

## **Facebook Groups as Unique Publics: Exploring the Overlaps of Private and Public in Young British Muslim Users' Experiences**

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In exploring the nature of private, intimate spheres held in opposition to public ones, a problematic of terminology emerges related to their ubiquitous use. With such frequency, their meanings are largely taken for granted. The stuff of 'public' and that of 'private' might be tossed around in casual conversation at the same time that the boundaries of both are being questioned in academic and institutional circles (Marquand, 2004; Newman, 2006; Passerin d'Entrèves & Vogel, 2000; Steiner, 2000). As Janet Newman observes, the contemporary climate in particular is marked by questions about "what is and what is not a public matter...However the shifting boundary between public, private and personal is not just a matter of definitional nicety—it is the focus...through which the boundaries are reordered" (2006: 164). As demonstrated by the proliferation of Internet technologies, the boundaries between private, public and political spheres are being challenged and reordered by new media which function to alleviate such boundaries as they infiltrate communication patterns and are adopted for purposes beyond their intended ones. For example, the recent adoption of *Twitter*, *YouTube* and *Facebook* by the Arab Spring movements can be seen as part of a modern innovation in which social movement action repertoires and even daily interactional exchanges are shifting from older models of social and political expressions to newer forms of reflexive political activity (Häyhtiö and Rinne, 2007). Through such innovation, new media spaces like *Facebook* have been transformed from strictly social tools to creative political spaces which demonstrate both private and public qualities and challenge notions of a divide between private and public spheres, further suggesting ways in which Facebook may host unique publics with particular political potentialities.

This paper will present some data from my PhD research which focused on a case study of twenty-five young British Muslim Facebook users. The fact that they are Muslims is significant since young Muslims have increasingly taken to the Internet as a mode of communication, a means of accessing religious information, and as a gathering place for identity-based claims-making, debate and discussion (Bunt, 2009; Mandaville, 2001). Therefore, this paper will discuss the particular uses to which these young British Muslims put certain Facebook Groups, with an emphasis on the ways these Groups were used as alternative or counter public spheres within the broader field of Muslim identity politics, as well as the ways in which these Groups hosted discussion of intimate matters alongside more public or collective matters of concern. In that way, this paper will highlight the ways in which such Groups and the usage observed within them demonstrated both

private and public qualities and, therefore, suggest the emergence of innovative spaces for engagement which can be seen as simultaneously public and intimately private.