this milieu EDL supporters were able to imagine the criticality of the organisation’s and their own activities in acting as a bulwark of resistance against Islam. This effectively situated the networking site users in the early stages of the clash of civilisations from behind their computer screens or mobile phones. Their discourse of resistance aimed at preventing the spread of Islam was given fundamental significance as the ‘cold’ phase of confrontation was believed to be being currently waged in a covert fashion by Muslims. As has been discussed earlier, EDL supporters largely conducted their notional resistance through sharing media articles and videos and producing a discourse that often imagined the effective regulation of Muslims, be that through the control of Muslim migration to Britain, removing Muslims from the country or in the most extreme cases envisaging their total annihilation as a group. Supporters used the networking sites to link into a potentially ‘global’ audience, informing this audience with regard to the (troubling) nature of Islamic expansionism.

The following highlights how *Jihad* was perceived as a malign religious doctrine that was influential in warping the minds of Muslims and by implication feeding the production of the troubling characteristics that EDL supporters liked to attribute to Muslim identity:

There ain't but one reason to have sent that young muslump to Somalia... training in the jihad. Simple as that (TERYOR). (Forum user 26)

The context for the discussion this was taken from was a news article that had been shared that covered a story from Denmark regarding the rape of a 10 year old child allegedly by a Muslim. The story relates that the rapist had went away to spend time in Somalia and had returned to Denmark a completely different person, prior to committing the act. Therefore, the user makes the assertion that the reason the offender had visited Somalia was to receive military training for *Jihad*. The perverse implication of the discussion was that the *Jihadi* training which the Muslim had received had pathologised his character enabling him to commit repellent acts such as child rape. This perception imbued *Jihad* with much more than a simply militaristic complexion, invoking the prospect of unspeakable acts of war violence being meted out by Muslims. Rape can be regarded as a weapon of war (Diken and Lausten 2005) and the use of sexual violence by Muslims as a weapon of this ‘war’ was a theme that was occasionally implied by the networking site users which fed into the hypermasculinity that they seemingly ascribed to Muslims, therefore constructing and affirming Muslim identity as perverse, predatory and immoral. Ultimately, however, the perception of sexual violence being used in this way by Muslims would likely produce anxiety about how the impending militaristic endeavour would unfold with such a rapacious opponent.

To return to the discussion in relation to the alleged rapist who had visited Somalia, any insecurities regarding the *Jihadi* training that had been linked by the discussants to the individual’s pathologised behaviour were transcended through dehumanising and aggressive discourse:

Somalians are not human. they used rape as a weapon in their war ffs [for fuck’s sake], Then we import them and wonder why rape goes up. (Forum user 27)

If this were any member of my family there wouldn't be a cnt left standing until I saw justice done… Somalia ...this country needs reducing to ash! (Forum user 28)

In this case it is the Somali nation that was constructed as a source of threat. The humanity of Somalis is questioned, which in a manner helps to make sense of their seemingly wicked sexual behaviour, as in the case of the alleged child rapist. In the second quote there is a typically aggressive and militaristic tone used. Through imagining the total destruction of the Somali state this user, along with other contributors to the discussion, has taken an article that addressed the alleged rape of a child in Denmark by a Somali immigrant, defined it as a *Jihadist* threat, demonised the Somali nation and vindicated the extermination of its people. This is another example of the snowballing effect of extreme expression that was commonplace within the networking sites. The polarising effect on opinions (Sunstein 2009), whereby there is a lack of critique or counter-opinions from members of the discussion, was notable within this context and it resulted in pushing of the boundaries of acceptability, literally to their extremes. As was typically the case the intemperate discourse was inflamed and rationalised by the highly emotive topic of discussion that conflated sexual violence with Jihadism and constructed a substantive threat, which could theoretically be located within the framework of a conflict between the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

For the networking site users *Jihad* conjured up visions of catastrophic atrocities committed by Muslims under the banner of Islam. The threat associated with it is manifest and potentially brutal in how it is to be implemented through Muslim violence. It is claimed by Rehman (2007) that Huntington’s (1993) *Clash of civilisations* thesis, which envisaged the prospect of a conflict between the West and Islam due to the incommensurate nature of values between these two civilisations, is the definitive claim of Western superiority and the rejection of Islam as a peaceful religion. This perverse logic was evident in the discourse of EDL supporters as they constructed their violent ‘other’. As was the case with many other conspiracy theories pertaining to the threat of Islam, the troubling spectre of the Muslim ‘other’ produced an excitable jingoistic response within the networking sites and, in relation to the example above, this rationalised raising the stakes of barbarity and, allowed for attacking the ‘other’s’ homeland with genocidal intent.

## Pseudo-hegemonic forces

We will go on to look in greater detail at the nature of conspiracy in the context of the networking site users. As a precursor to this, however, it would be insightful to digress slightly and set the scene by exploring in greater depth the pseudo-hegemony that was constructed by the EDL and its supporters. It was the perceived aggregation of a range of powerful social and political agents against the EDL that formed an important feature of the clash of civilisations, as these agents were said to be on the side of Islam.

The pseudo-hegemony effectively comprised any agents that were deemed to be anti-EDL in their outlook, which would duly be ‘othered’ in order to undermine their legitimacy. EDL supporters believed these various agents were collectively conspiring with Islam in order to facilitate its hegemony over the nation and ultimately over Western civilisation. Of course this was not a real hegemonic collaboration between these disparate agents, hence it is useful to conceptualise it as being ‘pseudo’ and a false construct. It was, however, imagined as being real by the networking site users in order to suit their worldview as well as to feed their sense of persecution.

The following quote is worth citing in its entirety as it was instructive in how the networking site users would weave together a range of agents and define them as conspiring with Islam to subjugate the nation:

There is serious opposition from a multitude of forces ranged against the ordinary, working class people who are concerned about the well being of their country and the way it is going. There is the British government waging war against their own people and using (probably illegal) methods to divide and destroy any organisation that threatens its survival. Then there is the obedient press and media vilifying people who could also threaten the establishment, and is therefore part of the same establishment. Added to the unholy mix are the deranged extreme left wing types such as the UAF and idiots like the one who wrote the article above, so, there is a lot of division in our society causing disruption and seriously obstructing the English people from opposing the threats they face in the future. All these people, government and their various agencies, left wing trade unions, far left organisations such as the UAF are complicit in the cultural genocide of the English and our eventual extinction as a race and a culture. They are also working towards the race replacement of the English at some time in the future. And, none of them have the faintest idea what is going to replace us, our laws and culture unless it is Islam. (Forum user 29)

In the quote we can identify four different sets of agents. Unsurprisingly, Islamic ideology and therefore Muslims were at the heart of the moral panic that was being constructed around a range of paranoid truth claims. Key facilitators of the interests of Islam were regarded as being the British government, which was according to the user aggressively concerned with protecting its own interests. This relates to post-politics and the manner in which the networking site users misinterpreted the actual cause of the failings of the political system as being linked to the influence of Muslims as opposed to the influence of capitalist interests. Such truth claims were largely accepted to be common knowledge within the networking sites, which highlights how out of kilter with reality the worldview of the networking site users could become; another instance of Sunstein’s (2009) polarisation of opinion whereby group think and a lack of an alternative viewpoint has allowed an extreme, and in this instance entirely fallacious, perception that the British government is at war with its own people to become ideologically salient for the EDL.

The media was claimed to be another anti-EDL agent that had conspired to protect the interests of the government and its agenda. Indeed, the media was in general a significant focus of contempt for many EDL supporters. This was largely a consequence of the negative coverage the EDL received across the board from all of the mainstream media outlets, who portrayed the organisation as far right and thuggish, a representation with which many supporters were extremely uneasy. They were averse to seeing themselves in such a light, most likely due to the fact they have never been to an event where this thuggish and extreme image of the organisation was largely engendered as a consequence of violent confrontation. In order to claim the moral high ground and transcend this noxious status, the media was ‘othered’ as an enemy of the nation, and on the side of Islam.

A final ideological agent that was incorporated into the pseudo-hegemony was “deranged extreme left wing types” which included the UAF, an anti-fascist organisation, as well as trade unions. Both the UAF and trade unions would be present at EDL demonstrations, protesting against the EDL as a racist organisation. So to EDL supporters these organisations could easily be rationalised as facilitators of Islam and demeaned as ‘extreme’ and ‘leftist’, in a process of ‘othering’ that also acted to delink the traditional working class association with the left wing and its institutions. These various agents were somewhat sensationally accused by the user of being responsible for “cultural genocide” and the “eventual extinction” of the English nation, a narrative which framed them as having a shared agenda that was the complete antithesis of that of the EDL. They were therefore constructed as a single, immoral, but powerful force conspiring against the good of the nation. It was noted earlier that viewing itself as a victim of persecution was likely a strategic device employed by the EDL and its supporters in order to help fashion themselves as the underdog, on the side of righteousness in their fight to defend the nation. Conspiracy theories draw spurious lines between otherwise unconnected information sources (Fenster 2008), and the above user highlights how such lines could be drawn between socio-political agents and Islamic ideology to fabricate a hegemonic foe that needed to be combated.

To digress momentarily, another key theme to foreground from the above quotation is how the EDL is associated with the working class as the user discusses the range of agents that are conspiring to destroy the English nation. This highlights how EDL supporters would adroitly attach their working class identity to their national identity; in this instance both the working class and national identities were defined as threatened, essentially from the pseudo-hegemonic forces. This colours these identities as resistance identities (Castells 2012) in response to the threat, and by doing so has the adherents of the identities as victims, thus moralising the endeavour to protect the integrity of the working class and the nation – the self-ascribed role of the EDL.

An additional important agent that the networking site users consistently incorporated into the mix of conspiring forces was the police. Perceptions of the police were frequently coloured by interactions that occurred at a local level – the outcome of direct confrontations with the police force which was of course responsible for regulating the behaviour of EDL supporters at events. Incidences of perceived police heavy handedness toward EDL supporters were frequently discussed within the networking sites, often serving to increase the levels of contempt for the police force. There was also a strong awareness that the police were monitoring the online interactions of the EDL in its networking sites, Facebook in particular, in order to collect intelligence on the organisation and some of the extreme elements within it. It should be noted that this was not an entirely paranoiac premise due to the fact the police, on Armistice Day 2011, pre-emptively arrested 179 EDL supporters following a threat that was issued by the organisation’s admin on Facebook, which suggested that the Occupy London Stock Exchange protesters, who were at the time occupying St Paul’s Cathedral, might be forcibly removed from the site by the EDL. The police had clearly acted upon this information and the incident inflicted further damage on the relationship between themselves and the EDL.

Here the user makes reference to the rationale as to why the police may be collecting information on the EDL via Facebook:

I suppose that by using FB [Facebook], the police don’t have to bother actually going out and collect evidence. We already know that the police will arrest any white person just on the basis that a non white person makes allegations of racism, whether true or not. This is nothing more than prosecution based on nothing more than denunciation, no evidence required. All the symptoms of a totalitarian society. (Forum user 30)

The discourse adopts a characteristically persecutory framing that racialises the behaviour of the police force as discriminating against white people and acting arbitrarily in favour of non-whites. This infers a racial power dynamic that results in police subjugation of white nationals and favours the interests of Muslims. This was a framing that was often applied to any of the EDL’s perceived enemies. In such instances, however, there was not always an overtly racial dynamic and at times there would be a focus on English or non-Muslim populations in general being discriminated against by the police, who were deemed to favour the comparative interests of Muslims. The overriding perception of the police, however, was that they victimised the nation, which placed them as enemies of the EDL and, by implication, as a legitimate source of threat and revulsion.

The police force was theoretically regarded by the EDL on Weberian (1919) terms as an instrument of state violence; although the EDL most certainly did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the police, which they deemed was oppressive to English nationals in particular. This outright rejection of the legitimacy of the police, which the EDL deemed to be acting as enforcement agents on behalf of the corrupt British government, highlighted how they disavowed the authority of the state, which in their eyes had been tainted by the influence of Islam, as the EDL positioned itself within a form of post-politics that served to demonise the EDL’s foes and rationalise a desire within the networking sites for a revolutionary movement such as the EDL to reclaim the nation.

Interestingly, as will be clear to the reader, the military, the other most prominent instrument of the state’s use of violence, was not defined in such negative terms as doing the bidding for the British government. Being itself to an extent an offshoot of the ‘War on Terror’, the EDL had unconditional respect for the armed forces, who they believed were being unnecessarily murdered by Muslims in the Middle East, in what most supporters defined as an illegal war. The following was typical of the sense of support that the EDL had for the armed forces and it also highlights how EDL supporters liked to entwine their own activities at home with those of the service men and women overseas, in order to promote a sense of purpose in what the organisation was doing:

We have the biggest street force this country has ever seen, there is a lot more than just demos!! Our troops have an army at home supporting them, willing to do all we can for their welfare. We are a band of brothers ( and sisters ) that will not let anyone down (Forum user 44)

In relation to the wars in the Middle-East that British armed forces were embroiled in, it seemed strange that the EDL would define wars in Muslim lands in such negative terms as it effectively linked in with the image of a clash of civilisations and taking the fight to the Muslim world. This association was never established as a narrative amongst EDL supporters and the ‘War on Terror’ was consequently regarded as illegitimate and not in the nation’s interests. The fact that the British government were complicit in such a war in Muslim countries also contradicted the ideology that the government was acting in the interests of Islamic expansionism, but this was also never addressed, another example of how convoluted and counterintuitive the imaginings of the networking site users could become. The armed forces was separated from the ‘War on Terror’ and it was constructed as a symbol of reverence for the nation, detached from the hegemonic state and its allies. Indeed, in the future when the clash of civilisations was to become a militaristic endeavour, the networking site users viewed the armed forces as an essential ally in the fight against Islam.

Clearly it was an important aspect of the EDL’s worldview and indeed the perception supporters shared of themselves and the organisation that agents which were moralistically critical of the organisation and its ideology could with ease be shunned as incredible or castigated as enemies of the nation. This helped to ensure that their attacks on the EDL could be effortlessly brushed off and accusations such as of EDL supporters being racist could be rejected. Through delegitimising the views of enemies of the EDL, supporters could simultaneously legitimise their own views. Associating these agents with Islamic expansionism and placing them on the ‘wrong’ side of a Manichean clash of civilisations was an effective tool for aiding in this rationalisation process.

## The Eurabian conspiracy

Many EDL supporters regarded Europe, not specifically England or Britain, to be the arena where the forces of Islam were seeking to achieve dominance with the intention of taking control, this was in line with a prominent far right conspiracy theory known as ‘Eurabia’. Carr (2006:2) claims that in recent years a “school of conservative opinion has begun to emerge in Europe and the US, which depicts Europe as a doomed continent, on the brink of cultural extinction in the face of a relentless and coordinated campaign of Islamisation.” This section explores how the networking site users expressed concerns about the influence Islam was acquiring within the continent and examines forms of resistance to Islam deployed by the users.

The following relates to the Eurabian conspiracy theory:

If you have not seen the video "Europe 2029" then I suggest you do, because this is the outcome of your stupid idea of multi-culturalism and immigration of these scumbags and this is your destiny as you have sown for yourselves.Go back to nationalism and independant soverignty and withdraw from the E.U. while you still can. (Facebook user 29)

This user cites multiculturalism and immigration as the tools which have been appropriated by Islam in this phase of the war, which of course implicates the political elite as key players in the conspiracy, as both multiculturalism and immigration are key political projects. Reference is made to a video that the user has shared: *Europe 2029*, which it should be highlighted, was also shared by other users on the networking sites on four separate occasions over the six month data collection period. The video was undeniably a propaganda tool and it starkly envisions a European continent in 2029 that has been violently taken over by Muslims, who were aided in their conquest by anarchists and leftists. The video interestingly places an emphasis on the role played by Muslims from Africa in this socio-political transformation, therefore extending the boundaries of threat as emanating from a much wider and, perhaps most importantly, a closer (to Europe) geo-political arena, in addition to the Middle East.

On certain levels the descriptions of Eurabia are similar to classic anti-Semitic criticisms of Jews (Fekete 2012). Indeed this association with anti-Semitic propaganda produced by the Nazi party, which anticipated a Jewish takeover of Germany and ultimately the world, is apparent when watching the *Europe 2029* video. The popularity of the video with the networking site users demonstrated that it was of ideological significance to this audience, feeding into the worldview of the networking site users. It most certainly performed to the sense of threat and fear that these people were keen to identify with, in relation to Islamic expansionism. The prospect of Europe 2029 becoming a future reality, whereby the European continent had succumbed to Islam, functioned to consolidate the in-group promoting the need for resistance in order to prevent this doomsday scenario.

In this instance a narrative is woven that outlines the decline of key Western European states, implying there was a problem of Islamic subversion inherent to these territories:

It’s easy to understand why you feel that way, however, just look at what is happening in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, France and all over Western Europe. In some cases, they have greater problems than we do. I’m more inclined to believe that this is part of a planned agenda designed to completely break down our European societies and destroy our culture. What the ultimate goal is, I have no idea unless it is a long term plan by the New World Order, controlled by a very small number of elites from politics, banking, the police (Forum user 31)

This was another typical ‘grand conspiracy theory’ (Fenster 2008) regarding the New World Order, which imagines a secretive elite that has acquired global dominance with the intention of creating a single totalitarian world state. The user relates to an array of conspiring forces from the world of politics, banking and the police, which is aiding Islam in its attempts to destroy European culture and society. Upon closer consideration the New World Order conspiracy, being a Western elite-centric paradigm, does not sit easy with the clash of civilisations conspiracy, which is Islamo-centric. Each theory has a different elite as globally dominant. The central point is that it largely did not matter to EDL supporters how a conspiracy narrative was constructed and the finer details of what was being suggested, as long as it was forged along the lines of a (pseudo) hegemonic threat to the nation. That a European context was avidly appropriated helped to magnify the impending scope of danger beyond the nation and it offered EDL supporters a whole continent from which to cherry-pick and share within the networking sites stories, news articles and video media that related to incidents of Muslim criminal and deviant behaviours in a way which favoured the EDL’s ideological worldview and acted as an evidence base, substantiating supporters’ otherwise abstract conspiracy theories. If conspiracy theories act as an outlet for hostile impulses (Abalakina‐Paap et al 1999) then such articles and videos facilitated this process, summoning up an objectified Muslim ‘other’ and aiding the rationalisation of otherwise abstract and disjointed theories.

This notion of the objectification of abstract conspiracy theories can be probed further. It was highlighted in the introduction that the EDL’s two defining campaigns were based on resisting the building of Mosques in local communities and resisting the production and consumption of Halal meat within society. These are local and national campaigns that target what are deemed to be tangible symbols of Islamic expansionism within the nation. To link this to the Eurabian conspiracy theory, Fekete (2012) underlines the issue that anti-Mosque campaigns have been proliferating all over Europe for several years now. Fekete identifies this as efforts that are taking root continent wide to resist the production of all signs of visible Islam in communities. As a consequence Mosques could perhaps be theorised as a key battleground for the European far right in resisting the perceived unfolding of their Eurabian conspiracy theory. Mosques were therefore objectified symbols of the Islamic religion, which were reviled by the networking site users.

What follows highlights the paranoia that was manifest within EDL discourse, engendered around the existence of Mosques, underlining the negative symbolism that was attributed to them:

Mosques are the units/retail outlets of this conditioning/hatred/virus… they form a chain.. with clear lines of ‘supply’. The mainframe/’source code generator’ is in the deserts of Arabia. All the scheming is plotted there and this source code of the virus is slyly supplied - to the indivudual muslims (mere robots) through the ‘viral ducts’ of mosques. The so called ‘prayers’ are nothing but ‘trojans’… whether the muslims understand it or not. Arabia is quite slick at chicanery. They sport a smile on their face as friends all the while plotting their ‘revenge’ for the perceived slights (say the formation of Israel). So, for them it is perfectly reasonable to take a ‘revenge’.. as they are not militarily strong, they have taken recourse to deception… convert people to Islam in the west or if that is not possible, send muslims there, let them breed and wait for the time….to create a huge fifth column and subvert the ‘enemy’ countries... Is not a 5th column being created before our very own eyes in our own neighbourhoods? (Forum user 32)

This user applies a ‘fifth column’ framing to define Muslims as subversive and untrustworthy and portrays the Muslim conspiracy theory in an intriguing fashion, as emanating in a virus form from Arabia. Mosques are regarded as offering an ideological resource for followers of Islam within communities around the world. This conceptualisation, whilst somewhat imaginative, demonstrates exactly how pernicious Mosques were deemed to be by EDL supporters and just how integral they were seen as being to the ideological spread of Islam. The implication of this is that the further spread of these institutions should be resisted.

To revisit the assertion made earlier that the networking site users were enthusiastic to ground the central tenets of their conspiracies in real events, there was often reference made by users regarding the role of Mosques in the radicalisation of Muslim terrorists, as is highlighted here:

Mosques are the breeding grounds for terrorists, homophobes, misogynists, antisemites and on this basis any application should be refused(wishful thinking). (Forum user 33)

Media stories that were shared and discussed by networking site users that covered terrorism would occasionally highlight a link to a suspect Mosque or Madrasa (religious educational institution) where the terrorist had been exposed to a radical interpretation of Islam that had fundamentally affected their worldview. These cases legitimated the perception that Mosques were detrimental to the interests of the nation, as cradles of radicalisation and conspiracy, which should be summarily dealt with.

EDL demonstrations were frequently generated around issues regarding a proposed Mosque development in a local community. On one level this was intended to exploit potential ethnic tensions in a given area, or even nationally, surrounding the issue. On a deeper level, it was also an act of defiance in the face of Islam – an attempt to expose the deviousness and dangerousness of Islam to the public through collective expression and, as is identified by Allen (2011), to engage ideologically with EDL supporters. Networking site users would enjoy imagining the destruction or even the burning of Mosques, as is the case here:

we need all muslim immigration stopped . we need all mosques closed and demolished . and all protests put down . that is my belief , of what needs to be done ,if we are to save our country , our heritage , our way of life . And there will ber civil wasr , with milliions dead , if it is not done. (Facebook user 49)

I and many other patriots will do what it takes to defend this country from the evil of islam weather that means peacefully protesting or any other means I will fight for my country and brothers of the edl by any means possible NS to the SCUM ! Burn our poppy and well burn ya mosque ! (Facebook user 5)

These examples usefully highlight how the destruction of this symbol of Islam was equated with defending the nation and its way of life. Through the strong sentiment that is clearly attributed to this imagined act of resistance, one can sense the revulsion that is felt toward Mosques and the amount of insecurity that was associated by EDL supporters with the local presence of these religious institutions, as well as a notable sense of national destiny infused into the prospect of their physical removal. It follows that there could be interpreted as being a latent reasoning behind this strong desire to purge Mosques in that this imagining relieved psychological inner-conflicts for EDL supporters, which could have manifested as a consequence of their socio-political alienation or due to the general feelings of destabilisation produced by globalisation. Some psychological comfort may have been experienced as a consequence of imagining the removal of Mosques as the networking site users would subconsciously conceive of ridding themselves of deep-seated insecurities. Eliminating Mosques could be deemed as a progressive act in re-establishing the ‘original state’ – a pure nation untainted by troubling minority groups – and as a consequence a much anticipated moment in time when psychological insecurity will be expunged.

The networking sites enabled e-activism campaigns, which we will look at in greater detail in the following chapter, to be efficiently mobilised as supporters shared details and links to websites where the campaigns were being conducted. There were a couple of such campaigns launched in an attempt to petition against the building of Mosques, including against the development of a ‘Super’ Mosque in London. As we will explore later, engaging with e-activism campaigns was clearly a valued activity for some networking site users. It undoubtedly engendered the esteem of ‘front-end’ activism and the belief that their actions were embroiled in the clash of civilisations, through a remote struggle to negate the spread of Mosques, conducted entirely from a personal computer or mobile phone. The success of such electronic campaigns was likely negligible, based on the fact the outcomes of their activism were largely never discussed by the networking site users. This was, however, seemingly inconsequential and it was the taking part that was seemingly of greatest import, including perhaps the fleeting feeling of defiant triumphalism upon electronically submitting the completed petition form. This was an act of resistance against a tangible indicator of Islam’s spread in local communities and from a broader perspective resistance against the perceived threat, encapsulated in the Eurabian conspiracy theory, posed by Islam to the European continent.

## Mainstream acceptance

Some mainstream media publications can be regarded as feeding into the agenda of the far right and in particular the EDL’s Islamophobic worldview and therefore offer legitimation to this skewed construct. In this section we look in depth at an example of how the troubling framing of Islam in the mainstream media was used by some networking site users to support their beliefs regarding a Muslim conspiracy. This can be probed by once again making reference to the Eurabian conspiracy theory, which has been given some credibility by certain right wing media publications (Fekete 2012).

One especially prominent media publication within the networking sites was the *Daily Mail*. The articles produced by the *Daily Mail* that addressed issues of Muslims and Islam were more frequently shared by networking site users than the articles from any other publication. There was an irony here based on the fact that the newspaper dealt in a very intolerant fashion with the EDL in its articles and outright condemned the organisation’s agenda, whilst portraying its supporters as thugs. This provoked similar feelings of contempt directed at the newspaper from EDL supporters. Whilst there was no explicit acceptance of the EDL’s ideology from this publication, there was an abundance of ideological legitimation attributable to the nature of the news articles produced by the publication, which would tend to focus on the negative influence of Islam and Muslims in Britain and indeed around the world. As was noted earlier, such news articles when shared by the networking site users constituted an evidence base that functioned to rationalise otherwise opaque conspiracy theories. As a consequence, this was an unspoken symbiotic relationship between the publication and the EDL that effectively fed into an overarching Islamophobic agenda that sold newspapers (or, more to the point, facilitated the online sharing of the paper’s news articles) and at the same time potentially recruited supporters to the EDL through stirring up dislike of Muslims.

One *Daily Mail* columnist and author, Melanie Phillips, was occasionally referred to within the networking sites in terms of her work, be that her newspaper articles or her book *Londonistan: How Britain Created a Terror State Within* (Phillips 2006), being shared or discussed by the networking site users:

My blood is boiling, again. only one religion causes this...These treasonable traitors have got to be stopped… Good article from mel phillips about mac [Muslims Against Crusades] and islamic fascism in London. (Forum user 44)

I thank God for Mel Phillips, she is one of those very rare people, A REPORTER AND BROARDCASTER WITH A SPINE Long may she continue to print the unbiased truth. (Forum user 34)

*Londonistan* was discussed in the previous chapter, but it is worthwhile probing further. In the book Phillips highlights how the British left has been complicit in the development of an environment acquiescent to Islamic fundamentalists – through for example the promotion of multiculturalism and cultural relativism – who have become centred in large numbers within London. Furthermore, the government is alleged by Phillips to have yielded to the presence of Islamists with an informal agreement that they will not be forced out of the country. Policing of the activities of Islamic fundamentalists has as a consequence been intentionally dumbed down in order not to offend these individuals. This general milieu has apparently allowed London to become a central hub for Islamic militants and terrorists. Vaisse (2010) makes the link between this publication and the Eurabian conspiracy theory, which admittedly does not require a huge leap in imagination. Phillips herself seemingly relates to an array of forces conspiring against Britain in a similar fashion as had EDL supporters. These forces included Islamic ideology, the political elite, agents of the left and the police. It is also highlighted by Briggs (2010:277) that Phillips’s framing essentialises violence as inherent to Islam and Islamism, adding: “These accounts of Islam and Islamism are able to arouse attention because of a lack of contact between different communities, which allows rumours to be received as fact without critical analysis.”

It was not difficult to understand why Phillips’s contentions were so popular with the networking site users, with the following quote indicative:

No need for the Government to wake up. They know what is going on. According to Melanie Phillipsand other writers, successive governments have made a deal with the Islamists to leave us alone if we give them their own way. (Forum user 35)

In this quotation the user appropriated one of Phillips’s central contentions that the British government was in hoc with Islamic fundamentalists. It was striking that a networking site user cites Melanie Phillips in order to back up his own argument and therefore validate his conspiracy line of reasoning – which claims that the British government is in cohorts with Islamists. This underlines the influence that the mainstream media could have in substantiating the discourse of EDL supporters and how it could be regarded to feed into the production of Islamophobic identity within the networking sites, through confirming the worldview of the EDL. In line with Briggs’s (2010) argument noted above, it is clear that the troubling framing of Islam within some mainstream discourse facilitates an unqualified leap of faith from conjecture or conspiracy to truth for some EDL supporters. In this particular context the framing could be regarded as feeding into a fantastical imagining of a conspiracy between the government and Islam against the nation. That this process could actually be traced from data collected from the EDL’s networking sites was an interesting outcome of the research.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have addressed notions of racism that are inherent to the Islamophobic identity and explored how conspiracy theories – most pertinently those that construct a hegemonic ‘other’ in-hoc with Islam that is perceived to be persecuting the EDL and the nation – have the utility of feeding into the distorted worldview of the networking site users, consolidating the group’s identity and externalising psychological insecurities. We have seen how the EDL credits itself the leading role as a resistance to the clash of civilisations conspiracy. This underlines how conspiracy theories have unique functionality in uniting groups, albeit in this instance around insecurities. The clash of civilisations is a conspiracy believed by many EDL supporters to be currently in its formative stages, where direct confrontation between the Muslim and non-Muslim world is not yet explicitly manifest. The Muslim world is believed to be presently preparing the ground for the impending conflict through a covert subversion, being conducted to a large extent through immigration and through ‘outbreeding’ ‘native’ populations. A key battleground where this is playing out, according to the Eurabian conspiracy theory, is Europe. Europe was regarded by the EDL supporters to be the victim of a transformational demographic shift as Muslims are quietly gaining the numerical ascendancy in preparation for what is to come. In a manner this conspiracy feeds into the anxiety of incompleteness (Appadurai 2006), based on how the far right has rallied around a pan-European conceptualisation that is fundamentally concerned about the presence of a growing Muslim minority within the continent that is ultimately threatening to usurp Europe’s citizenry. The notion of Eurabia therefore drives a desire to resist the movement of Muslims into European borders and it also legitimises the production of a ‘predatory’ identity (Appadurai 2006) that seeks to purge the source of the threat.

In reality, the threat of Islamic subversion has been constructed as such by EDL supporters within the networking sites and the ‘other’ has been racialised and characterised as violent and perverse with the aid of this conspiracy narrative. Through willingly appropriating the concept of *Taquiyya* and employing the term in a manner that stigmatises all Muslims, moderate or extreme, as being untrustworthy and concerned solely with Islamic hegemony, the networking site users underlined a discriminatory dislike for Muslims, whilst paradoxically attempting to portray them as dangerous supremacists. This fundamentally strayed from the official EDL stance that only fundamentalist Islam was the focus for disdain and resistance for the organisation

The racially stigmatising narrative of untrustworthy Muslims was a discourse of fear (Altheide 2003), fed by right wing media characterisations of Muslims, which informed and strengthened negative perceptions held by EDL supporters. When people feel fearful or angry is when they are most receptive to rumours, or becoming active in their spread (Sunstein 2009); therefore, as EDL supporters interacted and collectively generated insecurities regarding the intentions of Muslims within the networking sites, an environment was created that facilitated the widespread acceptance and dissemination of grand conspiracy theories that imagined destabilising Muslim forces, active within the Western world, and ultimately primed for *Jihad*. Such conspiracy theories gained credence from sources such as media articles and YouTube videos, thus further consolidating as real the perception of a conflict between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. Many EDL supporters were awaiting a tipping point whereby the conflict will cease to be ‘cold’ and being conducted in an indirect fashion, and at this tipping point the Muslim world will seek to violently pursue its goal of the subjugation of the non-Muslim world. At this point it is anticipated the inherently violent nature of Islam will be truly realised as it wages ‘holy war’ to overthrow its enemies.

The conspiracy theories would likely have functioned to relieve anxieties attributable to the destabilising social change that has been wrought through processes such as immigration, which was perceived by EDL supporters to have transformed working class communities through the inward migration of minority populations. Through internalising a belief they were partaking in a global power struggle with the Muslim world it could be interpreted that EDL supporters were effectively resisting the forces of globalisation and possibly using the Muslim ‘other’ as a projection screen to externalise inner antagonisms relating to feelings of a loss of control in their lives. That there was a particular fixation with resisting the local spread of Mosques indicates that EDL supporters were imagining themselves as protecting working class communities, whilst theoretically defending the purity of the national imagined community from the unwanted presence of these religious symbols. Mosques were likely interpreted as a tangible symbol of globalisation, relating to the global spread of Islamic ideology, and through resisting their development the EDL was on its own terms directly resisting Islamic expansionism. That there were often calls from the networking site users for the demolition or destruction of Mosques demonstrates how a cathartic psychological relief was achieved from the latent insecurities appertaining to globalisation that were symbolically attached to Mosques.

# 7/ Political extremism and hybrid space

Up to now we have examined closely the various components of the EDL’s worldview and the Islamophobic identity that is produced within the networking sites. Here I will theorise the process through which this worldview is constructed. I will achieve this through probing the relationship between the virtual and physical and ultimately through examining how these two spaces would combine to produce a ‘hybrid’ space that was pivotal to the construction of the EDL’s worldview and the production of identity. This is a space that is constructed by the EDL and its supporters through their interactions within the organisation’s networking sites. Castells (2012) uses the term hybrid space to refer to the kind of space produced by social movements that unites virtual and concrete urban space. Castells notes that neither the online or offline space can function without the other in relation to the objectives that the movement seek to address. The space is configured by communication technology, most prominently social networking sites, which interacts with a localised presence, such as a demonstration. This conceptualisation is premised upon how the physical, such as an EDL event conducted at the local level, may be fed into the virtual realm via discourse or sources of media. This occurs in a manner that functions to construct an ideologically appealing reality that conforms to the EDL’s Islamophobic worldview and consolidates the identity construct.

The chapter begins by addressing the promotion of events and how the EDL mobilises its support base in favour of the organisation’s aims and activities. Following this we focus on a schism in the EDL that demonstrates how those supporters who are solely active within the virtual realm are stigmatised as ‘keyboard warriors’ by a fraction of supporters who are active in representing the EDL at ‘real’ events. The forging of relationship ties that cut across the virtual and physical is then detailed, which addresses the idea of mobilisation within the networking sites, and has at its heart the role that emotion plays in uniting the two spaces. Finally, the chapter considers the nature of how live updates to the networking sites from EDL events help to facilitate the construction of hybrid space.

## Shaping attendance at events

Here we will begin to explore how virtual and physical spaces may interact with and transform each other (Garcia et al 2009), through taking a look at how EDL events are organised online. The internet allows for virtual forms of coordination and it can connect geographically dispersed aggrieved populations as a collective entity (Diani 2000). It was unsurprising to find that networking sites were used by the EDL and its supporters in order to coordinate activities. This was a key functionality of this online platform that was exploited by the EDL’s team of administrators, responsible for communicating with the EDL supporters, disseminating ideological messages as well as promoting and coordinating upcoming events.

The following was indicative of the kind of generic ‘status update’, posted by admin on Facebook, raising awareness of the next four demonstration venues and dates:

Well as promised here are four gauranteed national demonstrations for 2012. Leicester will take place on 4th february 2012 . The next 3 in this order will be , Luton the homecoming ,Dewsbury ,yorkshire, And Bristol just 4 of the things promised for 2012 dates to be confirmed for the last 3 but theyre going ahead.(Facebook administrator 30)

That a message like this can be communicated instantly and inexpensively, enabling interactive communication with an audience is a central tenet of the online networking platform (Gerstenfeld, Grant and Chiang 2003). On a practical level, therefore, the virtual networking environment was primed for the promotion and coordination of EDL activities that would occur within the physical environment. In order to enhance the diffusion of the message and thus maximise awareness, it would be repeatedly re-posted by the administrators over a series of days, weeks, or even months. This was undoubtedly a strategy intended to generate motivation to attend these events, although its overwhelming utility was to induce collective discussion in relation to an event between the networking site users. The unique ‘share’ facility within Facebook extended the prospects of widely communicating the message, as it enabled a status update to be disseminated by individual supporters within their own networks of friends. ‘Admin’ would often encourage supporters to do this as they sought to tap into these networks and recruit more supporters for the organisation.

Being the primary means of communicating information on events, the networking sites were influential in shaping attendance. As this information was rooted in the local – England’s towns and cities – it was accordingly imbued with symbolism for the audience; for example, in terms of ethnic tensions that had become significant within these locations. These were perhaps tensions which had received local or national media coverage and which had been exploited by the EDL to generate interest in the organisation’s activities and ideology. For those EDL supporters who were not local to areas where demonstrations were being held, their interpretation of the local situation, including in reference to inter-ethnic tensions, was forged through the sharing of media articles and video media and through sharing in the experiences of other supporters who claimed to inhabit these places. Discussions that would be generated as a consequence of a status update like the one cited above, may well incorporate information about the local situation, to help the wider audience form an opinion on the locality and perhaps to stimulate the desire to attend the event.

As is demonstrated here with reference to armed forces homecoming parades that the EDL was keen to attend, Leicester is defined as being populated with Islamists that pose a threat to returning soldiers. In doing so the administrator produces a troubling imagery of the location for the consumption of EDL supporters:

The 9th/12th Lancers will be holding homecoming parades in Northampton,Leicester,Derby and Chesterfield from the 22nd of november.This is the the Leicestershire regiment that Leicester city council refused permission for a homecoming parade! Then u-turned with shall we say a little persuasive nudge from the East Midlands region who were at an armed forces ceremony in Leicester at the time.We are all aware of the respect our troops deserve and Leicester City council should have shown this immediately not as an after thought! We are also aware that islamists are rife in these areas and we know the contempt they feel for our troops! Everyone who can, should turn out and show these brave men and women the respect and support that they deserve (Facebook administrator 2)

From this perspective we can see how the sharing of information within the networking sites helps to shape people’s understanding of physical space. Through designating certain areas as ripe for a demonstration the EDL was active in generating or fomenting insecurities in relation to these spaces, a process consolidated through the interactions of supporters online. The towns and cities that the EDL were intending to hold demonstrations within were always constructed in a similar way, as being troubling spaces that had in effect been ‘lost’ to the threatening influence of Islam.

Birmingham, being an ethnically diverse place, was typically treated with unease as EDL supporters imagined it. The following quote was a characteristic response to the prospect of a demonstration in Birmingham:

Im originally from Brum [Birmingham]. Watch your backs up there brothers cos its a whole different world. Hope you all have passports cos that city is no longer England, about time we FUCKING TAKE IT BACK!!(Facebook user 31)

This is a good example of how physical space may be assigned an unsafe status and, as has been covered in previous chapters, this is done through associating it with a Muslim presence. The expression of resistance at the end of the quote seeks to transcend the insecurity of the English nation having figuratively ‘lost’ Birmingham to Islam through a call to reclaim the space. Such assertions were often responded to in kind, such as:

i live in the shit hole and i will be there got my flags ready EE EDL EE EDL lets show thes basters what we are about !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!(Facebook user 32).

Whilst this touches on the theme of mobilisation, which will be covered in greater detail below, it is clear that the kinds of discourse that circulated through such networking media enabled representations of physical space to be imagined in malign ways that stoked the sense of a threat from a socially different and dangerous ‘other’. Furthermore, it also allowed users to imagine a future scenario whereby they might be able to reclaim physical space. According to the user above, this act of resistance will be conducted through nationalist protest using the English flag. This underlines the link often made to an imagined English community facilitated by networking sites. Such imaginings can be extended to imbue physical communities with meaning and generate the desire to protect or reclaim that local space in the name of the nation.

Fox (2004) highlights how virtual communities allow for the melding of the physical and virtual through the interactions of users and how this new space is treated as real by the users. At the heart of producing this new space is the role played by imagination. For the EDL it was the collective imaginings of physical space that produced it as a troubling construct within the networking sites. Users accepted this construction of physical space as real and were therefore seemingly inclined to feel uneasy about its existence and were resultantly motivated to imagine reclaiming the space in order to transcend the insecurities, generated around Muslims, which they had attached to it. A process can be charted which is initiated by the centre of the organisation as it seeks to organise events in areas it defines as contentious. EDL supporters interact within this virtual environment and may develop a narrative that assists in the reinterpretation of physical spaces as threatening and which requires defending. For a relative minority this process may well lead to their actually attending the event in order to attempt to enact this resistance fantasy.

Castells (2012) discusses the relationship between cyberspace and physical space, noting that social movements use communication technologies to connect the two spaces. This is explained within the context of the Occupy movement, which Castells claims was rooted in the urban space that it was occupying, but which appropriated social networks on the internet where experiences could be shared and which made the movement global in its reach. The two spaces would therefore be combined through the interactions of activists to form a new hybrid space that is used by the social movement as a space of empowerment where it can reach out to wider society. In the case of the EDL, an organisation that is rooted in local space and the defence of local communities, its administrators and supporters interacted within the networking sites to collectively construct urban spaces. In this instance it was in advance of that physical space being occupied by the EDL, in relation to an upcoming demonstration. Nevertheless, it was the sharing of opinions and experiences within virtual space that functioned to define the urban space and characterise it in accordance with the EDL’s Islamophobic worldview as being tainted by the presence of Muslims. This space was empowering for the EDL to the extent it allowed for this ideological construction of physical space to be produced, which mobilised supporters against Islam and potentially engaged new supporters to the EDL’s cause if they were acquiescent to the idea that England’s towns and cities were threatened by Muslims.

It was possible to see, using the accounts of users, how feelings of insecurity could be transformed into feelings of power through collectively envisaging the reclamation of urban spaces:

count on me2rid the streets of this scum.! one more against this pathetic opposition..!! e e edl comin down your road..! nfs [no fucking surrender] (Facebook user 52)

I'll go where ever, put it on there toes lads n lasses.. These are our towns and some of us are seeing it as were goin to there's... Let's fuckin take em back!!! (Facebook user 53)

In a manner the desire to aggressively purge the streets of this minority group relates to the anxiety of incompleteness (Appadurai 2006) and the feeling among EDL nationalists that Muslims sully the purity of the nation. As is symbolised here this anxiety is transformed into a drive to reclaim the streets. Of course these urban spaces had been collectively constructed by networking site users to promote this notional anxiety of incompleteness in order to mobilise support to overcome the threat believed to be posed by this minority.

Ploderer, Howard and Thomas (2008) note that ‘passion-centric’ networking sites can help to foster offline behaviours, and this is a significant point to consider in terms of how the networking site users related to the urban space that they had produced online. This symbolic construction of physical space would potentially determine how members would interact within and relate to this urban environment should they visit it. Indeed for those who went on to actually attend the EDL demonstration, they would be driven to make the reclamation of the space a self-fulfilling prophecy, albeit only for the duration of the actual event; and they would be equally driven to outwardly share with local community members their insecurities regarding the dangers posed by the presence of the ‘other’, with the intention of fomenting the desire to reclaim their local community from the clutches of Islam. It must be underlined, however, that the vast majority will not attend these local communities as an EDL activist and that it was what the networking site users conceptualised themselves as doing to reclaim this imagined local space that was of importance, be that waving the English flag or having a violent encounter with a Muslim. It was through this imagining that a feeling of psychological appeasement and a feeling of control could be achieved with fellow EDL supporters in the networking sites. It may have functioned to provide relief from the aforementioned anxieties pertaining to the existence of Muslims within these spaces that was deemed to be so detrimental to national purity.

## Mobilisation

Throughout previous chapters I have related to notions of mobilisation within the EDL’s networking sites. Wojcieszak (2009) rightly notes that there is still much that is not understood about the Internet’s effects on mobilisation and this discussion will explore in greater detail some of the salient themes in relation to mobilisation that emerged during the study. In the context of this study mobilisation has effectively occurred on two levels: the rallying of online supporters to express sentiment in favour of the EDL or an EDL cause and in terms of rallying supporters to physically attend an EDL event. To address the former, this is a phenomenon that was captured within the discourse posted on the networking sites.

The EDL administrators were responsible for the diffusion of often emotive messages within the organisation’s networking sites. In relation to online activism it is important to remember that “people do not solely participate to enforce political change, but also to express their anger and grievances, their feelings of injustice and other emotions” (Van Laer 2010:409). As has been covered in previous chapters, it is this desire for psychological appeasement that attracted supporters to the EDL networking sites, as they affiliated ideologically with the organisation. In order to ensure this psychological attachment of supporters to the EDL was maintained and consolidated, admin functioned to tap into the popular sentiment within the networking sites and mobilise it in a favourable manner. Needless to say the negative framing of Islam, Muslims, the British government and anti-fascist groups lay at the heart of this mobilising strategy as their ‘otherness’ was consolidated. Van Laer (2010) notes that news reports, photos and videos can be used to heighten the sense of collective excitement engendered around a certain issue. The use of media in this manner was a key device of the networking site users, made easy by the networking platforms. Emotive statements posted by admin were often accompanied by, for example, a newspaper article linked to the statement, which functioned as an evidential corroborating source to the discourse.

In response to provocative posts from admin, sentiment could quickly snowball and become extreme. Any theme linked to children, with an anti-Muslim framing, was often especially provocative in igniting supporters’ passions and motivating hate. In the following case admin initiated a discussion with the statement:

Its going on in every country*.* (Facebook administrator 3)

There was an accompanying link to a YouTube video. The video was a news package taken from a Russia Today broadcast. The focus of the report was the teaching of Sharia Law and its values within schools in Germany. It highlighted the potential for radicalisation amongst German school children and included some undercover footage of extreme views being preached to children in a school. The report was relatively rational in the way it presented itself; however, the admin framing was essentially of a globalised threat of child radicalisation unfolding in schools. The following two comments were attributed to supporters in the discussion that developed in response to the thread initiation:

Castrate muslims and stop them breeding, problem solved. (Facebook user 33)

Lets just wipe the whole lot out. (Facebook user 25)

The amount of hate levelled at Muslims in these comments was indicative of the snowballing effect that flowed from the post from admin, culminating in genocidal expressions that were not moderated out of the discussion thread.

Freud’s (1922) group psychology is interesting to loosely relate to in terms of interpreting the mobilising of extreme opinion, a process often initiated by EDL administrators within the online community. In this regard individuals submit to the group dynamic in order to transgress their burdensome consciences through in effect losing their sense of self within the group. The perverse expressions that come to define the discourse of group members binds the collective together and promotes irrationality and a transcendental sense of disregard for the standard norms of behaviour. It is perhaps a stretch to define the EDL administrators as group leaders to whom members unconditionally surrender, but they did have a strong influence over promoting the transgressive group dynamic and in stoking the irrational sentiment that was central to the snowballing effect.

It is also interesting to explore this case in terms of hybrid space, through examining the connection between physical and virtual space. With regard to this relationship, “the ‘substance’ of the body and the spatial… is carried through to the virtual world” (Campbell 2006:290). This can be extrapolated to mean that through sharing discourse, media articles and videos online, characteristics of the physical may have a transformative function within the virtual realm, with physical and virtual combining to produce hybrid space. To help us understand what is going on here we can refer to research conducted by Meek (2011) on the Invisible Children movement that is based in Uganda and is concerned with raising international awareness of the plight of Uganda’s child soldiers and refugees. Invisible Children uses social media to engage with supporters and it posts documentary films on YouTube. The videos are used to create visual and emotional connections among a geographically dispersed audience of viewers of the media. Meek claims that through viewing the videos that portray the plight of the child soldiers an emotional connection is engendered that allows the viewer to participate in the movement within cyberspace: “an online viewer becomes emplaced through their viewing. This emplacement is not in a speciﬁc material place, but an informational one, namely forged through emotive connections. (ibid:13). In effect this emotional connection is induced through viewing aspects of the physical existence of the child soldiers and it is the strong emotion that produces the hybrid space where participation occurs.

In relation to EDL supporters, the video of Muslim teachers expressing extreme opinions toward their students, viewed within the networking site, clearly produced strong emotion that connected the networking site users to the lifeworld of their ‘other’. This momentarily emplaced them within the environment, a Madrassa, where they perceived Islamic extremism was inculcated within young Muslims. The video vindicated the Islamophobic worldview of the EDL and through their experience of viewing the footage users were motivated to express extreme opinions toward Muslims and thus produce Islamophobic identity within the networking sites. The strength of emotion whipped up a frenzy of obscene expression incorporating racial and genocidal discourse, imagining brutality being meted out to the Muslim ‘other’. The virtual-public space of Facebook – accessible to a global audience on the basis they have access to the internet – was thus rationalised as an arena for a type of discourse that one would conceive not permissible in most other public contexts. This case demonstrates how the blurring of the physical and virtual, in this regard via a video portraying the actions of Muslims within physical space that was viewed on Facebook, may act to produce a hybrid space that was defined by strong emotion that produced Islamophobic identity and mobilised it against the ‘other’. To take the notion of mobilisation one step further, one could proffer that this hybrid space is in fact a fertile arena for the radicalisation of identity.

McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) note there are many potential meanings to radicalisation and that these are usually represented with distinctions between belief, feeling and behaviour; with the radicalisation of behaviour presenting the greatest concern. In this context we can identify two elements of radicalisation: i. the extreme polarisation of an individual’s attitudinal and belief system, within a social networking context (encompassing beliefs and feelings); and ii. the motivational inclination to act upon this realigned attitudinal and belief system (behavioural). I will return to the second element in a moment.

In terms of the polarisation of beliefs and feelings online Dienel (2010), focusing on Islamist radicalisation, highlights three factors that help us to understand radicalisation within a virtual environment. *Deindividuation*, whereby a person may feel freed of inhibitions due to a perception they are not receiving attention as an individual; this may promote less rational behaviour. *Imagined community*, connotes the individual’s belief they are part of a community of like-minded adherents which shares in their grievances. *Mortality salience* relates to how a person may experience increased exposure to death related thoughts and imagery. Mortality salience may enhance the level of identification with the in-group, whilst heightening hostility toward ‘others’. The notions of deindividuation and imagined community are directly applicable to the EDL’s networking sites. Imagined community of course relates to the nation in this regard comprised of other nationalists who interacted within the online space. Deindividuation occurs within the collective as an individual’s self-awareness may be reduced as they interact with other members of the imagined community that are active within the networking sites. It is likely that the disembodied nature of interactions online feeds into the deindividuation process, making people feel less accountable if they expressed extreme opinions. In terms of mortality salience, this was tacitly promoted by admin through provocative posts and amplified by other supporters in the group. Through framing Muslims as a physical and sexual threat, who are concerned with aggressive Islamic expansionism, and supporting this framing with apparent evidential sources such as YouTube videos that articulated this threat, threats to the self would have promoted a sense of mortality salience for the networking site users. That this mortality salience would feed into a radical mindset is in line with Terror Management Theory (Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2000) which stipulates that in order to protect their worldview from external threats, in this instance the threat is from Muslims, an individual will adopt prejudicial or extreme attitudes toward the ‘other’. It follows that the confluence of the three key factors defined by Dienel (2010) within a social networking environment may well push some supporters to a radicalised viewpoint in how they perceive of Islam and this would explain the frequency and tone of aggressive expression toward Muslims. On these terms the EDL’s administrators could be considered as being a significant radicalising force, as they sought to promote fears regarding Muslims. Many EDL supporters who may have been radicalised within the networking sites would likely limit their radical opinions and beliefs to the networking sites and this would not significantly impact their behaviours beyond this environment.

The second element of mobilisation highlighted earlier relates to a situation whereby supporters were radicalised within the networking sites and motivated to physically attend an EDL event. This fundamentally links to emotional mobilisation in that it is the next stage of this mobilisation process, whereby an individual’s emotion has been invoked to the extent their desire to attend an event is activated. Individuals who had been radicalised in such a manner and who were intent on directly coming into contact with their ‘other’ as EDL activists may be more inclined toward the use of violence at EDL events in order to express their sense of indignation toward the ‘other’ in an extreme manner. With the knowledge that the EDL’s online support base comprised some 30,000 to 40,000 adherents (Bartlett and Littler 2011) and turnout at events is in the hundreds it is easy to discern a significant disconnect between emotional and physical mobilisation for huge swaths of EDL supporters. Therefore, this form of mobilisation was less effective from within the networking sites, perhaps as it placed much greater demands on EDL supporters in terms of travelling and their willingness to directly confront the ‘other’.

Dienel (2010), again referring to Islamic terrorism, offers a binary conceptualisation of ‘soft’ support and ‘hard’ support, which can be drawn upon and modified slightly to help theorise the objectives of ‘admin’ in relation to mobilisation. In terms of ‘soft’ support, this is where particular Muslims would tolerate the cause of a specific terrorist organisation and not cooperate with its opponents. On the other hand, ‘hard’ support is where a Muslim would offer practical assistance to the group and become an activist on the ground. To apply the notion of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ support to our EDL mobilisation context, we can posit ‘soft’ supporters as being those who visit the networking sites and who are acquiescent with EDL ideology. ‘Hard’ support defines the diehard supporters, especially those who participate in EDL events within local communities. It is perhaps helpful to consider a continuum with ‘soft’ support at one end and ‘hard’ support at the other, with each individual supporter placed somewhere along the spectrum. At present that continuum will be heavily weighted toward the ‘soft’ support. It was therefore the strategy of the EDL leadership to encourage greater numbers of supporters along the spectrum toward the ‘hard’ support end and to physically mobilise them. Ultimately it has always been feet on the street and good turnout at events that is most influential in terms of engendering the organisation’s sense of positive self-esteem. As such, attempts to motivate people to attend were unrelenting, especially as an event was approaching.

The following comment was posted by admin late in 2011 and it reflects on the year just gone, whilst anticipating the upcoming year:

As 2011 nears its end do we rest on our laurels and think of battles won and lost. No we continue into 2012 with vigour and the fight in our bellies like when we first started. There's been highs and lows in 2011 but we have had some great demos. Friendships forged on our streets friendships that will last forever. They can hack our pages report us for false racism do whatever they like but the edl moves on with the fighting spirit of our forefathers we will never surrender not now not ever. (Facebook user 34)

This rousing comment was carefully framed in a way that established attendance at events as important and rewarding, an idea that the leadership was clearly keen to portray to supporters. From a theoretical perspective the quote was also rather uniquely suggestive of hybridity, of an organisation that operates across the virtual and physical realms, with reference made to demonstrations as well as hacking attempts levelled at the EDL networking sites. In terms of mobilisation, reference was made to demonstrations as being at the heart of the biography of 2011 and the demonstrations are inferentially linked to the “battles won and lost.” There is an interesting additional enticement for supporters in terms of the prospect of strong friendships being forged on the street. This comment could therefore be regarded as an incitement to physical mobilisation.

In response to admin’s comment an EDL supporter posted the following:

Now at least the people who aren't in divisions yet can see what opportunity there is to become active and attend their first demo. And make plans as its quite soon. Forums and groups are for those who are a bit further schooled in the edl. Most peoples first stop is the fb page. I suggest whoever admins are, to start improving the quality and info on this page! FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE VITAL!!! (Facebook user 35)

Here the supporter acknowledged the link between the networking sites and motivation to physical mobilisation. The supporter urged admin to improve the Facebook page, to effectively refashion the virtual space, in order to stimulate the attentions and perhaps the imaginations of potential new event attendees. Not only does this comment reflect and consolidate the central theme of the original admin post, underlining the importance of attending demonstrations; it also exemplifies the supporter’s impression of how ‘soft’ supporters, who are as yet not attached to specific EDL divisions (this can relate to long term EDL followers and not just those that are new to the organisation), may be converted to ‘hard’ supporters through admin creating a more alluring Facebook presence and by doing so acting to promote attendance in the physical sphere.

## Virtual and physical activist schisms

Another way to explore the virtual-physical relationship and indeed the notion of mobilisation is through looking at the activities and interactions of the EDL’s online and offline activists. Through doing this I will highlight important intra-organisational tensions that existed; most pertinently tensions between the core of diehard supporters who attended demonstrations and those supporters whose activities were entirely conducted within the virtual realm of the networking sites. It is interesting to firstly address this from what could be regarded as a ‘debriefing’ perspective, after an event, where EDL supporters would collectively or singularly construct narratives based on their experiences. These narratives can also be insightful regarding the development of online and offline relationship ties between supporters of the EDL.

The following quote outlines how the narratives produced in the networking sites were not always entirely positive and negativity often tended to revolve around the image that the EDL was presenting within the physical sphere through the behaviour of its activists:

Glad to be there, shame there wasn't more - can't wait for something like TH [the Tower Hamlets demonstration] again. The idiots that caused trouble yesterday...wisen up or get out. We don't need this, we are NOT this....true members don't go around to demos just to get absolutely hammered/coked up. We are here to make a stand, not to have a massive fight and make ourselves look like muppets. To those who genuinely can't come, if people are slagging you off, just think you're better then them - if you have commitments, money worries etc, most people would understand that. Things are absolutely terrible these days for a lot of folk, and seeing as we don't know each member personally, who are we to judge? (Facebook user 36)

Identity formed within an online setting cannot always be understood without examining its offline context (Wilson and Peterson 2002) and the user above touches upon an extremely important theme that has already been foregrounded as integral to the identity that was crafted within the networking sites. The criminal and deviant behaviour from some supporters, which was clearly a mainstay of many EDL events, was often derided within the networking sites. This was theoretically related to the organisation’s identity, which it was believed would be negatively interpreted by the media and members of the local community whom the EDL were seeking to appeal to. There was thus an inherent tension between the identity that we have observed being constructed online by the networking site users, who perceived themselves and the EDL as moralistic in contrast to their ‘other’ and the identity that was being expressed by a small minority at demonstrations.

Della Porta and Mosca (2005) discuss the Global Justice Movement, comprising networks of organisations and activists that communicated in virtual space and which protested against neoliberal globalisation at events in major cities around the globe. It is interesting to note that this movement and the various organisations that were involved in it struggled from a similar legitimacy problem as has been highlighted in reference to the EDL. Media coverage of the movement during its events tended to focus much more on issues relating to law and order and the misconduct of activists. This fundamentally detracted from the substance of the movement and the message it was attempting to project to the public. Therefore, the movement, whilst efficient at organising and mobilising within virtual space, has at the same time faltered in achieving mass appeal and social credibility. It was this very issue that troubled EDL supporters. It was clear that the negative media portrayals of the EDL as being far right thugs at demonstrations was damaging to the self-esteem of the organisation, as supporters believed it impaired their legitimacy with the wider public. In a similar vain to the Global Justice Movement it was the media representation of activist conduct at events that was a factor in inhibiting the overall success of the EDL and ultimately this forced supporters to occasionally negatively reflect on the organisation and by implication their own place within it as ‘peaceful’ supporters.

The user above also made reference to the all-important issue of ‘keyboard warriors’. The user was embroiled in a discussion regarding the dedication of some supporters, who would be regarded as ‘soft’ supporters according to the conceptualisation in the previous section in that they would never attend events. The term ‘keyboard warrior’ was a stigmatising term used within the networking sites, appropriated by those who were active in both the physical and virtual arenas, to demean those whose activities were constrained to the virtual, as they sought to resist Islamic expansionism effectively from behind their computer screen. The following was typical:

PEOPLE BANG ON ABOUT LADS DRINKING N FOOTBALL HOOLIGANS AND I SAY YES MAYBE BUT THESE LADS TURNED UP AND WERE PREPARED TO STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER AND FACE WHAT MAY COME.THEY HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH POLTICAL CORRECT KEY BOARD WARRIORS WHO DONT ATTEND DEMOS HENCE THE LOW TUNROUTS. (Facebook user 38)

As is clear here, this attribution of being unengaged from the physical activities of the organisation was a fractious issue amongst some EDL supporters. This implied a fissure between the virtual and physical elements of the EDL that manifested as a discourse through which offline activists ‘othered’ their online counterparts.

In a study of social movement activists from both North America and Latin America that examined the role that online social media played in aiding and prompting offline activism, Harlow and Harp (2012) found that the social media sites were central in mobilising and organising activists to partake in activities within physical space. The study demonstrated that activists’ online activities did not detract from the likelihood of their involvement in an offline context. This was most definitely not the case within the context of the EDL. As has been noted, there was a significant disjuncture between numbers of online and offline supporters. With the activism and interaction of online supporters constrained to the virtual arena their community of like-minded members did not effectively have an overtly physical dimension, in that they would be unlikely to have an embodied interaction with their fellow supporters. In this regard it was an exclusively virtual imagined community, with a national and global emphasis and no actually local, embodied presence. Within this specific theoretical context the continuum of community that intersects physical and virtual space (Wilson and Peterson 2002), was not necessarily an applicable model for this situation. There was no localised dimension that spanned into the physical arena, whereby supporters would come together at an event to share in the enjoyment of occupying physical space with one another in order to consolidate identity and promote feelings of collective security, whilst symbolically resisting Islamic expansionism. It was perhaps to a large extent this perceived shortcoming that troubled the core of supporters who vilified the ‘keyboard warriors’. The fact that they were not initiated at the local level in the physicality of resisting Islam maybe engendered such contempt.

It was interesting to note that imbued within some comments levelled at the ‘keyboard warriors’ was a discourse of weakness that could be regarded as emasculating, as is expressed here:

EDL is not for xmas or to make ur profile look great to ya dopey mates.. its about fighting a disease thats ruining our country. Its time for each of us to man the fuck up and get out on the streets spreading the word!!! Keyboard hypers need to get out the way for those of us that are prepared to do something!! (Facebook user 50)

If you sissy cunts are just going to stand back and accept this from behind your PC screen so be it but I'm not just gonna sit back. (Facebook user 37)

Weakness was identifiable in the two quotes above, with one user appropriating the word “sissy” and the other user claiming the ‘keyboard warriors’ were unprepared to stand alongside other supporters and “face what may come”, the implication being violent confrontation. Such discourse was not uncommon and can be interpreted as constructing the physical space of the demonstration as being masculine and potentially dangerous. On one level this allowed the critical supporters to attribute characteristics of masculinity, bravery and loyalty to their own personas, thus elevating their levels of self-esteem. On the other hand it attributed the absolute antithesis of these characteristics to the ‘keyboard warriors’, who were defined as being too weak to visit such a threatening space. This was perhaps further evidence of identity being forged in comparison to an ‘other’ as Allen (2011) suggests; however, in this case it was an intra-group phenomenon. The ‘keyboard warriors’ therefore had the indignity of being the ‘other’. A further potential consequence of this framing was that it constructed virtual space on similar terms as the ‘keyboard warriors’ that were exclusively active within it. It was classified as an innocuous space, sheltered from the ominous realities of the ‘front line’ – a place of security for the weak. Within this context the virtual realm was itself ‘othered’. Obviously the ‘hard core’ cohort of supporters would happily frequent this space, but they also used it as a comparator against which to fashion the physical realm of the demonstration as an unforgiving environment for the strong and fearless.

That is not to say that the so-called ‘keyboard warriors’ did not have their own say in defining and defending their own activities, as is evidenced here:

Its impossible for every supporter to be at every march. People like me for instance at the very bottom of the income scale. Im lucky if i got a £10 in the bank at end of each month. But im still edl through anf through. I detest islam, i repost important threads in my wall to spread awareness i display and post onto twitter and facebook occurances that show how evil and bad Islam is so i do my bit too. Infighting needs to stop NOW! we are all in this together. Awareness is the key both at demo's and online and in other places. Spread the word of the EDL friends, and stop fighting!! (Facebook user 39)

This was a typical instance whereby a user would attempt to resolve internal conflict between the EDL’s local activists and the ‘keyboard warriors’ through attempting to make salient the prospect that the fight against Islam may be waged from both virtual and physical space. In general, however, this internal schism within the EDL represented another example of how the far right was inherently fractious and prone to inner dissent, with a more extreme and aggressive fringe provoking intra-organisational discord, in this situation through attempting to undermine the self-esteem of those that did not attend events.

A few of the ‘keyboard warriors’ would elevate the importance of their own activities above those of the offline activists, as is demonstrated by this user:

Its not the size that matters really its all about the message and we can do most of the work on line, ive said it before demos are just a couple of pints with friends and a bit of fresh air to me, I do most of my work on the Internet sounds sad but I can reach millions of people world wide from here. (Facebook user 40)

The user was apt to attribute greater esteem to activities conducted online, simultaneously disparaging the anti-keyboard warrior cadre, through demeaning the effectiveness of its offline activities. This highlights how the ‘keyboard warriors’ would attempt to transcend threats to their self-esteem through positively evaluating the importance of acting in the virtual realm, as was the case here:

On a lighter note, two victories in a matter of days! These 'keyboard warriors' aren't so useless after all eh? The whole of the English Defence League should be very proud (Forum user 45)

In a manner it was surprising that there was not a more widespread defence within the networking sites against attacks on ‘keyboard warriors’, based on the reality that the vast majority of users belonged to this group. Perhaps this was an indication that many of them subconsciously acknowledged the shortcomings of not representing the organisation at a local level. If this was the case then these supporters would likely have experienced a psychological conflict surrounding their place within the organisation. Such psychological conflict may have manifested as a feeling of weakness, which could have fed into the ‘othering’ process as the negative impulses were projected onto Muslims and anti-EDL agents. This dynamic could potentially feed into the radicalisation of an Islamophobic mind-set as an individual seeks to demonstrate his belonging to the EDL’s cause, compensating for his lack of physical support at events, through upping the ante in terms of the extremeness of discourse that they express within the networking sites.

E-activism campaigns were one such tool for promoting collective self-esteem for the ‘keyboard warriors’. Such campaigns could be mobilised with ease in virtual space. The networking sites allowed for campaigns of various type to be immediately shared with EDL supporters in order to mobilise a ‘rapid response’ from other online activists to a defined problem (Hill 2010). In some instances external campaigns that were of ideological interest to the EDL could be linked and shared within the networking sites. The following quote was in relation to a government e-petition that had been started in relation to the banning of halal meat:

this guy is the biggest hater of halal slaughter. Please everyone get signing this petition, we need 100,000 signatures to get this barbaric practice debated in Parliament! Unless you want Halal slaughtered meat as your staple diet then sign now, no excuse!! (Facebook user 41)

Such requests would often generate responses from EDL supporters who proudly exclaim that they had signed the petition:

Signed……….. and passed on to others nse [no surrender ever] (Facebook user 42)

Sorted! Now let's outs these vile foreign bastards! (Facebook user 43)

signed and proud! (Forum user 36)

In a study into MoveOn, an online based social movement that uses the internet to lead campaigns on progressive issues, most pertinently against the Iraq war, Carty (2010 ) found that online tools appropriated by the organisation helped to empower e-activists. Whilst campaigning against the Iraq war the movement encouraged its supporters amongst other things to sign e-petitions, which it used as a tool to challenge the power of the political elite that was seemingly going to war in defiance of the will of the people. So in this regard there were certain parallels with the e-activism of EDL supporters to the extent they were using virtual space as a means to resist forces that they perceived were acting against their interests and indeed the interests of the nation. The empowerment associated with such acts would have been associated with enhancing the self-esteem of activists, as is notable above in terms of a sense of strength and triumphalism that imbues the users’ discourse.

On another occasion a user generated a campaign that focused on Home Secretary, Theresa May’s Facebook page:

feel free to show your disgust at known islamic extremists being allowed to desecrate the remembrance silence plz keep it clean as they'll only delete n ban if ya don’t. (Facebook user 44)

This was an example of a very brief antagonistic assault on the virtual space belonging to a prominent politician in order to make a statement about the conduct of alleged Islamic extremists in being disruptive during the silence on Remembrance Sunday. The post apparently incited other supporters to attempt to hijack May’s Facebook page in what could be regarded as something akin to an online flash protest. In reality the effectiveness of such a protest will have been nought; however, its wider utility was to mobilise anti-government sentiment and to enable EDL supporters to experience the empowerment of participating in an attack against a prominent politician that they had defined as facilitating Islamic expansionism.

In effect, EDL supporters would use e-activism as a tangible form of resistance to post-politics, whereby they could directly challenge what they perceived to be the agents – most prominently Muslims and the government – that had acted to refashion the political system to favour the interests of Islamic expansionism. Using the networking sites in this manner was an integral bonding device for EDL supporters, although there always remained a niggling antagonism between the ‘keyboard warriors’ and some of the offline activists.

## Virtual and physical relationship development

Having foregrounded some aspects relating to what could be regarded as a theoretical disjuncture between the virtual and physical arenas, concernng the online and offline EDL activists, I would like to return to explore the notion of continuity and complementarity between the two within the context of the production and consolidation of friendship ties between EDL supporters. This should let us probe the notion of hybridity further.

Van de Donk et al (2004) claim that the internet will never replace traditional forms of protest; for example, due to the fact that activists will devalue it as lacking the attraction and adventure of the standard collective experience of the demonstration. It has been noted above that a collective elation was at times generated within the networking sites. This could serve the purpose of uniting the in-group, and would occasionally be responsible for the polarisation of opinion (Sunstein 2009), leading to extreme expression. Collective elation was, however, often only fleeting and the forging of strong bonds between networking site users was to an extent limited within this environment. This was especially so in relation to Facebook, which had a more numerous and transient population than did the forum, which could be regarded as somewhat more closely knit. Needless to say, for some supporters the establishment of friendship ties with other supporters was important and not constrained to online interaction. For this cadre, it was indeed the collective experience of the demonstration that was of great importance, as well as the forging of friendship ties that straddled the virtual and physical spheres.

The following quote was from a supporter who had been frequenting the EDL Forum for several weeks, establishing loose knit relations with several of the other forum members, prior to feeling suitably integrated into the collective to attend a demonstration although, as he admits, with a certain amount of apprehension:

My first demo yesterday since joining the EDL a couple of months ago.. I wasn’t sure at first how it would go but during the march and speech I knew I had done the right thing. I now feel a real part of the EDL and what it stands for. I am glad I went to Barking and I am feeling proud at the moment just like all you brothers and sisters who attended. The march was peaceful, the speeches were excellent, (Hoops, Kevin etc etc).. I found many new friends, especially [another supporter] the Swiss Infidel. Thank you my friend for your commitment to the cause, it is outstanding and it was a real honour to meet up with you and drive back to Luton Airport afterwards, have a safe flight home this morning brother. (Forum user 37)

It was clear that once this user had overcome the initial apprehension, a unique bond had developed in terms of the organisation and other supporters in attendance. The case highlights how EDL supporters would appropriate the networking sites to express strong emotion toward the organisation and its supporters. This demonstrates the utility of the platform for sharing emotion in a disembodied way to an extensive audience, and how it was used to consolidate ties that had been largely shaped in physical space. It shows how the virtual and physical could be fused by EDL supporters, in this instance through an emotional recollection of the event that a supporter had attended. Experiences within the physical realm were brought to life within the virtual space to create a new hybrid space that allowed the networking site users to emotionally connect with the embodied experiences of this user at the demonstration and at a deeper level allowed them to connect with the EDL itself, consolidating their emotional attachment to its cause. For some of the networking site users sharing in this type of emotional experience may act as a catalyst for them to go on to actually attend an EDL event.

If one relates to hybrid space, as does Castells (2012), as being at once global and local, we can interpret relationships like the one highlighted above as being constructed in such a manner. The networking sites relate to the global and indeed the national, as they allow people to connect from disparate locations, to share in emotion and produce identity. These are interactions not constrained by time or distance and help to produce the imagined community, as in their minds they imagine their communion as a similarly minded collective (Anderson 1991). The local dimension of the actual event offers the prospect of fulfilling this imagined communion with other supporters and enabling the collective expression of emotion. Following the event the interaction would once again return to the networking sites. Therein lies the intrinsic interdependency of the virtual and physical, and by implication the global and the local, or what Castells (2012) would conceptualise as the interconnection between the space of places and the space of flows. In this regard the event or the space the event was to be held in is defined by the flows of communication, occurring within the networking sites. This manifests in a narrative form. In the build-up to an event this narrative will construct the local space in a manner that we explored earlier, as being tainted by the troubling presence of Muslims. Following the event the narrative will provide an articulation of how the local space was fashioned through the presence of EDL supporters as they share their experiences. These before and after narrative constructions would often feed into the worldview of the EDL as they would tend to have an Islamophobic, pro-EDL theme.

The following quotation highlights further how this hybrid space can be conceptualised:

It was my first demo and it was great, everything ran smoothly I felt and it was well organised. Yes mate it must have been great for you seeing all the new faces on Saturday. That can only be good news for the EDL that more and more people are taking to the streets with the EDL …. OUR STREETS!!! I can remember speaking with many guys who said to me it was their first demo so we kind of stayed together as a small group within the EDL march and spread out later. It also nice to meet people on my friends list and future friends for the EDL website I am looking forward to meeting you again at Leicester Bro and I enjoyed the speech on Saturday. I felt very proud when I woke up Sunday morning because that was when it dawned on me the most that I had done my duty demonstrating with the EDL for our country.(Forum user 38)

We can suggest that this user is relating to the physical experience within the networking sites through a resistant chant that effectively reclaims the physical space within which the event was held. The user was in effect reimagining the communion with other supporters that had been enjoyed at the event and the chant perhaps was a link to the feeling of power and togetherness that was lived on the day. As was typical with discourse of this nature networking site users would likely be urged to imagine themselves reclaiming the streets, the chant representing an emotional connection to this act. Again this might provide a motivational spur for some of the networking site users to seek to fulfil this act through attending a demonstration and living the experience in an embodied manner. Of course most of the networking site users would not ever act upon the desire to attend an event and their only understanding of it would be achieved through connecting to it as a hybrid space through sharing in the emotion surrounding the event.

Whilst it has been portrayed in earlier chapters that the networking site users actively constructed the local as a place of insecurity for non-Muslims, discourse relating to events was often imbued with this kind of empowering imagining of the event setting. Castells (2012) notes how the internet can act to increase people’s sense of security, as in the above instance. Paradoxically, the networking sites, which were used as a platform for the production of insecurity and the attribution of physical space negative, even fearful, characteristics can also construct it as a space free of such problems; the crucial context of this of course being the presence of the EDL within this troubled arena, acting to reclaim the space. It is the relationship between fear and hope that Castells (2012) relates to when considering social movements and indeed these contrasting emotions can be regarded as definitive in the construction of the hybrid space of the protest that was shared in online. Through being able to imagine a kind of nationalist dominance over this space and share this imagining with other EDL supporters, this aided in the production of hope that functioned to transcend fears of Muslims which networking site users had collectively constructed as they imagined their enemy. There was thus an undeniable sense of destiny attached to the activities of the organisation that tapped into the sentiment of its supporters who hoped for a more secure future free from the influence of Islam.

## Live updates from physical space

In the previous section I discussed how the networking sites were used by EDL supporters to make an emotional connection to an event that had taken place. In this section I will focus on events that were actually taking place and how updates from physical space were shared within the networking sites by EDL supporters. This is an interesting discussion to close with as it will underline the ambiguous nature of the hybrid space in which the EDL’s worldview and identity is produced.

Live updates from EDL demonstrations were somewhat circumscribed by the fact that the EDL Facebook wall was usually closed during these official events as a result of the actions of activists external to the organisation, who had a history of hijacking the website and causing general turmoil within the networking site, to the extent it appears that a decision was made prior to the data collection period not to leave the wall open on these occasions. This is not to say there were no live updates at all on this platform from the physical sphere, but the Facebook page was often closed during high profile events.

There were some intriguing instances of incidents unfolding via Facebook; for example when 179 supporters were subject to a mass arrest on Armistice Day. As was explained earlier, this particular incident unfolded immediately following the Armistice Day silence, when a large number of EDL supporters had congregated in a London pub. The important precursor to the mass arrest had been a statement made by the EDL leadership on Facebook threatening the Occupy protesters at St Paul’s Cathedral. It was during a Facebook discussion on an unrelated issue that the incident went ‘live’ on the networking site and the emphasis switched toward the scene of the confrontation. One user posted the following:

Live report on Radio 5live that EDL protestors causing trouble outside the Red lion pub*.* (Facebook user 45)

This news was broken by a user who had heard a media report on the radio of a disturbance at the Red Lion pub, therefore highlighting how information from external sources may be immediately diffused into a network to promote a kind of ‘shared awareness’ (Shirky 2011). This is where the instantaneous sharing of information within the social network ensures users active within the network were made aware of how the situation was unfolding. This could be regarded as a state whereby group identity became salient, as the focus sharpened on the incident and the need for further information became crucial.

The need for information was immediately satiated from the ‘front line’ as EDL supporters who had been caught up in the fracas were able to post details of what was happening onto the networking site, with the following typical:

We are now kettled in the red lion because of 'who we are'. How do they know? They are making assumptions based entirely on oyr appearance.... But yeah, the service was brilliant and peaceful, went off without a hitch... Shame old bill are spoiling it. (Facebook user 46)

This user acted to confirm the validity of the news report that had been cited and therefore clarify the state of shared awareness. He claims to have been directly caught up in the kettling incident and was posting from inside the locked down site and uses the opportunity to question the actions of the police as discriminatory, demonstrating the persecutory framing of incidents that was ubiquitous amongst the networking site users and definitive in the construction of identity. This individual was effectively relaying this perceived persecution to the virtual audience from the actual site from where it was being played out by the police, highlighting the uniqueness of this hybrid space in the production of identity.

It is interesting to draw on Castells’ (2012) account of the Occupy movement to explore the consequences of seeming police heavy-handedness. Occupy Wall Street occupied a park located in New York City’s financial district. In dealing with the activists who were conducting a peaceful protest the police were at times physically forceful. Castells notes how imagery and accounts of police brutality were shared on the internet, which functioned to mobilise sympathy and opinion in favour of activists and ultimately to radicalise the movement. As part of this process YouTube was a potent tool for mobilising the movement through exposing supporters and a potentially global online audience to imagery of police oppression.

The EDL supporters, in a similar manner to Occupy activists, used the internet to promote the idea of police heavy handedness. This relates to the Armistice Day incident as the networking sites became alive with anti-police sentiment, such as this:

THE PEOPLE IN THE RED LION were not drunk...!!!! they were not doing anything....my 71 yr old mom was in there after laying a wreath at traf square.....and the police manhandled her out of the pub.....they barged in for no reason batons out...disgraceful.....SHAME ON YOU MET POLICE.... (Facebook user 51)

Video footage taken by EDL supporters who were involved in the kettling incident was uploaded to YouTube and shared within the networking sites. The footage was interpreted as evidence of police persecution, which clearly fed into the hardening of opinion against the police and in favour of the EDL as an organisation being discriminated against.

Other users started to share their own experiences of what was happening at the kettling incident, including this user who claimed to have managed to avoid getting directly caught up in the incident, and who feeds into the sense of persecution by claiming the police had no motive for their actions:

OB [the police] have kettled loads in the pub opposite the cenotaph for NO reason, I saw it coming so moved offload on time, now having a beer in the Sports bar! (Facebook user 47)

The user revels in his freedom, naming the bar he was drinking in, as if to emphasise his embodied presence at the site. This in itself raises a potentially convoluted issue in terms of hybrid space of this kind based. EDL supporters were often free to make claims within the networking sites regarding their physical presence in places in order to underline their involvement with the organisation and to generate respect from other supporters. However, in this environment, especially with regard to the loose nature of social ties, supporters of the EDL had scope to misrepresent their activities. A fictitious narrative could be fashioned by a particular user within the networking sites that portrayed EDL supporters as being present within a particular physical space, when in reality they may not have actually been there.

The following quote, which was also posted amongst all the turmoil, further emphasises this ambiguity of presence:

Just been told everyone in the pub they've been kettled in are being nicked for breach. (Facebook user 48)

Here the user is reporting that she has “just been told” that all of the EDL supporters are to be arrested for breach of the peace. It transpired this information was exactly correct; however, it raised the issue upon analysing the comment regarding the whereabouts of this individual: was she at or near the site receiving this information in person? Was she simply restating information gleaned from another source online? Or did she receive the information from another individual who was at the site? This was unfathomable, but at the time was not a relevant issue for the audience as they seemingly received the information as accurate. The ambiguity of the user’s location and her ‘source’ of information underlined a broader issue regarding the precarious nature of the space in which the EDL’s worldview and identity was produced. This was a space constructed around ambiguous information and truth claims, narratives which would often be uncritically accepted as fact if it favoured the Islamophobic, victimised outlook of the organisation and its supporters.

Whilst Facebook was the more dynamic and easily accessible via mobile phone of the two networking platforms being studied, the EDL Forum was used on event days to provide live updates. It must be noted that the bulk of these updates came from one of the administrators for the site who was active at demonstrations and therefore sending posts to the Forum from the scene. During a demonstration the EDL administrator shared information from Twitter and other sources from the Internet that related to important details regarding how the event was unfolding:

Police: The EDL protest is now underway in Centenary Square. Shops and businesses across Birmingham are reporting business as usual. (Forum administrator 1)

Looks like people are making their way to the coaches now. This from the police: Broad Street will be closed for a short period of time while we manage crowds that are moving away from the protest. (Forum administrator 1)

Here we can see how the administrator was essentially attempting to use the official sources to frame the event in a certain way, instead of merely relying on sharing her own personal experiences on the day. The quotes, which include police reports, construct the EDL protest and its dispersal at the end as being an amicable affair that is causing no adverse disruption to the local community. On the other hand the administrator here uses information acquired from Twitter to construct the Muslim counter-protest in the complete opposite terms, as aggressive and disruptive:

Twitter: Muslims tried to get in to the EDL demo area but were quickly dealt with by the Police. Fireworks were let off. (Forum administrator 1)

This was a stark contrast, in line with how the EDL constructed its own identity as moral; in comparison to immoral Muslims which were defined as being intent on aggressively usurping the local. It may have been the case that this was a true representation of the event; however, it was typical of the strategic framing techniques used by the organisation and its supporters. Therefore, once again we see how the hybrid space was open to manipulation in this kind of way, as cyber space was fashioned to articulate the events occurring within physical space in a specific way that was ideologically appealing to the networking site users. This brings a new dimension to Garcia et al’s (2009) claim that online and offline spaces interact and transform each other, as events within physical space were potentially remoulded in this manner within the networking site. This fundamentally allowed for the generation of truth claims, which were so important to the construction of the EDL’s skewed worldview and, of course, its identity.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relationship between virtual and physical space providing an account of how virtual and physical space may become fused to engender a kind of hybrid space that is not exclusively virtual or physical and yet which is interdependent on both. In practical terms, the networking sites were used to organise and mobilise EDL supporters for important events to take place in local communities. The specific aim of this was to shape attendance within physical space through diffusing and sharing information within virtual space. This was effectively achieved through the construction of the local in a manner that was ideologically appealing to the networking site users, as a dangerous and threatening space that required defending by the EDL. The networking sites allowed for the local to be imagined in such a manner, through the symbolic construction of physical space. A process could be identified whereby a community was defined as contentious by the EDL and identified as a site for protest. Following this framing, supporters would interact and develop narratives regarding the troubling characteristics of the area, thus further producing insecurities associated with the locale. In order to transcend these insecurities the supporters would imagine themselves defending and reclaiming the area.

Through a mixture of third party media sources that related to real-world happenings and the experiences of the networking site users expressed through discourse, characteristics of the physical were fused into the virtual realm in a manner that conformed to the EDL’s Islamophobic worldview. Identity production was fundamentally dependent on incorporating properties from the physical realm, such as EDL supporters’ experiences at local events or their interactions with perceived enemies of the organisation, in a way that adhered to the EDL’s positive self-image. Imagination was stimulated through these revelations from the physical realm, which often likely had some basis in fact, but were often skewed out of context in order to fashion a unique hybrid space that was ripe for extreme expression and the construction of a more radical identity, engendered around hatred toward the ‘other’.

A hypothetical disjuncture is identifiable, which could be contextualised on a certain level as fragmenting the physical and virtual realms based on supporter activism. The notion of ‘keyboard warriors’ defined a significant proportion of the EDL support base, whose actions and interactions were explicitly constrained to the virtual realm and they had no localised presence in an EDL context. They were occasionally vilified by the’ hard core’ of supporters who were active at EDL events, a minority presence within the networking sites, but who occasionally spoke loudly in terms disparaging of those whose activities were conducted solely from behind a computer or mobile phone screen. A perverse intra-communal identity process was identifiable, in which instance ‘keyboard warriors’ were being ‘othered’ and constructed as weak in comparison to the offline activists. By implication, the physical realm of the demonstration was fashioned as a masculine space in comparison to the virtual realm which was the preserve of the weak-willed.

However, this particular disjuncture between the virtual and the physical was merely theoretical, as it helped us probe the concept of ‘keyboard warriors’ and their place within the EDL. These spaces are therefore better considered as being interdependent. This was especially so in respect of the forging of friendship ties. Mobilisation to attend events and develop relationships in an embodied manner was nurtured online and had seemingly led a few supporters to undergo the collective experience of the EDL demonstration. Post-event relationship consolidation occurred within the networking sites and it could be theorised that strong emotion was a unifying characteristic that blended virtual and physical, bonding the collective. Crucially, even those individuals that were not in attendance at the demonstration were able to share in the emotion surrounding it through characterisations of the event that were constructed in the hybrid space via discourse and media relating to it. Fears that were engendered through threats to the local were transformed into hope based on the presence of the EDL as a vehicle of security. This was therefore a space where networking site users who did not attend EDL events could in a unique way engage with happenings from physical space, potentially consolidating the strength of their connection to the organisation.

Live updates from physical space, including EDL events, would be fed into the networking sites through discourse and media. This would potentially allow for the misrepresentation of reality to be strategically produced by the networking site users as they sought to define the situation unfolding at a local level in a favourable way. This would maybe involve moulding an event into a greater success than what would otherwise be suggested. This was another lever of identity calibration as it could facilitate in the production of pride and self-esteem; or it could be appropriated to make salient the perception of persecution – perhaps as a consequence of police mal-treatment of EDL supporters – that was such a definitive component of the Islamophobic identity. Therefore, the notional hybridity that defined the space that was constructed within the networking sites, through the infusion and integration of physical characteristics, was a key site for the production of identity.

# 8/ Conclusion

In this chapter we will revisit the key themes of the study. First we will explore the socio-political environment in which EDL supporters have found themselves within the present era, as disenfranchised and alienated members of the working class, and how insecurities that have manifested as a consequence of this situation have driven a search for a new form of identity – ultimately an Islamophobic identity that oppresses Muslims. Next we will take a look at the process of identity production, which will be shown is engendered around the reduction of insecurity. Here the Islamophobic identity is produced as a binary construct to Muslim identity, which is duly ascribed immoral and dangerous characteristics in order that EDL supporters may imagine themselves in a positive way. Finally we will look at the worldview of the EDL, which incorporates a global, national and local scaling logic that functions to help construct the organisation on grander terms than is the reality. The unique worldview of the organisation and its supporters will be theorised as at times being produced within a hybrid space that connects physical and virtual space through emotion within the networking sites.

This study has explored how a far right organisation has appropriated online communication technology as a means to recruit ideological supporters to its cause. The functionality of decentralised media platforms, in this context Facebook and the EDL Forum, has enabled the organisation to develop a loosely knit network of nationalist supporters who converge within the networking sites to interact with each other and with online administrators that represent the organisation. This online community has been forged through hatred of Muslims as well as all other agents that are perceived to be critical of the EDL. At a deeper level, however, it is insecurities brought about by processes such as industrialisation and globalisation, which unites this collective as the networking sites are used to construct an empowering identity that enables its adherents to transcend any feelings of weakness and insecurity linked to belonging to the working class in present-day England.

As part of specific aims of the study we have explored the process of identity production used by EDL supporters to construct their own Islamophobic identity in comparison to the identity of their Muslim ‘other’. This was fundamentally engendered around a moral comparison that defined the EDL as upstanding defenders of the nation and which had Muslims as an existential threat to non-Muslims. The research has also provided an account of the prevailing security concerns of EDL supporters. Most obviously it was the presence of Muslims and the influence of the Islamic religion that was of greatest concern, a threat that had powerful historical connotations, most pertinently in terms of the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, which demonstrated the violent potentiality of the ‘other’ which it was the role of the EDL to resist in defence of the nation. It was in reality more likely the case that insecurity was the outcome of the destabilising forces of globalisation, especially in terms of the migration of minority populations into once white working class communities; or as a consequence of neoliberalism, which has weakened the status of the working class and subverted the British political system. Another aim of the research was to assess the relationship between the global and the local in the context of the EDL, a relationship that was also importantly defined through the inclusion of the national. The networking sites were an environment where dynamics relating to the global, local and national scales could be imagined by EDL supporters in a manner that facilitated in the construction of the EDL’s worldview and its sense of purpose in the face of Islamic expansionism. What follows will deal in depth with the research themes of identity, security and the global-local nexus.

## Socio-political environment and identity production

Working class identity has been shaped by various social, political and economic circumstances, which are explored in this section. In many ways the English white working class has suffered as a consequence of the implementation of neoliberal policies. This has had troubling implications, most prominently in relation to deindustrialisation as the British economy has been restructured to favour the interests of international finance.

In order to understand the extent of working class exclusion and suffering it is instructive to compare the current situation with that of the period following the Second World War. During this period the working class had a strong political influence as its interests were facilitated by the efforts of trade unions, whilst the interests of capital were constrained and subsumed as secondary to the needs of combined worker’s organisations. This situation was reversed during the 1980s under Thatcher when market logics were unleashed as the means by which economic growth and organisation could best be met. Yet in reality these apparent freedoms promoted the needs of business and capital foremost and generated profound consequences for a national working class that was undermined by the efforts of the working classes in other nations (Crouch 2004). Trade unions were relinquished of their political authority and, through deindustrialisation, the working class became redundant to the concerns of the political elite. This elite has now forged a neoliberal consensus, rendering the reality of a ‘left’ and ‘right’ distinction on the political spectrum defunct and thus consigning Britain to an era of what has come to be termed post-politics (Mouffe 2000). Political influence was sucked upward from the local level to the supra-national level, with multinational corporations having significant sway over the political elite (Bourdieu 2000). This was an eminently disempowering process for the working class.

At a local level some working class communities started to fragment under the strain of deindustrialisation and as a consequence of the social atomising effects of neoliberalism and the capitalist system. The outcome of these complex processes on working class identity was the promotion of political alienation. On top of this the stigmatising effect of middle class misrecognition of the working class became more pronounced, whereby sections of the middle class have acted to stigmatise the working class as a means to overcome uncertainties in relation to their own place in the social structure through ‘othering’ those they regard as inferior (Young 2007). It is not difficult to postulate that working class identity would have developed a sense of precariety as its members came to embody a diminished social and political status. Furthermore, where working class community formations have broken-down under the weight of these forces social and cultural estrangement has resulted in the in promotion of more privatised lifestyles within the domestic sphere and a diminution of municipal space and institutions outside the private home (Putnam 2000).

The contemporary situation of working class weakness and alienation, influenced by the destabilising effects of globalisation, has induced a state that Young (2007) likens to a form of social vertigo,in whichfeelings of insecurity and uncertainty become more pronounced. The dominant narrative, related to by Ochs and Capps (1996), that had imbued working class identity with socio-political empowerment was now one of decline and loss, as this identity was refashioned by the forces of neoliberalism and globalisation. Writers like Young (2007) have argued that the existential insecurity associated with these forces drove the search for alternate sources of identity and, fundamentally for the working class, the identification of empowerment, fulfilment and self-esteem in new class projects built on resentment and ethnic intolerance. This is a useful means of interpreting the creation of the EDL which, being a predominantly working class organisation, has thrived within a set of feelings of low self-esteem and weakness that many supporters experienced and from which they wanted to escape; thus producing a resistant type of ‘white backlash’ (Hewtitt 2005) against migrant populations. The EDL, in a similar vein to other far right organisations, has been adept at exploiting these feelings and the recent crises of 9/11, the war on terror and the collapse of the financial system which propelled many towards its nationalist cause.

Lowenberg (1992) highlights the sense of narcissism that can be engendered from nationalism as well as the esteem generated by being associated with projects linked to the protection and enhancing of the nation. These projects offer narratives of empowerment that have at their core the sense of being joined to other members of an expansive and imagined community. National identity therefore contains a subtle alchemy by which the very characteristics that have made working class identity so troubling for its adherents may be transcended. Castells’ (2010) notion of a primary identity (in this regard the working class identity) that exists among a plurality of different identities is useful in helping us contextualise how an individual may possess multiple identities and how these are configured in complex ways. It is the feelings of low self-esteem, insecurity and weakness which have become associated with this identity that may motivate the desire to search for other inspirational and more affirmative roots of identity formation that may help us to explain the rise of groups like the EDL.

We therefore have a situation whereby the traditional working class identity’s association with the left co-exists with a far right nationalist identity. Whilst the working class identity can be regarded as the dominant identity, nevertheless the perceived strength acquired through associating with the far right nationalist identity would likely motivate a desire to shun or repress this association with the left. It was found that EDL supporters would not only express repugnance toward the left, but would tend to define any anti-EDL agent as leftist or Marxist, including the Conservative party. This can be related to in this context as being something of a paradox of post-politics, whereby the left has in reality been significantly diminished, partly as a consequence of neoliberalism’s attack on working class interests. However, the world according to EDL supporters comprises an association of leftist institutions and agents that are perceived to harbour an all-encompassing threat to the nation in facilitating Islamic expansionism. This is of course a product of the EDL’s distorted worldview, but it could also be interpreted through the framework of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009). In this regard, the troubling effects of neoliberalism for the working class, in facilitating the interests of capital, have not been perceived as damaging and remain invisible, and the blame is placed elsewhere, with Muslims acting as a scapegoat.

In order to explore how the EDL perceived of Muslims from the perspective of post-politics, it is useful to return to Crouch’s (2004) ideas regarding post-democracy, whereby democratic institutions have been subverted by a self-serving business elite, which has corrupted the political elite. A central narrative relating to the Islamophobic identity construct, which helped inform the entire worldview of the EDL, was that the political elite and indeed all state institutions had been corrupted and no longer served the interests of the people. In line with the aforementioned effects of capitalist realism, EDL supporters did not define the problems with British politics as being the product of a parasitical brand of capitalism. Instead, a conspiracy theory was constructed that had Islamic ideology as contaminating politics, not just locally and nationally, but globally. In this scenario the political elite had allied itself to facilitating Islamic expansionism and the realisation of the global dominance of Islam. As a consequence, if we are to theorise politics shifting upward to the global level, in this framework we must see it as being subsumed by an ‘extreme’ brand of Islamic ideology that is propelling its adherents towards achieving global omnipotence. It was therefore Muslims who were deemed to have theoretically brought about the demise of democracy, wielding a corrupt influence over the political elite. The ideological blurring of the boundaries between left and right on the political spectrum, noted by Mouffe (2000) to have forged a political consensus engendered around neoliberalism, from the EDL’s point of view had a different culprit, in the shape of Muslims. The central contention was that in order to reclaim democracy and ‘freedom’ the influence of Muslims must be tightly controlled or in the most extreme scenario they should be purged from the nation.

This contention could be regarded to have its roots in the Lacanian theory of nationalism (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006), a theory which is extremely insightful for understanding nationalist identity. In this regard we can decipher the aversion toward Muslims as pertaining to insecurities regarding the place of the ‘native’ majority within the nation and the belief that the presence of this minority group is a threat to the nation’s integrity and an alienating buffer between a return to the ‘original state’ of the nation, an idealised imagined past when national ‘purity’ brought with it a sense of happiness, which was ultimately lost upon the incorporation of the ‘other’ into the nation and into local communities. An important driver of insecurity, as noted by Appadurai (2006), is linked to the antagonising fear that the numerical rising tide of Muslims will eventually consume the nation and consign its members to a minority status if nothing is done to counter its surge. EDL supporters were fearful of an imagined future whereby ‘native’ populations had been demographically usurped by Muslim populations.

The notion of antagonism is pertinent here to return us to post-politics, as it is the case that the closing down of ideological divisions between political parties that once represented left and right has created a vacuum of democratic confrontation into which the far right has moved (Mouffe 2000). Undoubtedly, the type of confrontation that the EDL seeks is the antithesis of democracy, a type of biopolitics (Foucault 1998), which endeavours to control the perceived spread and concomitant threat that Muslims are construed to present to the nation. What is fascinating to observe is that for the EDL this form of biopolitics was to a large extent being conducted online, with networking sites a vehicle for the production of a threatening Muslim ‘other’. We will go on to explore this phenomenon in the next section, but it is important to highlight that the networking sites were a potent means for expressing post-political antagonisms, with Muslims the object of animosity.

The resistant discourse expressed by EDL supporters in the face of this perceived threat, in seeking to neutralise the Islamic ‘contagion’ infecting the nation and its politics, notionally sought to liberate the nation from the affliction of post-politics. The reality of course was entirely different, as the EDL’s fixation on ‘controlling’ Muslims and their religion conformed to the notion of ‘oppressive othering’ (Schwalbe et al 2000), which had racist connotations. Here the EDL sought the subjugation of Muslims and their consolidation as an inferior social group to the white working class. There was a dissonance within the EDL regarding the issue of racism, as the organisation followed in the footsteps of other European far right organisations in attempting to shun the history of fascism and racism through focusing on defining the ‘other’s’ culture as being of a troubling nature and incommensurate with that of the nation. This focus on culture or religion was opposed to focusing overtly on skin colour as the definitive signifier of ethnic ‘difference’. Overt racism was present within the discourse of some supporters, but there was a ubiquitous subtle form of racism that was identifiable. The EDL’s reliance on terminology such as *taqiyya* that defined even moderate Muslims as untrustworthy and subversive highlighted a racial hate dynamic that went far beyond the organisation’s officially ordained focus of dispute: Islamic fundamentalists. As a consequence, whilst the EDL viewed itself as a liberator it was fundamentally a racial oppressor whose actions simply acted to consolidate post-politics. Through providing a medium for the continued expression of popular antagonisms, by way of utilising Muslims as a profound figure of hate, the EDL’s ideology fails to identify the actual source of political antagonism – that being the corrupting influence of unregulated capitalism – and in doing so merely legitimises the status quo. As a consequence post-politics continues unabated.

## The process of identity production

Having explored the socio-political environment in which the white working class has found itself in 21st Century Britain, identifying the three major identity constructs that could be regarded to be defining for sections of the working class who have embraced the far right, the next stage is to highlight the process of identity production that collectively manifested between EDL supporters within the networking sites. This was a process engendered around the production and reduction of insecurities that EDL supporters experienced.

Allen (2011:291) refers to identity being produced process as in terms of “who we are not.” It was therefore through the ascription of characteristics to the Muslim ‘other’ that the EDL fashioned its own identity as a comparative construct, defined as the antithesis of its ‘other’. In a case study of the offline activism of three EDL supporters Treadwell and Garland (2011:1) make an important assertion that is supported by this online study, that “acute feelings of marginalisation and disadvantage prompt internalised negative emotions of disillusion and anger, which manifest themselves through externalised hostility, resentment and fury directed at the scapegoat for their ills: the Islamic ‘other’.” This sense of marginalisation and anger was indeed notable within the networking sites and was the basis for the production of identity, during which process psychological conflicts are externalised through the construction of the ‘other’. In addition, it is noted by Young (2007) that a sense of destabilising rapid transformation that has come to define society in the present day has motivated a search for a source of certainty and that this is achieved with recourse to the adoption of empowering identity constructs, produced in contrast with the ‘other’. As we have noted, the notion of insecurity and the search for certainty is highly relevant to the alienated working class. In order to understand how this insecurity was addressed through the identity process it is therefore crucial to highlight some of the characteristics that were assigned to the ‘other’.

Immorality was an overarching attribute of Muslim identity and this incorporated an array of troubling characteristics, one of which being inherent violence and aggression. The functionality of the networking sites assisted in legitimating this characteristic as inherent to Muslim identity. The multimodal nature of the internet allows the instant sharing of various media and information, the components of which may be remixed to relay a specific message (Castells 2012) and this was a notable strategy used by the EDL and its supporters. In defining Muslims as violent, as with the attribution of other key characteristics, the networking site users would supplement their own discourse with other sources. A range of media would be drawn upon that evidenced Muslim violence, be that media articles, YouTube videos, or other imagery, all of which could be easily shared within the networking platform. These media sources would not uniquely focus on localised incidents of Muslim violence that occurred within England’s communities, but the sources could relate to violent incidents from anywhere around the globe. This was important as it fed into the essentialising of this characteristic, or indeed any characteristic, into Muslim identity. It facilitated in promoting the perception that Muslims were disposed to violence, regardless of their whereabouts on the world map.

If we consider that fascism necessitates the identification of an ‘enemy’ (Zizek 1997) and how the Nazis relied to an extent on pictorial and televisual propaganda characterisations, disseminated to the German public, to construct the Jewish ‘other’, the internet has most certainly brought a new dynamic to this identity process. It has widened the scope for these characterisations to be developed at the grassroots level collectively by far right supporters, as opposed to merely in a top-down fashion within an organisation. Of course the internet provides an extensive source of freely available materials, thanks to the likes of YouTube, with which identity can be produced in this way. As were the Jews, this has facilitated the construction of Muslims as being a subversive threat that is in the social and political ascendance, demographically threatening the nation as they ‘outbreed’ the ‘local’ populations.

We noted earlier the primordial view of identity (Geertz 1963) that proffers identity to be innate and an irrational phenomenon. This concept helps us understand how the EDL constructed the ‘other’s’ identity, as being intrinsically dangerous. Of course, this framing was possibly part of the process of achieving certainty in an uncertain era. Through essentialising the ‘other’ as immoral with a tendency to violence, the EDL supporters cast their own identity on moral terms, thus producing a sense of security in the innate nature of their moral character. This was not to say that they defined themselves as non-violent, as aggressive discourse was a mainstay within the networking sites and indeed many users claimed they were anticipating violent confrontation with the Muslim world in the future. The crucial distinction was that Muslim violence was inherently immoral and to an important degree was perpetrated against non-Muslims, especially white working class persons, who themselves would only use violence as an act of resistance against aggressive Muslims. In an otherwise uncertain and opaque world, this was a certainty.

Other significant characteristics that were assigned to the ‘other’ were formulated around sexual immorality. Muslims were defined as rapists, paedophiles and sex deviants. This characterisation was again uniquely brought to life within the networking sites, to a large extent orchestrated by the EDL’s team of administrators. Through the persistent sharing of media articles and videos relating to, for example, the grooming of underage white girls – a current affairs item that was getting media publicity during the research period – the EDL were active in constructing an environment that amplified far beyond reasonable proportion the extent to which Muslim males were partaking in this kind of activity. It created the impression of an epidemic and thus fed into the essentialising process that had this as an inherently Muslim trait. There was also a racial dynamic that this framing of Muslims played to, which the EDL and its supporters were frequently active in exploiting across a wide range of different contexts in order to personify the ‘other’ as racist. That the victims in the child grooming case were white was exploited by EDL supporters to symbolise the racist nature of Muslims and their proclivity to ‘prey’ on white people.

The sex deviant characterisation of Muslims was again a moral comparison that constructed the EDL in a puritan fashion. These perverse values of Muslims, infused with a tendency to violence, could theoretically be associated with a narrative of ‘hypermasculinity’ (Mosher and Sirkin 1984) that informed the EDL’s definition of Muslims. In this regard the threatening mystique attributed to Muslims was intensified through magnifying the ‘extreme’ typical traits associated with male masculinity: aggressiveness and sexual potency. Through constructing the ‘other’ in this way EDL supporters were perhaps not seeking to fashion a direct comparison in relation to their own identity, but to maximise the ‘risky’ (Mythen, Walklate and Khan 2009) disposition of Muslims. Having defined Muslims on such threatening terms the EDL was able to imagine itself in a more magnificent way, as the only counterpower (Castells 2010) with the character to tackle its ‘hypermasculine’ foe. In addition, through defining Muslims as racist toward non-Muslims, the inference was that there existed a power dynamic between the two identity constructs – that of the oppressor and the oppressed – with non-Muslims being persecuted. This introduces another key component of the identity construct, that being a kind of persecution complex. I will go on to evaluate how the EDL perceived itself to be the target of a range of anti-EDL agents, through the adoption of a persecutory framing, but for now it is worthwhile focusing on the racial dimension of persecution.

Norton and Sommers (2011) identify a perception among white Americans that, as a consequence of the drive toward political correctness, white people have become the victims of racism. This perception of the racial victimisation of whites was strong amongst EDL supporters, as was the belief that the establishment – be that the political elite, the judiciary and the police – supported the oppression of whites. In effect these agents were deemed to be a legitimating force for the racial subjugation of white people under Islam. At present this was limited to racial attacks on whites by Muslims at a local level, be that physical or sexual attacks, which were either covered up by the establishment or not appropriately addressed by the legal system. Ultimately, however, there were concerns that this oppression would intensify as Islam sought to achieve political dominion over the nation and indeed around the globe. An impending clash of civilisations between the Muslim and non-Muslim world was a pervasive concern in the minds of many EDL supporters, who feared a hellish persecution under Islam if this ‘war’ was lost.

Such persecutory conspiracy theories were on one level functional and on another destructive in respect of the identity construct. Conspiracy theories can act as an outlet for hostile impulses (Abalakina‐Paap et al 1999) and from a psychoanalytical perspective, as noted above, we can interpret that this is a vehicle for externalisation and channelling out of the psyche inner-antagonisms. The concept of frustration-aggression displacement (Rohter 1969) is informative for understanding the dynamic that was at work. In this regard, the conspiracy theory of white oppression likely feeds into the already existing feelings of uncertainty, weakness and low self-esteem that have manifested for members of the working class in the era of post-politics and under the duress of middle class stigmatisation. The conspiracy theory acts as a narrative outlet for the feelings of frustration and aggression that may, for some, accompany being white and working class in Britain. Through this process of displacement the feelings of weakness and oppression may be offered an outlet and be replaced by a resistant form of empowerment. The process of empowerment would be supplemented by the networking sites, which act as a forum that connects like-minded individuals who may be geographically dispersed into a single disaffected community (Diani 2000), thus offering strength in unity, albeit unity engendered through insecurities. Also, lending to the depersonalised nature of interactions in the networking sites, the group identity in which an individual is interacting may become salient over that of the individual (Postmas and Brunsting 2002), thus feeding into a sense of deindividuation and the diffusion of responsibility, which could promote an immoderate code of conduct between group members and the production of increasingly intolerant discourse as opinion polarises against the ‘other’ (Sunstein 2009), manifesting as an empowering form of Islamophobic expression.

The notion of resistance is essential in understanding all of this and resistance was of course the cornerstone of the EDL. It is clear that being part of a resistance movement helped to produce a sense of certainty and strength for EDL supporters and also fundamentally provided a means through which to partake in an antagonistic form of politics. Resistance was legitimised and also intensified as a response to persecution, which aided in the rationalisation of this obscene discourse and the production of extreme narratives that imbued the identities of ‘self’, in relation to the EDL, and ‘other’, in terms of Muslims. The ‘other’ was theoretically constructed as a projection of the anxieties pertaining to post-politics and the late modern era, most prominently a sense of socio-political powerlessness, humiliation and a disdain for the processes of globalisation. These anxieties are attributed an embodied form in the Muslim ‘other’, where they may be attacked, reviled and ultimately resisted by EDL supporters from within the networking sites.

The attribution of troubling characteristics to the ‘other’ and the perception of ‘its’ inherent racism invited the EDL supporters to ‘up the ante’ and express their very own oppressive discourse of a racialised and perverse nature as they denigrated Muslims. Within the networking sites a snowballing effect could at times be witnessed as expression became increasingly obscene, generated around highly emotive issues like child grooming. At its most extreme this discourse would dehumanise Muslims and condone genocide. The fact that such discourse was largely not condemned by other users underlines its normative acceptance within the community and indicates there was a ‘predatory’ (Appadurai 2006) nature to the identity as, at its extreme fringe, it was motivated by a desire to annihilate it’s ‘other’. As was noted above, the depersonalised space that constitutes networking sites facilitated the group dynamic, but on a theoretical level it was a place where fears could be constructed and confronted safely in private from behind a computer screen. Regardless of the fact this was a safe environment there was a palpable sense of fear, discernible from the discourse of EDL supporters, that accompanied the construction of the ‘other’ and the ‘hyper-masculinity’ attributed to ‘it’. Indeed, it was seemingly through fear and anxiety that the EDL online community ties were forged, driving its resistant response. There was an irony in the fact that the sense of fear and helplessness that was engendered through the sharing of discourse and media about Muslims was both constructed and subsequently resisted all from within the networking sites.

The vast majority of EDL supporters did not have any involvement with the organisation other than via the networking sites. This could perhaps to an extent be linked to an aversion to directly confronting the source of their fears, but the outcome was that their activities took place explicitly online. These ‘keyboard warriors’ were engaged in a self-destructive cycle of fear production and frustration-aggression displacement. In this regard fear would produce the expression of rage, which would alleviate inner-anxieties, and which would in turn be collectively reproduced within the networking sites through further threat and fear scenarios surrounding Muslims. They constructed identity within what could be considered their own phantasmic ‘hybrid space’ that fused the virtual and physical through strong emotion.

Castells (2012) highlights the dependency between urban and online space with regard to the creation of hybrid space. This was evident in the process of identity construction, which was embedded within discourse engendered around anecdotal conversations between EDL supporters in the virtual realm. As has been noted, however, it was also dependent on incorporating phenomena, for example, in the form of news articles and video media, which related to concrete events within the physical realm that supported the EDL’s ideology. Through the sharing of experiences of EDL supporters and often with the help of external sources of media, a skewed type of ‘hybrid’ reality was fashioned that allowed the networking site users to attach to events and activities that occurred within physical space, be that an EDL demonstration or an incidence of Muslim violence. It was through strong emotion that this connection occurred and through which the hybrid space was produced. This would allow users to attach to physical space from within the networking sites. The space was of course produced in a manner that appealed to the EDL’s Islamophobic outlook, as Muslims were imagined as a troubling enemy of the nation. At the same time the EDL was glorified and thus a sense of belonging to the organisation and its ideology was engendered for the networking site users.

This skewed reality that had been constructed in turn had the effect of imbuing urban space with a negative symbolism in terms of the ‘mental maps’ (Lupton 1999) EDL supporters collectively developed in order to understand their local and national environment. Anxieties were frequently fomented within the networking sites, especially around Mosques being built within local communities. This fed into a process of defining and understanding such communities as endangered constructs, which resultantly strengthened a desire to conduct demonstrations in these locales in order to ‘defend’ the established way of life from this apparently perilous symbol of Islam. Whilst this desire to ‘defend’ the local was manifest, expressed through a narrative of aggression and defiance, what was less clear was the actual intent of the networking site users to attend such events and visit this ominously imagined space in person.

## The English Defence League’s unique worldview

Notions of the global, the national and the local were imperative to defining the EDL’s worldview and the construction of identity. Here I will define this worldview construct, which is fundamentally fashioned in an empowering way within the networking sites and which has the EDL as an important force within the global arena. A hybrid space is produced by the networking site users that to them feels ‘real’ and which may have a mobilising and radicalising effect on identity.

There was a discernible perception shared by EDL supporters that the local was being lost. Whilst discourse addressing this sense of loss was couched in terms of immigration and cultural contagion, it is possible that the social atomising effects of neoliberalism and the destructive impact of deindustrialisation on working class communities have facilitated in the production of insecurities around the strength of local communities. As a consequence of perceptions of the collectivist and fundamentalist nature of Muslims that exist within British society (Meer and Modood 2009) these insecurities will likely have been maximised as Muslim communities were seen by EDL supporters as being strong and threatening entities. The local was therefore viewed with anxiety, a symbol of working class weakness. The national, whilst glorified, again was treated by EDL supporters as an endangered entity, and as also being increasingly subverted by immigration and ‘cultural contagion’. This being a nationalist imagined community (Anderson 1991), within the networking sites the nation was therefore the primary focus of ‘defence’ for the EDL. Maintaining the perception of the nation’s transcendental exceptionality was the locus of fevered concern amongst its members who used this attachment to overcome low self-esteem. The global was imagined within the networking sites with negative symbolism, as encapsulating the troubling processes and products of globalisation, including immigration, ‘cultural contagion’ and terrorism; responsible for the feelings of insecurity and the sense of destabilisation that accompanied life in the current era. The global could in a respect be theorised as a propagator of crisis, be that the crisis associated with physical threats to the body as a consequence of Islamic terrorist attacks, or this destabilising crisis of identity that has befallen the working class.

What was unique about the EDL and its supporters was how their worldview was not merely glocal (Robertson 1995), incorporating a fusion of the global and the local, but was fashioned around a fusion of the three scales, incorporating the national. Dynamics relating to the global, national and local would often be related to within discourse and through the sharing of news articles and video media. It was the manner in which the emphasis of discourse would shift in a seamless manner between the scales that was profound and it was apparent that this served an important ideological function within the networking sites. Most importantly it allowed for phenomena, for example, happening on a global scale to be interpreted by the EDL through the same lens as phenomena occurring nationally or locally and vice versa. The best instance of this was within the context of the ‘War on Terror’, which was at the same time imagined by EDL supporters as being waged against Islam on a global scale by Britain’s armed services, but also at home by the EDL itself in defence of local communities and, most critically, in defence of the national realm. This conceptualisation helped the EDL place itself at the heart of a global struggle against Islam, which will have produced a significant self-esteem payload in relation to the Islamophobic identity, imbuing it with a strong sense of purpose. In this regard the identity would have theoretically acted as a fuelling mechanism for the transcendence of insecurities inherent to the working class and national identities, such as low self-esteem and Appadurai’s (2006) ‘anxiety of incompleteness’. In terms of the anxiety of incompleteness, through associating with an organisation that is acting against the spread of Islam, concerns that were attributed to the presence of this threatening minority within the nation would have likely been reduced based on the belief that in the EDL there was a functioning defender of national purity and that one day the nation may be set free from the ‘other’s’ spoiling presence and returned to its ‘original state’.

Social movements will tend to “think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are, in the global networks of power and in the communication sphere” (Castells 2007:249). In a manner the EDL conforms to this construct, albeit in a self-deceiving and illusory fashion. Its supporters weave narratives within the networking sites that vilify any perceived agents that are deemed to be against the EDL, including the government and the police, constructing these agents as part of a conspiracy to persecute the organisation and to favour the interests of Islam. EDL supporters were therefore theoretically struggling against a hegemonic force, which represented a Golliath that needed to be slayed in order to avoid a future of Islamic tyranny.

Supporters were seemingly seduced by the global potentialities of the networking sites to the extent they believed they were part of a global imagined community that comprised like-minded supporters from around the world. This community was commensurate with the globalised threat being posed by Islam. This perception was enhanced as a consequence of the presence of international supporters who were active within the EDL’s networking sites, offering ideological support to the organisation. For a meaningful interpretation of what is in fact occurring here we must return to the notion of post-politics and ultimately Bourdieu’s (2000) assertion that politics has shifted from being conducted at a local level to the global level. It has been postulated that the EDL has fashioned its own model of post-politics. As was noted above, the EDL has confused the source of working class weakness and of political and cultural sterility that has been the product of neoliberalism’s influence on the political system and society (Fisher 2009). The problem is not identified as emanating from the corrupting influence of big business but as a consequence of Islamic hegemony. The EDL perceives itself to be a globally ascendant political actor; its worldview rationalises the prospect that it is actively resisting the aggressive forces of Islam that seek global dominance and which are converging upon the nation and threatening local ways of life.

The EDL has therefore fashioned its own brand of politics that notionally functions at the global level, albeit not in direct defiance of the more likely sources of the political breakdown that has been troubling the British working class, most prominently the capitalist elite. Through figuratively closing the gap between the global and the local via discourse the sense of socio-political weakness that has manifested at local level, the outcome of fragmenting white working class communities, and at a national level through the hollowing out of democratic institutions (Crouch 2004), may be tackled at a global level, within the virtual domain. Indeed, what is exceptional about this scenario is that it was largely constructed from behind a computer screen, through discourse and the fashioning of a hybrid space that may connect local issues and events to virtual space within the networking sites and make them feel real and of great importance to users. The virtual component of this hybrid space therefore acted to attach users along with these important local issues – such as non-Muslim no-go areas – to the global domain, where they could be collectively resisted within the networking sites through empowering discourse.

The balance between what Dienel (2010) would relate to as ‘hard’ supporters who are activists at demonstrations and the ‘soft’ supporters who largely operate as ‘keyboard warriors’ in the networking sites, is difficult to discern, although the huge disparity between the numbers of online supporters and the numbers which would actually attend events (Bartlett and Littler 2011) was quite telling in this regard. It was clear that the networking sites were appropriated by the EDL’s leadership in the hope of radicalising ‘soft’ supporters to adopt the worldview of the organisation and to literally act upon it, beyond the social networking environment, in order to boost the numbers at demonstrations and generate a stronger presence in local communities. This radicalisation was potentially facilitated by the manner in which the worldview was fabricated in an ideologically skewed way within the hybrid space. It was clearly the case, however, that the attachment to the physical realm that occurred remotely from the safety of the online hybrid space was enough to satisfy most of the networking site users whose involvement with the organisation would be conducted entirely in this kind of remote manner. Through the sharing of media within the networking sites the perceived threat posed by Islam was constructed as being at once global, national and local. This was assisted through a discourse that unified the scales and which effectively constructed a new reality through conflating events; for example, Muslim violence in locations around the world was defined to be un-differentiable from Muslim violence within England’s local communities. Producing a proximate sense of threat in this manner likely fed into the radicalising process and hardened opinions against Muslims.

Radicalisation can occur on various related levels, such as in terms of beliefs, feelings and, most troublingly, in relation to behaviour (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). Of course, whilst the EDL leadership wanted to improve the proportion of ‘hard’ supporters, whose beliefs and feelings have been radicalised to the extent they would be willing to leave the relative safety from behind their mobile phones or computer screens in order to actually support the EDL in the physical sphere, radicalisation is a double-edged sword. For a small fringe of supporters it is possible that their exposure to the EDL’s networking environment would encourage the very undesirable criminal behaviour at events that was damaging to the organisation’s media image, which was itself a threat to collective self-esteem as a consequence of negative media portrayals. The reality was, of course, that the vast majority of EDL supporters would likely only ever remain as ‘keyboard warriors’ and whilst their beliefs may become radicalised by the EDL’s ideology and its worldview, they would never thirst for a direct confrontation with the ‘other’ that they have come to both revile and fear at the same time. The perceived problem of Islamic expansionism was resisted through aggressive discourse or with recourse to e-activism. In this regard the fight could be taken to Islam in a disembodied manner from within the networking sites, a platform which allowed users to dip in and out of the battle as they pleased through the click of a button.

Their actions within the networking sites likely produced for some EDL supporters a sense of empowerment, excitement and belonging that was transcendental in relation to their debilitated social status. Castano et al (2002) claim that people can experience a fear of annihilation associated with the loss of traditional identity formations in the present era and that this propels them to resist such fears through attaching to groups that have social identities. Working class status may be defined as a threatened construct in this regard, marginalised to the extreme due to post-politics. Theoretical fears of annihilation within an atomised and deindustrialised society were potentially alleviated within the EDL’s online networking community through the construction of an Islamophobic identity. The ‘keyboard warriors’ may genuinely await the day that the Muslim and non-Muslim world take up arms against one another. Until that moment their seeming acts of resistance against Islam – proxy for a latent struggle with much more pervasive and hegemonic forces responsible for the production of insecurity in the present era – will be perpetrated through the pugnacious striking of a keyboard.

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