

Keyboard Warriors

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*The Production of Islamophobic
Identity and an Extreme
Worldview within an Online
Political Community*

By

Graham Edward Geddes

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PREFACE

This book is based on my PhD thesis. The thesis comprised the first in-depth online study of its type examining the English Defence League (EDL), a far-right political movement in England, and its supporters within an online setting. The broad focus of the study 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.

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 mainstays 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 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 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 embracing 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 as 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 first is the flash demo—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, or, 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 used a variety of these mobilisations, but 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 a “child of the Internet” (Tweedie 2009). It has adroitly exploited the potentiality of networking sites, Facebook in particular, 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 had 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 so 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 does not partake in any direct confrontation with the EDL’s opponents at events in local communities, but uses 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 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 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 (Ibid.). Through highlighting “problems” in these locations and turning out as a group to resist them, 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 also 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 where 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 are 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 whom 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 that 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 hooligans 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 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 (Ibid.). 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, 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 off to form their own anti-Islamic movements. The so-called North East Infidels and North West Infidels are the new factions, and 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 (Ibid.). Jackson (2011) stipulates that 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 implusive 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, where it 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, due to a large extent 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.

Focus of the book

The study upon which this book is based had three aims, broadly based on the themes of identity, security, and the global-local nexus, which were defined to provide a unique exposition of a decentralised political formation that was using virtual space to produce a mediated identity and worldview. The aims were as follows:

- (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 that are at the heart of this study: identity, security, and the global-local relationship. I made reference in the previous section 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 book: 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 Bauman (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 the aspects of globalisation that created the greatest concern. The study explores how the perceived increase in ethnic populations and their concomitant cultural forms unsettle the “native” population’s traditional way of life and produce 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 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 organisation and its supporters.

Virtual ethnography

The study employed a virtual ethnographic approach in order to study the EDL online community and the interactions of its members. 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 supporters, and as 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 (2004, 2) 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.” 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 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 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 of an abstract online world only when this world was evidently structured by offline dynamics, as a result of which 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.

While 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 that 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. It is the intention of this book to accurately express the narrative of EDL supporters and therefore all quotations used are taken uncensored from the original source.

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 two fundamentally different aspects to

the methodology—one that addresses documentary analysis of discourse, and another that deals with the 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 an 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 addressing 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 remain 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.

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, and therefore acquiring some sort of informed consent for access 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 addresses, 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, that both networking sites would be treated equally and no form of consent would be sought. An important safeguard was incorporated into the book 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 that 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 book would potentially be traceable through a process of 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 book. 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.

Some personal reflections

As a precursor to delving into the story of the EDL I would like to provide some context for the rationale of the study and to share some details from my own biography, most specifically in relation to a fairly extensive period of my life living with my parents that connected certain of my early adolescent experiences with my transition to adulthood. Hopefully, this will go some way in helping to explain my interest in studying the working class within the context of globalisation and insecurity.

Coming from a relatively modest social background and through studying politics and society as an undergraduate, I have developed an intimate interest in social structure and class dynamics. This was a driving influence in terms of my desire to conduct research that has an emphasis on the working class. I was interested in addressing the dynamics of contemporary social and political change that have affected the working class and which have also impacted on my own life. I felt it would be interesting to explore the more troubling aspects of working class behaviour and to trace this through to the sense of alienation and disempowerment that the group has been subjected to as a consequence of processes such as deindustrialisation. At the time of coming up with ideas for the focus of my study, the EDL was receiving a significant amount of media attention due to its high-profile demonstrations within England's towns and cities, which were generating violent confrontations with anti-fascist protesters and police. It became apparent as I was conducting scoping research on the EDL that the organisation had a vibrant online

social-networking community with a strong working class character, and I quickly became engrossed in the nature of interactions between community members, which were often highly emotionally charged with Islamophobic vitriol. As there had been little previous research conducted on the online component of the EDL, I felt this would be a great vehicle through which to explore troubling forms of working class behaviour.

In terms of my own biography and how it fits into the context of the book, it is important to focus on my father's employment experiences as a manual tradesman. He worked as a welder, fabricating ships and oil platforms in Wallsend on Tyneside from the 1960s, and had become relatively well-off financially as a result of steady well-paid work that extended throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. I have memories as a child, however, of the family's financial situation becoming somewhat precarious during the late 1980s and into the 1990s, and I recall my father spending significantly more time around the family home at the time. I eventually reached an age whereby I was able to understand that my father was having difficulty finding secure employment, or indeed for long periods of time struggling to find any employment at all. I was made starkly aware that the financial implications of all this would potentially determine whether the family would be able to remain living in our house for much longer, and I can remember experiencing a troubling sense of anxiety as a result. The financially secure life that my father had worked hard to create for the family was suddenly unravelling, the process initiated by forces beyond our control and which had resulted in the gradual mothballing of once prominent industrial sites on, and nearby, the River Tyne where my father had worked. My father managed to get through to retirement with sporadic bouts of temporary employment and we managed to avoid having to sell the family home, but this profound shift from a situation of certainty and security to one of utter precariousness has fascinated me to this day.

During my time studying at university, I have come to understand the situation that had befallen my family and many other working class families in Britain. I now know that the sense of insecurity we experienced was the outcome of deindustrialisation and globalisation as manufacturing production shifted elsewhere in the world with lower wage economies where it was more economical to produce commodities such as ships. This globalisation of production was hugely damaging to the social fabric of Britain, as certain industries, most prominently the coal industry, were brought to their knees, producing large-scale unemployment (Jones 2012). Another key driving force of the insecurity experienced by the working

class was delivered through the introduction of neoliberal economics, engendered through the rollout of the free market and the transfer of economic policy from the public to private sector (Cohen 2007). Neoliberal policy presided over the diminution of the power of trade unions and the concomitant loss of power for employees as the hand of employers was legislatively strengthened in terms of employment rights. This in particular had a significant impact on my own concerns regarding my father's employment prospects during the 1990s and into the 2000s, as he was largely only able to secure employment for days, weeks, or, when he was lucky, a few months at a time, after which he never knew where his next pay packet would come from. It is undeniable that the situation he found himself in during the 1990s was in stark contrast to that in the heyday of his career a couple of decades earlier.

The situation was to become more complicated in the early twenty-first century with the accession of Eastern European countries into the European Union. This heralded the free movement of skilled manual workers from these countries into the local job market. My father would complain that the hourly rate of pay was decreasing as a consequence of greater competition for jobs. When he was able to find work he would come home with stories about how large numbers of "local lads" could not get a job, while Polish men were being employed in place of them. While I was never able to validate the stories my father shared in relation to the Polish workers it was undeniable that their migration into the local economy was having an impact on the sense of security experienced by local workers, who were chasing sparse employment opportunities. It may have been that the Polish were scapegoats for the precariousness of employment that had been engendered by globalisation, neoliberalism, and deindustrialisation, but their presence was unsettling and produced an abundance of animosity among local workers, who would clearly go home and share their opinions with friends and family, as did my father. This underscores the negative effects immigration can have on local populations, who may come to view migrants as inimical to their own fortunes and way of life, and how migrants can consequently be constructed as objects of hate.

There is also an important political aspect I can reflect on that provides further context for this study. My father, prior to the 1990s, had been a staunch Labour supporter and an advocate of trade unionism. His political attitudes would change with the coming to power of New Labour in 1997, which he came to detest more vigorously than the previous Conservative government. This was based on the fact that New Labour seemingly did