

Extremists hijack Speakers' Corner

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The reputation of Speakers' Corner as a bastion of free expression is being abused by those with extreme views who use it to promote their agendas and post inflammatory videos online, it has been claimed.

Supporters of Anjem Choudary, the hate preacher who is set to be released from prison this year, have made several appearances in recent months and Tommy Robinson, the former English Defence League leader, also gave a speech accompanied by a large group of followers.

Scuffles have broken out in recent months and a large number of speeches and stand-offs have been captured in YouTube videos that have garnered thousands of views.

For 150 years Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park has hosted heated debates, providing a platform for a wide range of political or religious beliefs. Anyone who climbs on a soapbox must risk the scorn or derision of the crowd, as passers-by stop to listen and argue.

However, the atmosphere has turned ugly this year, according to people who regularly attend. It has been claimed that some groups are seeking to "weaponise" the institution.

At least four associates of Choudary have been filmed speaking at the site this year, and there has been speculation that Choudary will appear there upon his release, which could be as soon as October.

His supporters include Ricardo McFarlane, who calls himself Abdul Hakim, and was a good friend of Khuram Butt, one of the London Bridge attackers. McFarlane was recently released from prison for possession of a false identity document. Shortly after the van and knife rampage at London Bridge last year, McFarlane told *The Times* that his friend Butt had been influenced by foreign policy.

In a video filmed at Speakers' Corner in April he was asked by another speaker why he did not condemn Butt or Isis. McFarlane said: "I don't want this to be a Muslim against Muslim conflict."

He added: "As Muslims we should be against all extremism," explaining that extremism was "the moderate Muslim who tries to water down Islam".

He also said: "I believe that democracy is a man-made system that is bad for society and I believe that the Sharia is the solution for society."

Another Choudary follower, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was instrumental in recruiting the teenage



Abdul Hakim and the EDL founder Tommy Robinson were filmed for YouTube; the site has a long tradition of fiery speeches

terrorist Brusthom Ziamani, who was found guilty in 2015 of a plot to behead a soldier. In one video filmed at Speakers' Corner the follower complained that other Muslims at the site were not harsh enough on the "kafir", or non-believers, and accused them of "snitching". He was also filmed praising Choudary and calling for his release.

In March Robinson, the EDL founder, appeared at Speakers' Corner to read a speech that had been due to be delivered by Martin Sellner, an Austrian anti-Muslim activist who was denied

entry to the UK. After his ban from Twitter for posting Islamophobic comments, Robinson called on his supporters to hold a "free speech" march beginning at Speakers' Corner.

A video entitled "The right vs Muslims" has been viewed almost 20,000 times on YouTube, showing scuffles that broke out at the site

during his speech. On the same day, Heiko Khoo, 54, a Marxist speaker who has spoken regularly since 1986, was manhandled from his platform by far-right supporters shouting abuse.

The Friends of Hyde Park, a charity which represents the interests of park users, said: "Although Speakers' Corner has traditionally been used for free speech, and things said have historically on occasion been reported to a wider audience through the press, we believe the current use, especially linked with modern electronic media, represents an abuse of that tradition."

Dr Khoo said that the nature of speeches at Speakers' Corner had changed, because people were no longer using oratory to draw in random passers-by, but were "playing to a YouTube audience".

He said: "After Tommy Robinson made his appearance in Hyde Park, which was obviously orchestrated ... to try to present him as some kind of defend-

On their soapbox

Speakers' Corner is linked to the Tyburn gallows that stood near the spot for almost 600 years, where condemned people were given the chance to make a final speech.

The right to free speech at the site was enshrined in an act of parliament in 1872. Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and George Orwell have exercised this right. The latter described the site as "one of the minor wonders of the world" and said he had listened to "Indian nationalists, temperance reformers, communists, Trotskyists, the Socialist Party of Great Britain, the Catholic Evidence Society, free thinkers, vegetarians, Mormons, the Salvation Army, the Church Army, and a large variety of plain lunatics".

From 1906 to 1914 supporters of women's suffrage gathered there and fights broke out when the fascist leader Oswald Mosley spoke there in 1934. Arthur Scargill and Neil Kinnock spoke at CND rallies in 1983 and protests against the Iraq war converged on Speakers' Corner in 2003. Lord Soper, a Methodist minister, socialist and pacifist, spoke there regularly from 1926 until his death in 1998.

er of free speech, the antagonism in Hyde Park has increased."

He said that he had seen an increase in police patrols, but a Metropolitan Police spokeswoman said: "We have not seen an increase in speeches that would cause concern but where someone is found to be breaking the law, officers will take appropriate action."

Bryn Harris, of the Speakers' Corner Trust, a free speech group, said there were concerns that Speakers' Corner was being "weaponised and exploited" as part of organised campaigns, but posting videos online was a legitimate way to spread debate. He said that many websites made a profit from videos posted on their sites and added: "Essentially, it is privatising Speakers' Corner to become something owned by these sites."

The Royal Parks guidelines state that anyone wishing to film must submit an application, but this applies to "commercial filming" and it is not clear if this would cover footage captured on smartphones at Speakers' Corner. A spokeswoman said: "There is a long tradition of free speech at Speaker's Corner. Speakers must however act within the law."



Tinder falls out with its founders over sex and money

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It's the app that can "find love anywhere", but the relationship between Tinder's founders and its owners has gone sour amid allegations of sexual harassment and financial trickery.

In a lawsuit filed in New York against Match Group and IAC, the dating app's founders and eight early employees accused Greg Blatt, a former chief executive, of groping and sexually harassing a senior marketing executive in 2016.

They accused the parent companies of "whitewashing" the alleged incident because Mr Blatt, Match's chairman and chief executive, was needed for a "scheme" to con the plaintiffs out of billions of dollars to succeed.

According to the filing, Match and IAC deliberately manipulated financial

data provided to banks last year to undervalue the company at \$3 billion and deprive the founders and early executives of huge sums to which they were entitled from stock options. Match and IAC strongly deny the allegations, and say they will defend themselves vigorously.

The alleged harassment of Rosette Pambakian, Tinder's vice-president of marketing and communications, is said to have taken place at a company party at a Los Angeles hotel that coincided with Mr Blatt's appointment at Tinder.

In a statement to CNN, Ms Pambakian, 34, said that Mr Blatt, 49, started behaving inappropriately. She said she "bolted" to a hotel room with two people she knew, but Mr Blatt showed up uninvited soon after. She was sitting on the bed, and without speaking he pushed her back, climbed on to her and

started kissing and fondling her. She said the contact was not consensual.

Mr Blatt, who left the company with a "golden parachute" after the valuation, did not respond to a request for comment. However, a source familiar with the matter told CNN that a company investigation concluded that he was invited to the room and there was "consensual cuddling".

Sean Rad, one of Tinder's co-founders, said he alerted IAC to the allegations last year, but the company failed to act because Mr Blatt was central to their plans to devalue the business.

Ms Pambakian claimed that other female employees of Tinder had been subjected to "pervasive sexual harassment and misogyny by Match executives". Match Group said in a statement: "The Match Group board takes allega-



Greg Blatt is accused by Rosette Pambakian of pushing her back on a bed in a hotel room at a company party and kissing and fondling her

tions of workplace misconduct extremely seriously. We investigate reports of misconduct, including sexual harassment, promptly and thoroughly, and take appropriate action, including swift termination of those responsible.

"As it relates to the matter alleged in the lawsuit, an incident occurred in late

2016 and was reported at the end of April 2017. The Match Group Board, with the assistance of experienced outside counsel from two nationally recognised law firms, promptly conducted a careful and thorough investigation under the direction of independent board members; concluded, among other things, that there was no violation of law or company policy; and took appropriate action."

The statement added that "Mr Rad and his merry band of plaintiffs did not like the outcome" of the rigorous valuation process involving two independent global investment banks.

One of the plaintiffs in the latest case, Justin Mateen, a co-founder of Tinder, was accused of sexual harassment four years ago. He left the company after a lawsuit was settled with no admission of wrongdoing by any parties.