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Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: An exploratory study of strategies for policing interfaces in cyberspace.

Dr Paul Reilly  
University of Leicester

### **Abstract**

Ten years after the Belfast Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a divided society as signified by the persistence and even proliferation of interface areas, often divided by so-called 'peace walls' and intermittent conflict between rival communities on either side. Recent media reports have suggested that online interactions between rival interface communities on social networking sites may be undermining efforts to foster better intercommunity relationships. This article explores the extent to which key stakeholders are aware of the use of the Internet by young people to plan street riots in interface areas in Northern Ireland and their responses to this 'anti-social' use of sites such as Bebo. It presents evidence to suggest that stakeholder awareness about the extent of the use of social media by young people to organize street riots is based on rumour and hearsay. Key stakeholders report that Internet Safety programmes have received positive feedback from local audiences but concede that they are unlikely have any significant impact upon the level of anti-social behavior in interface areas.

### **Introduction**

Zittrain (2008) asserts that strategies to protect the "generative spirit of the Internet" must "blunt the worst aspect of today's popular generative Internet and PC without killing these platforms' openness to innovation" (p. 150). The tension between the regulation of online activities and the preservation of the right of "generativity" among Internet users is particularly evident in the "architecture of participation" synonymous with the Web 2.0 universe, Tim O'Reilly's (2005) descriptor for the section of the World Wide Web that promotes bottom-up communication via platforms such as weblogs and social networking sites (SNS). While some scholars have suggested that the use of these sites may serve to encourage the development of social skills among teenagers and even create bridging social capital between different groups (Ellison et al. 2007), concerns continue to be raised among global policymakers about the potential sexual exploitation of children on these sites, as well as their possible misuse by young people themselves via the disclosure of sensitive information and anti-social behaviors such as cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin 2008).

This article adds to the policy debate over how to promote Internet Safety on Web 2.0 platforms by focusing on the extent to which the use of social media to organize anti-social behavior in contested areas of Belfast is recognized and addressed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and community groups in these areas. The UK Home Office (2010) defines anti-social behavior as "any aggressive, intimidating or destructive activity that damages or destroys another person's quality of life." Recent reports in the *Belfast Telegraph* have suggested that young people who live in close proximity to sectarian interfaces, the barriers between Catholic and Protestant districts that local residents often refer to as "peace walls," have used Bebo to organize street riots in contested areas of North and East Belfast, with the perpetrators often posting

videos of these attacks on YouTube (Belfast Telegraph 2008; 2009). This paper sets out to explore the level of awareness and responses of stakeholders to the use of social media to organize these incidents of what has been called “recreational rioting,” a phenomenon defined by Jarman and O’Halloran (2001) as “clashes between young people in interface areas” that “occur out of boredom and bravado rather than having an overtly political basis” (p. 3). It does so by reviewing the relevant theoretical perspectives on the use of social media to organize anti-social behavior, analyzing how key stakeholders promote Internet Safety on these platforms, and presenting the findings of a preliminary set of interviews with community workers and a representative from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

## **Background**

Young people in Northern Ireland appear to be more comfortable in their use of new media technologies than their parents. The 2010 Media Literacy Audit commissioned by the UK’s Office of Communications (Ofcom) suggests that Northern Irish adults remain the most cautious in the United Kingdom when it comes to entering their personal information online, with only 56 percent of parents who had children aged between 5 and 15 years believing that the Internet’s benefits outweighed the risks associated with its use (Ofcom 2010a). By contrast, recent studies suggest that there is little to differentiate between the online social networking practices of young people in Northern Ireland and their peers in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Ofcom Children’s Media Literacy Audit in the Nations (Ofcom 2010b) found that Northern Irish children aged between 5 and 15 years were no more or less likely than their peers in England, Scotland, and Wales to maintain a social networking profile. Indeed, the study found that 43 percent of children in Northern Ireland checked their social networking profile at least once a week, 2 percent higher than the average across the United Kingdom. Young people in Northern Ireland tend to use social networking sites to communicate with their family and friends. This finding resonates with much of the current research in the field that indicates that the majority of teenagers who use social networking sites do so to sustain existing offline relationships rather than to contact strangers (Ellison et al. 2007). However, Lloyd and Devine (2009) point to the potential online risks that children may face on these platforms, with a small minority of 8–11 year olds (17 percent) in Northern Ireland confirming that they had met in person someone who they had initially contacted on a social networking site. This is one example of the “youth thrill-seeking behavior” in Northern Ireland that has arguably been made easier via social networking sites such as Facebook (Goldie and Ruddy 2010).

The purpose of this article is to explore the extent to which key stakeholders are aware of the use of social networking sites by young people to plan street riots in interface areas in Northern Ireland and their responses to this “anti-social” use of sites such as Bebo. Interface areas are defined here as disputed territories that are contested by Loyalist communities, the predominantly Protestant neighborhoods from which Loyalist paramilitaries who previously used political violence in support of the union with Great Britain drew support, and their Republican counterparts, the predominantly Catholic neighborhoods from which Republican paramilitaries who previously used political violence in support of a united Ireland drew support during the conflict. Hughes et al. (2007) suggest that there has been an increase in “chill factors” such as the demarcation of sectarian boundaries with flags and graffiti, as the

zero-sum perception of politics in these areas has remained largely intact in the post-Good Friday Agreement era.<sup>1</sup> Protestants perceive they have lost their “relative advantage” in Northern Ireland due to concessions made to Republicans in the peace process. Meanwhile, Catholics appear cognizant of the reduction of inequality of Northern Ireland but remain fearful of perceived Protestant bigotry and intolerance. An unintended consequence of the construction of “peace walls” in urban interface areas has been that they have provided a focal point for violent clashes between groups of young people from the Loyalist and Republican communities they were designed to keep apart. This has remained a persistent problem in interface areas throughout the period of conflict transformation and has been described by Goldie and Ruddy (2010) as “both the product and outcome of interface issues” (p. 9).

Recreational rioting is differentiated from paramilitary-led and orchestrated violence in interface areas due to the absence of a clear political agenda among its participants, who tend to be predominantly—but not exclusively—young people aged between 10 and 17 years (Jarman and O’Halloran 2001). Although reports in the *Belfast Telegraph* have claimed that Loyalist paramilitaries have organized street riots involving young people in North Belfast (Belfast Telegraph 2010), a number of studies over the past decade have suggested that the majority of violent clashes are motivated by boredom rather than an overtly political agenda (Cownie 2008; Centre for Young Men’s Studies 2009). Throwing stones at people living on the other side of an interface may represent a “cheap night out” for teenagers in these areas, particularly given the high levels of socioeconomic deprivation that continue to blight the North Belfast electoral constituency that has been the location of the most widely reported incidents of recreational rioting in Northern Ireland over the past decade. However, Leonard (2008) suggests that it is overly simplistic to characterize this violence as non-political in nature. Her study of 80 Catholic and Protestant teenagers in North Belfast found that group norms established during the conflict continued to influence young people’s conceptualization of in-group and out-group identities and that it was difficult to differentiate the behavior of child rioters from the political context in which they had grown up.

Studies conducted by Leonard (2008; 2010) and the Centre for Young Men’s Studies (2009) have linked social networking sites to anti-social behavior in interface areas. Both reports suggested that young men aged between 13 and 16 years in particular used sites such as Bebo to threaten members of rival interface communities and to organize violence in their respective areas. However, public awareness about the scale of this activity has tended to be limited to media reports of violent clashes between Catholic and Protestant youths in areas such as the Ardoyne district in North Belfast and the Short Strand in East Belfast. These have invariably taken the form of a reference to a statement from a Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) spokesperson stating that the street riots were organized via social networking sites.

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<sup>1</sup> The Good Friday Agreement was an agreement between the Northern Irish political parties (with the exception of the Democratic Unionist Party who opposed the treaty) and the UK and Irish governments, signed on April 10, 1998 and later ratified in both countries via national referendums. It included plans for an Assembly with 108 members, the creation of North–South administrative bodies, and constitutional change in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to recognize the principle of consent in determining the future of Northern Ireland.

The *Belfast Telegraph* reportage of the Ardoyne riots in June 2009 is the exception to this rule, with its online edition using user-generated YouTube videos to show how young people engaged in street riots following a contentious Orange Order march in the predominantly Catholic area (Belfast Telegraph 2009).<sup>2</sup>

Efforts by the PSNI to identify and arrest suspected teenage participants in these street riots have been publicized in most if not all of the media reportage of these incidents. For example, the PSNI released CCTV images of 23 young people who were involved in the Ardoyne street riots in August 2009, leading to 14 teenagers being charged with public order offences (Belfast Telegraph 2010). However, there is very limited information available in the public domain about how key stakeholders are responding to the use of social media by young people to organize this violence in interface areas. This paper sets out to add to the limited empirical data on this issue by presenting an exploratory study of the perspectives of two key stakeholders involved in the prevention of anti-social behavior in interface areas, namely community workers and the PSNI. In doing so, it will explore the extent to which these actors recognize and respond to the problem of the use of sites such as Bebo to organize recreational rioting in contested areas such as North Belfast.

## **Web 2.0 and the Organization of Anti-Social Behavior: The Story So Far**

Much of the recent debate in the literature on the mobilizing potential of new media technologies has tended to focus on the use of social media to organize protests either in democratic nation-states (Gillan and Pickerill 2008) or in authoritarian regimes (Morozov 2010). By contrast, there have been relatively few studies of how social media have been used to organize anti-social behavior such as street riots in democratic nation-states. In order to analyze how social networking sites are being used to organize street riots in Northern Ireland through multi-stakeholder perspectives, one must first develop an understanding of what is meant by the term anti-social behavior. The UK Home Office (2010) provides an extensive list of examples of anti-social behaviors on its website, including rowdy and noisy behavior, vandalism and graffiti, street drinking, dealing drugs, and yobbish behavior. These are all activities that have the potential to damage another person's quality of life and are particularly prevalent in economically deprived urban areas, such as those surrounding sectarian interfaces in Belfast. However, the posting of pictures and videos on YouTube, the use of social media for gang recruitment, and cyberbullying would appear to be the three anti-social behaviors that are most prevalent among the teenage participants in urban street riots in Belfast (Centre for Young Men's Studies 2009).

The posting of pictures and videos showing young people engaging in anti-social behavior, such as unprovoked violent attacks on strangers and the consumption of alcohol when under the legal age to do so, has been the subject of much media coverage in the United Kingdom over the past five years. Government ministers have

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<sup>2</sup> The Orange Order is the largest Protestant fraternal organization in Ireland, with an estimated 80,000–100,000 members. Traditionally linked to the Ulster Unionist Party, the Order organizes several thousand marches each year, with the climax around the 12th July celebration of King William of Orange's triumph over the Catholic King James at the Battle of the Boyne (1798).

called for YouTube to remove videos of unprovoked attacks on unsuspecting young people as far back as October 2006 (Mediawatch 2006). This phenomenon, also referred to as “happy slapping,” has continued to be projected via social networking websites, as demonstrated by the recent trial of two men in Glasgow accused of assaulting another man and posting a video of the crime on YouTube (BBC News 2010). However, the use of social media to share photographs and videos of drunken behavior has arguably become an everyday activity of many young people in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Fionnuala Sheehan of Drinkaware.ie has claimed that this activity has led to a “normalization of drunken behavior” among young people, who have a perception that all people in their late teens drink to excess and engage in other anti-social behaviors (Corden 2010).<sup>3</sup>

There has also been evidence that gangs are recruiting new members and threatening their rivals on social networking sites. Kelley (2009) suggests that police in the United Kingdom and the United States have noticed an upward trend in the use of social media to organize both criminal and anti-social behaviors. Members of gangs often pose with weapons on their social networking profiles and post messages designed to intimidate members of rival groups. A recent example of this phenomenon was uncovered during the trial of 10 members of the Manchester-based Fallowfield Mad Dogs gang for affray in August 2009. Judge Clement Goldstone QC took action to limit the online activities of the gang after it was revealed that the defendants had posed for photographs on their MySpace and Bebo profiles making “gun salutes” and stating that they were “preparing for war.”<sup>4</sup> Similar behaviors on social networking sites were described in the recent Centre for Young Men’s Studies report (2009) that examined youth violence in Northern Irish interface areas. The study found that many teenage boys admitted to using sites such as Bebo to threaten their counterparts from the other side of the interface. However, the scale of the use of Bebo by Northern Irish youths to threaten members of rival interface communities is difficult to estimate given the relatively limited empirical data in this area.

Cyberbullying is perhaps the most well-known anti-social behavior that has been linked to the use of social media by young people. The UK Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2007) defines cyberbullying as “the use of information communication technology, particularly mobile phones and the Internet to deliberately upset someone” (p. 2). Instant Messaging and social networking sites have made it much easier for peer-to-peer harassment in the offline world to be communicated in the online sphere (Ybarra and Mitchell 2004). Although there is limited data available to show the extent of cyberbullying in the United Kingdom, the Byron review into children and technology (2008) identified it as a significant threat facing young people who use social networking sites on a regular basis. However, the nexus between technology and bullying also demonstrates how online and offline relationships have increasingly become blurred in the Web 2.0 era. Scholars such as Mesch and Talmud (2007) and Hampton (2004) argue that the criticism that online

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<sup>3</sup> Drinkaware.ie is an Irish information portal on alcohol and drinking.

<sup>4</sup> The 10 gang members were banned from posting pictures of themselves with other gang members on their social networking profiles (The Independent 2009).

ties are by definition weak and incomplete is no longer valid, given that people increasingly use both online and offline spaces to sustain their pre-existing relationships with friends and family members. This also arguably applies to those Internet users who use social networking websites to engage in anti-social behavior such as happy slapping or cyberbullying. New media technologies are not likely to lead to anti-social behavior in offline spaces unless their users seek to use them for such purposes. As Kelley (2009) asserts, “violence was around long before Bebo, so let’s not blame the medium for offline violence” (p. 1). The implication of this emerging strand of research for this study is clear. In order to investigate the role of social media in the organization of recreational riots in Belfast interface areas, one must also consider the offline relationships that teenage rioters cultivate with both in-group and out-group members and how these are communicated via these sites.

### **Responses to Anti-Social Behavior Organized Via Social Media**

This paper will also explore the responses of stakeholders to the use of social media by young people to organize street riots in contested urban interface areas. Morozov (2010) suggests that the use of sites such as Twitter to organize demonstrations has made it easier for authoritarian regimes such as the Belarusian and Iranian governments to monitor the activities of anti-state protestors. Clearly, the same form of surveillance on social media sites is unlikely to be present in the United Kingdom, particularly given that UK citizens are legally entitled to express their opposition to state policies via public demonstrations. A better comparison can be made between efforts to monitor the activities of online criminal gangs and those young people who use social media to engage in recreational rioting in Northern Ireland. Although there is limited evidence in the public domain as to the extent of the surveillance of the online activities of criminal gangs due to the sensitive nature of these operations, it is known that police forces in the United Kingdom use social media to conduct investigations into the criminal activities of gangs (Kelley 2009). Therefore, it was considered highly unlikely that the PSNI would provide extensive information for this paper about the level of their surveillance. Instead, this paper will focus primarily on the responses of those stakeholders who are engaged in the prevention of young people using social media to organize anti-social behavior in interface areas. This paper will analyze how community groups and the PSNI are promoting Internet Safety in these areas and how effective these stakeholders feel these campaigns have been in addressing this issue.

The focus of UK policymakers thus far has tended to be on cyberbullying, online grooming of children by pedophiles, and preventing young people from accessing illegal or harmful content on social networking sites (Byron 2008). One of the key recommendations of the Byron review was that there was a need for a coordinated approach towards children’s digital safety among parents, the Internet industry, voluntary bodies, and the government. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) was created in September 2008 to bring together these stakeholders, and has overall responsibility for the promotion of events such as Safer Internet Day (February 9, 2010) and raising public awareness about Internet Safety. The ThinkuKnow Internet Safety program has been taught in UK schools since 2006. Information is provided on how young people can both identify and report harmful activity on social networking sites, ranging from cyberbullying to the risks of talking

to strangers on these sites (CEOP 2010a).<sup>5</sup> This program has sought to encourage young people to set their social networking profiles to private in order to avoid the disclosure of sensitive data to Internet users who might use this information for illegal activity such as identity fraud or for the online grooming of adolescents. The issue has also been highlighted on the social networking sites themselves, with the users of Facebook receiving a message asking them to check and update their privacy settings in December 2009 (boyd and Hargittai 2010). Although this particular update was prompted by changes made by Facebook itself to its default privacy settings, it nevertheless served to make its users more aware of the need to protect their personal information from the attention of “unwanted visitors” to their profiles.

Recent studies have suggested that campaigns such as ThinkuKnow may have been successful in increasing awareness among young people about the need to restrict public access to their profiles (Hinduja and Patchin 2008). A recent study found that 78 percent of children aged 12–15 years were likely to keep their profiles private (Ofcom 2010b). Boys were more likely to allow their profiles to be seen by anyone compared to girls, who appeared keener to restrict access to their personal information. However, there have been some indications in recent studies of U.S. social networking practices that the moral panic surrounding online predators on sites such as MySpace in 2005 and the privacy updates by social networking sites have prompted young people to make their profiles private (boyd 2008). Furthermore, although young people are becoming increasingly vigilant about the sharing of personal information on their social networking sites, a significant number still choose to post personal information on publicly accessible profiles (boyd and Hargittai 2010).

The First UKCCIS Child Internet Strategy was launched in December 2009 with a mission statement that referred to the need to provide “high quality controls to stop children seeing harmful and inappropriate content online and monitor their behaviour” (UKCCIS 2009: 5). A key pillar of this strategy focuses on the need for the Internet industry to make it easier for users to report illegal or harmful activity on social networking sites and to ensure that children are not exposed to age-inappropriate content such as pornography. A key recommendation was that the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) website should become the one-stop shop for Child Internet Safety in the United Kingdom. The primary purpose of CEOP is to “protect children, young people, families and society from pedophiles and sex offenders, and in particular those who use the Internet and other new technologies in the sexual exploitation of children” (CEOP 2010b). CEOP has provided Internet Safety training materials to teachers, community workers, police officers, and child protection specialists in the United Kingdom since its formation in April 2006. The CEOP Ambassador training course is aimed specifically at professionals who work with children and young people and who wish to deliver the ThinkuKnow program for 11–16 year olds.

A key theme that emerges from the UK Child Internet Safety Strategy is that young people must be empowered to use new media technologies but also be aware of the

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<sup>5</sup> The site provides videos showing young people talking about these online risks and how they should be reported to CEOP.



potential risks of online communication. This is congruent with both the principles for Safer Social Networking adopted by the European Union (2009), and academic studies of adolescent social networking practices (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Livingstone and Brake 2010). What is also clear is that efforts to reduce the risks associated with social networking practices are based on a multi-agency approach towards the promotion of Internet Safety, and a combination of both peer-to-peer and conventional forms of surveillance on these sites. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of whether key stakeholders in interface areas in Belfast perceive these Internet Safety campaigns to have been effective in promoting the safe and responsible use of social media by young people in their respective areas.

### **Research Questions**

Specifically, three research questions emerge from the preceding literature review. These are:

(1) What is the level of awareness among community workers and the Police Service of Northern Ireland about the use of social networking sites by young people to plan anti-social behavior such as street riots in interface areas? (2) To what extent is there a coordinated response between these stakeholders towards the use of social networking sites by young people to organize anti- social behavior in interface areas?

(3) Do these stakeholders perceive that Internet Safety campaigns in Northern Ireland have been effective in promoting the responsible use of social networking sites among young people who live in interface areas?

To investigate these questions, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with nine community workers and one Education Advisor from the PSNI Community Safety Branch. Interviews were conducted between June 2009 and July 2010.

The PSNI officer had over three years experience of writing and distributing Internet Safety training materials for schools and community centers, and was therefore able to comment on strategies used to prevent the use of social networking sites for anti-social behavior. This female officer was not available for interview during the period of data collection, but provided written responses to the interview questions.

Community workers were selected due to their constant interaction with young people in community centers and their role in promoting Internet Safety in interface areas. Contact with the community workers was arranged through the Belfast Interface Project (BIP), an umbrella non-governmental organization incorporating 22 community groups across Belfast whose purpose is to promote positive intercommunity relationships in contested interface areas. A total of 13 community groups did not respond to the invitation to participate in the project. Characteristics of groups who responded and those who did not were examined for systematic differences between the two groups and none were found in terms of group size, community identification, or the area of Belfast in which they were based. Face-to-face interviews were held with six of the community workers in their respective community centers in Belfast, one in a city center coffee house, and two of the interviewees were contacted via telephone. All of the community workers had at least two years' experience working in interface areas and all were male and aged between 25 and 40 years. Due to the persistent threat of violence against community workers

and police officers in these areas over the past three decades (Community Relations Council 2008), it was agreed that interviewee identities would not be revealed in the study. Thus, interviewees are identified in this study according to the area in which they were based. All of the participants agreed that the interviews could be recorded for later transcription and analysis.

The community worker interview schedule comprised nine questions relating to how social media were used by members of rival interface communities and community groups to interact with one another (see Appendix 1). The community workers were asked to comment on how sites such as Bebo were being used by young people in interface areas and what strategies, if any, were being deployed to prevent social networking sites being used to plan anti-social behavior. They were also asked to give an opinion on the role of community groups in the promotion of the responsible and safe use of sites such as Bebo.

The interview with the PSNI Educational Officer consisted of 15 questions relating to the role of new media in their community safety program, feedback received by key stakeholders in relation to Internet Safety training, and the strategies deployed by the police to prevent the use of social networking sites by young people to plan street riots (see Appendix 2). The officer was also asked whether the PSNI were monitoring these sites to gather intelligence about potential incidents of street riots in interface areas. The interviewee was also asked to comment on the resources that were used by the PSNI Community Safety Branch to promote Internet Safety and how effective they felt these campaigns had been in Northern Ireland.

Both interview schedules were subjected to an internal reliability check conducted by a colleague with extensive experience in qualitative data analysis. A thematic approach was used to analyze the data after transcription and themes were extracted and discussed until consensus was achieved. Quotations are provided to illustrate key themes that emerged in the course of analysis.

## **Results**

### **1. Stakeholder Awareness about “Anti-Social” Networking is Based Primarily on Rumor and Hearsay**

All of the community workers confirmed that they were aware of incidents of street rioting that had been organized on social networking sites. Two of the North Belfast community workers stated that the violence that marred the lighting of the Christmas tree at Belfast City Hall in December 2009 had been organized on Bebo. A West Belfast community worker also asserted that violence between youth gangs on the Springfield Road/Shankill interface was organized via SMS text messaging and Bebo. A common theme in the interviews was that many of the participants in these street riots were friends with members of the “other” community. An East Belfast community worker reported that the so-called “recreational rioting” in their area had been organized on Bebo by children who knew each other from the local integrated college. This interviewee noted that the violence in their areas should be characterized as anti-social behavior rather than a return to the sectarian violence synonymous with the “Troubles”:

“Rioting is designed to get a bit of craic with the PSNI, young people self- justify

their violence, defending their community, feel as if they have missed out on the conflict.”

(East Belfast community worker 1)

There was much support among the interviewees for the thesis that this was anti-social behavior rather than a return to the “Troubles,” with one community worker suggesting that some people were always likely to use social networking sites “for what it’s not meant to be used for.” However, two of the interviewees were uncomfortable with the use of the term recreational rioting, which they felt depoliticized this violence. In the words of one West Belfast community worker:

“I think there is also a sectarian dimension to it, children and young people may not know, or have met, anyone on the other side but there is a sense that they are the enemy.”

(West Belfast community worker 1)

The study found that only one of the interviewees maintained a social networking profile. One of the West Belfast community workers reported that he had been “so scared” by the CEOP training that he had received that he had canceled his membership of social networking sites such as Facebook, and had refused to allow his children to set up their own profiles. Much of the evidence pointing towards the use of sites such as Bebo by young people to organize anti-social behavior appeared to be based on hearsay:

“It’s anecdotal, no hard evidence. Kids tell you, teachers, different community workers.”

(East Belfast community worker 2)

There was a perception shared by all of the interviewees that community workers often lacked the technical skills to use social media effectively. This was indicative of an age-related digital divide in attitudes to and usage of social media (Ofcom 2010a). One East Belfast community worker stated that he had until recently used an administrative assistant to answer his emails for him and was “something of a backwoodsman” in relation to the use of mobile technology. This often left the interviewees reliant upon others for information on the use of sites such as Bebo for anti-social purposes. For example, one North Belfast community worker stated that his teenage daughter had made him aware of discussions among young people in their area about a planned street riot between Catholic and Protestant youths. Another interviewee suggested that youth workers often had greater awareness of the “anti-social” networking practices adopted by young people than community workers, by virtue of their familiarity with new media technologies:

“Young youth workers get it [Bebo], and they use it, and they’ve used it for years. Sometimes with community workers, sometimes teachers as well, it’s a bit more this dangerous thing that you need to be very careful with.”

(North Belfast community worker 2)

The PSNI Educational Officer declined to comment on their level of awareness of this

activity or on what impact social networking sites were having on community relations in Northern Ireland in general. The interviewee stated that the PSNI were aware of the use of social media by young people in Northern Ireland to plan street riots but stressed that their patterns of usage were no different than in other parts of the United Kingdom:

“The Internet is as prevalent and popular a communication medium in Northern Ireland as it is in any other part of the UK. Bearing this in mind, PSNI have adopted the use of social networking sites to address not only young people, but also the general public.”

(PSNI Educational Officer)

## **2. There Does Appear to be a Coordinated Approach Towards the Prevention of the Use of Social Media by Young People to Organize Anti- Social Behavior**

The study suggested that there was a joined-up approach towards the prevention of young people using social networking sites to organize anti-social behavior in interface areas. However, surveillance was only a small part of the response of these stakeholders, whose primary responsibility was to promote the responsible and safe use of social media among young people in these areas. As expected, these stakeholders reported that they did not look at social networking profiles for information that might help prevent incidents of so-called “recreational rioting” in interface areas. Community workers reported that they were only able to crudely monitor social networking practices of young people by “peering over their shoulders” when they used communal computing facilities in their community centers:

“We keep an eye on what they are using it [Bebo] for. They use it to communicate with people in the same room, not with the outside.”

(West Belfast community worker 1)

One East Belfast community worker confirmed that young people were banned from using Bebo because they had been using it to discuss and plan anti- social activities such as drug dealing:

“They are not allowed to use Bebo on it, cos we found them mucking about on it. We didn’t like some of the things they were doing on it.”

(East Belfast community worker 2)

It was acknowledged by all of the community workers that they could only influence the social networking practices of young people within their community centers. This was perhaps a predictable observation, given their self-reported lack of technical skills and apparent reluctance to use online social networks themselves.

Community workers continued to highlight potential misuses of social media by young people in their areas to the PSNI, who in turn monitored these sites to plan their responses to street riots. One of the North Belfast community workers stated that the PSNI had been monitoring social networking traffic prior to the violent clashes in Belfast city center in December 2009 at the request of the Belfast Conflict Resolution

Consortium, an umbrella organization for community groups across Belfast. This interviewee also confirmed that the PSNI had used this information to plan their policing response to these street riots and to minimize disruption to the nearby Christmas tree lights switch-on at Belfast City Hall.

This theme was also implicit in the responses given by the PSNI Education Advisor. She confirmed that there were no specific PSNI strategies to monitor the use of sites such as Bebo by young people to organize anti-social behavior in Northern Ireland. The PSNI did not monitor social networking sites on a regular basis due to the privacy settings on these sites, and there needed to be a legitimate purpose for them to do so:

“We don’t routinely monitor social networking sites. There are new privacy settings on most and some of this is now deemed private information, therefore we require a specific purpose to be monitoring.”

(PSNI Educational Officer)

The PSNI interviewee did not confirm that social networking sites were being monitored for signs of criminal or terrorist activity, despite evidence from authors such as Kelley (2009) that this has become common practice among police forces on both sides of the Atlantic. Therefore, the hypothesis that the PSNI are monitoring social media for signs of young people joining dissident terrorist organizations such as the Continuity IRA cannot be ruled out, and this would appear worthy of further exploration, particularly given the recent reports in the *Belfast Telegraph* suggesting that the recent spate of street riots in interface areas have been orchestrated by paramilitary organizations (Belfast Telegraph 2010).

There was a coordinated strategy in place to address anti-social behavior in interface areas that did not address the use of social media explicitly, but did focus on the consequences for those young people who engaged in recreational riots. The PSNI interviewee asserted that in 2009 the PSNI had run a series of drama workshops for young people aged 13–16 years that dealt specifically with the topic of so-called recreational rioting. These workshops had been designed in conjunction with local councils and the Northern Ireland Policing Board and were delivered in schools across Northern Ireland:

“The drama was designed specifically to deal with the topic of rioting, and peer pressure placed on young people to become involved. The drama looked at consequences, both long term and short term, which young people will face if they engage in anti-social behaviours such as rioting.”

(PSNI Educational Officer)

The interviewee also confirmed that these workshops were supplemented by “bespoke lessons” in secondary schools that dealt with issues such as Public Order Offences and Gang Behavior. One module entitled “Uses of the Internet” was specifically designed to promote safe and responsible use of the Internet among school children. This was said to have been among the most requested lessons for PSNI officers to deliver in schools:

“As a requested topic, this would be in the top five of our most requested lessons for

officers to deliver as part of our Citizenship and Safety Education programme.”

(PSNI Educational Officer)

Resources were also provided to parents, children, and community groups upon request, as per the CEOP strategy to promote Internet Safety in the rest of the United Kingdom. This included information on how to report cyberbullying and harmful material using the CEOP red button on sites such as Bebo. In terms of resources, the PSNI Educational Officer confirmed that she was a member of the CEOP Education Advisory Board and often adapted CEOP training materials for use by PSNI officers in schools:

“All PSNI officers who deliver these messages to young people, parents, teachers and community groups have received training and resources from CEOP and from the PSNI’s own Education Advisor.”

(PSNI Educational Officer)

The PSNI Education Officer was unable to provide copies of these lessons due to copyright restrictions. However, it was made clear that industry partners such as Microsoft and Hewlett Packard played a key role in the promotion of Internet Safety in Northern Ireland, in much the same fashion as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. For example, the interviewee referred to the role played by these corporations in promotion of the most recent European Union Safer Internet Day and in the delivery of Internet Safety lessons in secondary schools across Northern Ireland. The materials used in these lessons were also heavily influenced by CEOP initiatives such as ThinkuKnow, which tend to focus on cyberbullying and the risks of contacting strangers rather than the use of social media by young people to organize recreational rioting.

Although school children were the primary focus of these initiatives, community workers still had a role to play in the promotion of Internet Safety among young people in their respective areas. One community worker referred to CEOP training as the reason why they encouraged young people to restrict public access to their social networking profiles. Three of the community workers confirmed that they had received CEOP training from the PSNI and that this Ambassador training program was to be rolled out in other interface areas shortly. One of the interviewees stated that their community group intended to send its staff on this course again after it had proved popular in 2009:

“Training is going to happen in other interface areas, we did Ambassador training and we intend to do it again.”

(West Belfast community worker 1)

This Ambassador training would allow these community workers to cascade the ThinkuKnow program to young people aged 11–16 years in their respective areas, in much the same fashion as the bespoke Internet Safety lessons provided by the PSNI in local schools.

### **3. Key Stakeholders Feel that Internet Safety Campaigns are Effective But May**

## **Not Reduce the Level of Anti-Social Behavior in Interface Areas**

The consensus among the interviewees was that these campaigns had been well received by people in Northern Ireland, but were unlikely to stop young people using sites such as Bebo to organize anti-social behavior. While by the very nature of their work these stakeholders might be expected to report that these campaigns were successful, this was a persuasive theme throughout all of the interviews. For example, the PSNI Educational Officer reported that they had received positive feedback from the public about their “bespoke lessons” in Internet Safety:

“The public are very receptive to having appropriately trained PSNI officers delivering talks and lessons on Internet Safety.”

(PSNI Educational Officer)

Three of the community workers suggested that strategies to promote safe and responsible use of social networking sites would have little or no impact on the level of anti-social behavior in interface areas. SMS text messaging was said to be as important a tool of communication for young people who participated in anti-social behavior such as street riots in interface areas:

“Texting, [sic] to a lesser extent social networking sites, are being used to arrange these sorts of activities.”

(North Belfast community worker 2)

“Bebo would be one of the means of doing it [organizing street riots]. Mobile phones another one, text messages and stuff.”

(East Belfast community worker 2)

The consensus among these stakeholders was that young people were likely to organize anti-social behavior using other communication tools if their access to sites such as Bebo was restricted. Yet, the preceding literature review suggests that Internet Safety programs are not intended to prevent young people from using sites such as Bebo to organize violence in their areas. Rather, the focus of programs such as ThinkuKnow is on cyberbullying, the risks faced by young people in revealing sensitive personal information on social networking sites, and the risks of online sex predators. Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise that efforts to promote responsible social media usage among young people using these training materials are unlikely to remedy the problem of anti-social behavior organized via social networking sites. Rather, the evidence presented by community workers in this exploratory study provides support for Leonard’s (2010) assertion that recreational violence cannot be divorced from the political context in which its practitioners grow up. The drama workshops organized by the PSNI in conjunction with local councils and schools may prove more useful than Internet Safety programs in developing an understanding of the motivations of teenage rioters and informing policy in this area.

## **Conclusion**

This preliminary study suggests that, on the basis of the evidence to date, stakeholder awareness about the extent of the use of social media by young people to organize

street riots is based on rumor and hearsay. Key stakeholders report that Internet Safety programs such as ThinkuKnow have received positive feedback from local audiences, but concede that they are unlikely to have any significant impact upon the level of anti-social behavior in interface areas. The consensus among the interviewees was that this form of anti-social behavior could be organized via SMS text messaging if sites such as Bebo were no longer available to young people situated in or around interface areas. Moreover, the findings presented in this study resonate with the suggestions by Hampton (2004) and Carter (2005) that social media have become integrated into the daily lives of people and that online and offline relationships are increasingly blurred. The use of social media to organize recreational rioting in interface areas is likely to continue sporadically until such time as the causes of this anti-social behavior are addressed in these contested geographical areas.

There are two issues that emerge from this preliminary study that merit further investigation. First, the perspectives of young people should be explored in relation to the use of social networking sites to organize anti-social behavior in interface areas. With the exception of the Lloyd and Devine study (2009), most recent empirical studies in Northern Ireland have tended to focus on adult perspectives on Internet Safety and have neglected the attitudes of young people towards social media. In addition, much of the recent work on young people in interface areas has tended to focus on their anti-social behavior, with little emphasis placed on their reported use of new media to threaten members of rival interface communities (Leonard 2008; 2010).

Second, further research is needed to examine the extent to which the stakeholder perspectives discussed in this exploratory study are yet another legacy of the conflict. Several of the interviewees stated that they did not feel comfortable using the Internet, and that youth workers might have a greater awareness of the social networking practices of young people in Northern Ireland than the older community workers. This finding resonates with the evidence from the recent Ofcom Adult Media Literacy Audit (Ofcom 2010a) that suggested that Northern Irish adults remain cautious about the Internet and report low levels of trust in new media technologies in comparison to their peers in the rest of the United Kingdom. This proposed work would also provide further evidence as to the potential role of new media in promoting positive intercommunity relationships in contested interface areas such as North Belfast.

## **Appendix 1**

Interview Schedule for Community Workers. Q1: How important is the Internet as a tool for residents' groups?

Q2: How do new media technologies fit into your general communication strategy?

Q3: What impact do you think social networking websites have had on community relations in NI in general?—positive and negative.

Q4: What impact do you think social networking websites have had on attitudes of young people in NI?

Q5: Can you tell me about any incidents of Bebo being used to organize anti-social behavior in this area?



Q6: How were you made aware of this activity?

Q7: Could you tell me a bit about your strategies to prevent so-called “recreational rioting” in this area?

Q8: To what extent do you monitor Bebo? Is it difficult to do so?

Q9: Are there any strategies to combat the use of social networking websites to organize anti-social behavior that you feel are particularly effective? Why do you think this is the case?

## **Appendix 2**

Interview Schedule for PSNI Educational Officer.

[Preamble, including notification that they may choose not to answer any questions, or ask for the tape to be stopped, or for the interview to be terminated at any time]

Q1: Could you tell me a bit about the Community Safety Branch’s media/communication strategy and where the Internet fits into that?

Q2: Are there any forms of media that you think are particularly effective in helping to promote community safety in Northern Ireland?

Q3: What impact have social networking websites had on the communications and media strategies of the Police Service of Northern Ireland?—positive and negative.

Q4: What social networking websites has the PSNI joined, if any? List of names for prompting—Bebo, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube.

Q5: What does the PSNI use social networking websites for? How do they fit into your general communication strategy?

Q6: What sorts of groups are accessing your social networking sites?

Q7: What sort of feedback have you received so far about your social networking profiles? (Provide examples)

Q8: What impact do you think social networking websites have had on attitudes of young people in NI?

Q9: What impact do you think social networking websites have had on community relations in NI in general?

Q10: Where do you locate resources for your Internet Safety campaign in Northern Ireland? Do you find these resources easy/hard to find?

Q11: Could you tell me a bit about the Community Safety Branch strategies to prevent so-called “recreational rioting” in interface areas in Belfast and where the Internet fits into that?

Q12: To what extent does the PSNI monitor social networking sites such as Bebo to

gather information about potential incidents of recreational rioting in interface areas and plan policing operations to prevent their escalation?

Q13: Are there any strategies to combat the use of social networking websites to organize anti-social behavior that you feel are particularly effective? Why do you think this is the case?

Q14: What sort of feedback have you received from community groups in NI about these campaigns? What feedback have you had about your Internet Safety campaign in general?

Q15: How do you see the Internet Safety strategy of the PSNI developing over the next few years? How would you like to see it develop?

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bweblogs and social networking sites (SNS). Gaines and Mondak (2008) suggest that social networking websites 'publicise socialising' and allow for the exploration of different facets of an individual's identity in front of a potential global audience. While some scholars have suggested that these sites have the potential to encourage the development of social skills amongst teenagers and even create bridging social capital between different groups (Crook and Harrison, 2008; Ellison et al, 2007), concerns continue to be raised amongst global policymakers about the potential sexual exploitation of children on these sites, as well as their potential misuse by young people themselves via the disclosure of sensitive information and anti-social behaviours such as cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008).

This article adds to the policy debate over how to promote Internet Safety on Web 2.0 platforms by focusing on the strategies employed by key stakeholders to prevent social networking sites being used by young people to organise anti-social behaviour in contested urban spaces in Northern Ireland. Recent reports in the *Belfast Telegraph* have suggested that young people who live in close proximity to sectarian interfaces, the barriers between Catholic and Protestant districts that local residents often refer to as 'peace walls,' have used Bebo to organise street riots in contested areas of North and East Belfast with the perpetrators often posting videos of these attacks on Youtube (Internet used to plan city riot, 2008; Ardoyne violence videos posted on Youtube, 2009). This paper sets out to explore the strategies deployed to prevent the use of social media to organise incidents of what has been called 'recreational rioting' in contested areas of Belfast, a phenomenon defined by Jarman and O'Halloran (2001) as 'clashes between young people in interface areas that 'occur out of boredom and bravado rather than having an overtly political basis' (p.3). It does so by reviewing the relevant theoretical perspectives on Internet Safety and empirical evidence on the use of social networking sites by young people, and presenting the findings of a preliminary set of interviews with community workers and a representative from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

## Background

The purpose of this article is to explore strategies to prevent the use of social networking sites by young people to plan street riots in interface areas in Northern Ireland. This is perhaps a less well-known and under-researched example of how social networking sites have been used to mobilise people against the wishes of the ruling government. Much of the recent literature on the use of social networking sites to mobilise young people has focused on its role in the organisation of protests in authoritarian nation-states such as Belarus and Iran. The use of flash mobs, a term used to describe the seemingly spontaneous mobilisation of people in public places to perform a specific act before dispersing, allowed young people in Belarus to highlight their opposition to the Lukashenko government plans to ban political demonstrations in May 2006. They did so by using social media and SMS text messages to invite young people to eat ice cream in a public square in Minsk. Images of the protestors being arrested by the police were transmitted worldwide via sites such as Flickr and these were in turn recirculated by bloggers such as Ethan Zuckerman (Shirky, 2008).

The most well known use of social media to coordinate protest has been seen in Iran. Some Western media outlets described the use of Twitter to organise and publicise demonstrations against President Ahmadinejad in June 2009 as the first ‘Twitter Revolution.’<sup>1</sup> Despite shutting down Facebook for a few days before the Presidential Election, the Iranian government appeared unable to control the flow of information from its citizens to the Western news media about the alleged electoral fraud that had resulted in Ahmadinejad being returned to office ahead of opposition leader Hossein Mousavi. Morozov takes a more skeptical view of the events in Belarus and Iran. He states that the shutting down of Facebook in Iran was a symbolic act designed to show that the Iranian government still ‘had the power to do it’ (EDGE, 2009). Contrary to the perception that Iran was powerless to stop these demonstrations because they were organised via user-generated platforms, he suggests that the use of sites such as Twitter made it easier for the Belarusian and Iranian governments to monitor the activities of the protestors in Minsk and Tehran. This paper will consider whether social media grant similar powers of surveillance to the PSNI, and will investigate whether this publicly available data is used to arrest those involved in street riots in interface areas.

#### Moral Panic? Media framing and adult perspectives on Web 2.0 in Northern Ireland

Interface areas are defined here as disputed territories that are contested by Loyalist communities, the predominantly Protestant neighbourhoods from which Loyalist paramilitaries who previously used political violence in support of the union with Great Britain drew support, and their Republican counterparts, the predominantly Catholic neighbourhoods from which Republican paramilitaries who previously used political violence in support of a united Ireland drew support during the conflict. While studies conducted by Leonard (2008; 2010) and the Centre for Young Men’s Studies (2009) have linked social networking sites to anti-social behaviour in these areas, public knowledge about this activity has tended to be based on media reports of violent clashes between Catholic and Protestant youths in areas such as the Ardoyne district in North Belfast and the Short Strand in East Belfast. This has invariably taken the form of a reference in the report to a statement from a PSNI spokesperson stating that the street riots were organised via social networking sites. The *Belfast Telegraph* reportage of the Ardoyne riots in June 2009 has proved the exception to this rule, with

its online edition using user-generated Youtube videos to show how young people engaged in street riots following a contentious Orange Order march in the predominantly Catholic area (Ardoyne violence videos posted on Youtube, 2009).

The media framing of these incidents is arguably congruent with the discourse of 'moral panic' that has surrounded the use of social networking sites by young people since the mid-nineties. This was a period in which reports about the dangers of 'online sex predators' started to circulate in the US news media causing widespread alarm amongst parents and children in the United States (Lawson and Comber 2000). The Media Literacy Audit commissioned by the Office of Communications (Ofcom) suggests that Northern Irish adults remain the most cautious in the United Kingdom when it comes to entering their personal information online, with only 31 percent of participants stating that they had set up a social networking profile in 2009. The Audit also found that only 56 percent of parents who had children aged between 5 and 15 years old believed the Internet's benefits outweighed the risks associated with its use. A similar pattern emerges from the Children's Audit, which found that Northern Irish children were the least likely in the United Kingdom to be allowed to use the Internet at home without supervision. Although it is not possible to attribute this cautious approach towards Internet Safety amongst Northern Irish adults to the discourse of 'moral panic,' it is fair to say that media reports of Bebo being used to organise street riots are likely to reinforce pre-existing attitudes towards new media technologies in Northern Ireland.

#### Social Networking sites and the management of online risk by young people

Young people in Northern Ireland appear more comfortable than their parents in their use of new media technologies and appear to have embraced the participatory culture associated with social networking sites such as Facebook. Much of the empirical evidence points to there being little to differentiate between how young people use social networking sites in Northern Ireland and their peers in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Ofcom Children's Media Literacy Audit in the Nations (2010) found that Northern Irish children aged between 5 and 15 years old were no more or less likely than their peers in England, Scotland and Wales to maintain a social networking profile. Indeed, the study found that 43 percent of children in Northern Ireland checked their social networking profile at least once a week, 2 percent higher than the average across the United Kingdom. This finding was congruent with previous research into patterns of social networking site use amongst children in the region. Lloyd and Devine (2009) found that 48 percent of 10-11 year olds in Northern Ireland maintained a social networking profile despite the membership of these sites typically being restricted to those aged 13 years old and over. The study also indicated that there was little difference between boys and girls in terms of their use of sites such as Bebo and that 29 percent of the respondents stated that they used these sites several times each week. This finding resonated with the results of the Ofcom Children's Media Literacy Audit (2010), which showed that 22 percent of 8-11 year olds had set up a profile on a social networking site.

In terms of the purpose of using social networking sites, empirical evidence also points to a convergence between the experience of Northern Irish Internet users and their peers elsewhere. A recent Ofcom (2008) study of social networking practices suggested there were five distinct groups of users in the United Kingdom:

Alpha socialisers – users who use these sites sporadically to meet new people.  
Attention seekers – users who post pictures because they crave attention.  
Followers – people who use these sites to keep up with the lives of their peers.  
Faithfuls – people who use these sites to get back in touch with old friends.  
Functionals – users who use these technologies for a particular purpose.

Potentially all of these users might post sensitive information on sites such as Facebook. A preliminary investigation into social networking practices in interface areas in Belfast found that communicating with family and friends and posting pictures were the most commonly reported purposes of social network use amongst interface residents (Reilly, 2010). Only a very small percentage of the respondents in this pilot study could be considered alpha socialisers. Few teenagers admitted to using sites such as Bebo to make contact with people who lived on the other side of the ‘peace wall’ and with whom they were not already familiar. This finding resonated with much of the current research in the field that indicates that the majority of teenagers who use social networking sites do so to sustain existing offline relationships rather than to contact strangers (Ellison et al, 2007; Watch Your Space Survey, 2008).

The Lloyd and Devine study (2009) points to the potential online risks that children may face on these platforms, with a small minority of 8-11 year olds (17 percent) confirming that they had met someone in person who they had made initial contact with on a social networking site. The Watch Your Space study (2008) also found that 40 percent of teenagers in the Republic of Ireland had met someone who they had first contacted on Bebo, with boys more likely to engage in this activity than girls. While there was no evidence to suggest that these contacts had been with ‘online sex predators,’ this finding nevertheless demonstrates one of the ways in which the behaviour of young people on social networking sites may leave them vulnerable to potential harm in the real world. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) argue that it is the children with the most Internet skills rather than the most self-efficacious who are the most likely to encounter risks on social networking sites (636).

A preliminary report into stakeholder perspectives on online risks to UK teenagers found that the worst things that young people were likely to encounter on social networking sites were ‘rude words, being subject to nasty personal messages, unwanted sexual advances and exposure to unwanted information and impersonation of identity’ (CEOP, 2008: 11). Livingstone and Brake (2010) suggest that the disclosure of sensitive and personal information and the ‘experimental nature of peer communication’ are the two adolescent practices that are most likely to increase online risk for children and teenage Internet users (78). In terms of the former, social networking sites make this personal information – whether it is idealised or an extension of the real-life personality of its owner - available to a potential and often unintended global audience, a phenomenon boyd (2008) refers to as ‘hyperpublicity.’ Potential threats emerging from the disclosure of this information might include social embarrassment, stalking, or perhaps even identity theft (Gross and Acquisti, 2005).

The policy debate about how to promote the safe use of social networking sites has been based on an implicit assumption that young people are likely to reveal sensitive information about their real-life identities on sites such as Bebo. The ThinkuKnow



Internet Safety programme has been taught in UK schools since 2006 (UKCCIS, 2010). This programme has sought to encourage young people to set their social networking profiles to private in order to avoid the disclosure of sensitive data to Internet users who might use this information for illegal activity such as identity fraud or for the online grooming of adolescents. The issue has also been highlighted on the social networking sites themselves, with the users of Facebook receiving a message asking them to check and update their privacy settings in December 2009 (boyd and Hargittai, 2010). Although this particular update was prompted by changes made by Facebook itself to its default privacy settings, it nevertheless served to make its users more aware of the need to protect their personal information from the attention of 'unwanted visitors' to their profiles.

Several studies between 2006 and 2009 suggest that although young people are becoming increasingly vigilant about the sharing of personal information on their social networking sites, a significant number still choose to post personal information on publicly accessible profiles. As far back as 2006, a study of US college students found that three quarters of Facebook users knew exactly what they were sharing on their profiles but that a significant minority had limited understanding of how open their profile was to unintended visitors (Acquisti and Gross, 2006). However, there have been some indications that the moral panic surrounding online predators on sites such as MySpace in 2005 and the privacy updates by social networking sites in 2009 have prompted young people to make their profiles private (boyd, 2008; boyd and Hargittai, 2010). The evidence from the United Kingdom also points to an increasing awareness amongst young people about the need to restrict public access to their profiles, with teenagers 'fairly but not always' careful in their online communications (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008). A recent study found that 78 percent of children aged 12-15 years old were likely to keep their profiles private (Ofcom Children's Media Literacy Audit, 2010). Boys were more likely to allow their profile to be seen by anyone compared to girls who appeared keener to restrict access to their personal information. Although there have been no studies of the attitudes of Northern Irish teenagers towards privacy settings on social networking sites, it is reasonable to assume that the patterns that emerge from these two studies would apply to adolescent social networking practices in Northern Ireland.

#### Internet Safety and social networking sites in the United Kingdom

The focus of policymakers in the United Kingdom has tended to be on cyberbullying, online grooming of children by pedophiles, and preventing young people from accessing illegal or harmful content on social networking sites (Byron, 2008). Cyberbullying in particular has been identified in a number of surveys as one of the most frequent threats that minors face, as Instant Messaging and social networking sites enable peer-to-peer harassment in the offline world to be communicated in the online sphere (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004). One of the key recommendations of the Byron review into children and technology was that there was a need for a coordinated approach towards children's digital safety amongst parents, the Internet industry, voluntary bodies and the government. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) was created in September 2008 to bring together these stakeholders and has overall responsibility for the promotion of events such as Safer Internet Day (9 February 2010) and raising public awareness about digital safety. A number of initiatives have been launched to promote the responsible use of social networking

sites amongst young people ranging from the launch of the ThinkuKnow programme in primary schools in England in September 2009 to the development of the CyberMentors website to provide peer support for the victims of cyberbullying.

The First UKCCIS Child Internet Strategy was launched in December 2009 with a mission statement that referred to the need to provide 'high quality controls to stop children seeing harmful and inappropriate content online and monitor their behaviour (p.5). A key pillar of this strategy focuses on the need for the Internet industry to make it easier for users to report illegal or harmful activity on social networking sites and to ensure that children are not exposed to age-inappropriate content such as pornography. A key recommendation was that Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) website should become the one-stop shop for Child Internet Safety in the United Kingdom. The primary purpose of CEOP is to 'protect children, young people, families and society from pedophiles and sex offenders, and in particular those who use the Internet and other new technologies in the sexual exploitation of children' (CEOP, 2010). CEOP has provided Internet Safety training materials to teachers, community workers, police officers and child protection specialists in the United Kingdom since its formation in April 2006. Alongside the Internet Watch Foundation, an organisation that also seeks to minimise the availability of illegal and offensive online content, CEOP has lobbied social networking sites to adopt the 'Report Abuse' icon to allow users to flag inappropriate content and behaviour on their sites. This function allows social networking site users to report harmful content to CEOP directly for investigation. This campaign received widespread media coverage in April 2010 when CEOP condemned Facebook's refusal to carry the 'Click CEOP' button on its site. The BBC reported that Facebook eventually agreed to install a 'panic button' on its site after months of negotiations with child protection specialists and the UK government (Facebook unveils child safety panic button, 2010).

A key theme that emerges from UK Child Internet Safety Strategy is that young people must be empowered to use new media technologies but also be aware of the potential risks of online communication. This is congruent with both the principles for Safer Social Networking adopted by the European Union (2009), and academic studies of adolescent social networking practices (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Livingstone and Brake, 2010). What is also clear is that efforts to reduce the risks associated with social networking practices are based on a multi-agency approach towards the promotion of Internet Safety, and a combination of both peer-to-peer and conventional forms of surveillance on these sites.

### Research Questions

Specifically, four research questions emerge from the preceding literature review. These are:

- 1) What is the level of awareness amongst key stakeholders such as community workers and the Police Service of Northern Ireland about the use of social networking sites by young people to plan anti-social behaviour such as street riots in interface areas?
- 2) To what extent is there a coordinated approach between these stakeholders towards the monitoring of social networking sites to obtain information about

potential use by young people in the organisation of anti-social behaviour in interface areas?

- 3) Do these stakeholders perceive that Internet Safety campaigns in Northern Ireland have been effective in promoting the responsible use of social networking sites amongst young people who live in interface areas?
- 4) To what extent is there a coordinated approach between these stakeholders towards the promotion of Internet Safety in interface communities?

Semi-structured interviews with nine community workers and one Education Advisor from the PSNI Community Safety Branch were held to investigate these research questions between June 2009 and July 2010. The police officer provided a written response to the interview questions, as she was unable to make herself available for interview during the period of data collection. This Officer was invited to participate in the study because she was responsible for writing and distributing Internet Safety training materials that were used in schools and community centres, and therefore was able to comment on the strategies used to prevent the use of these sites for anti-social behaviour. It was not possible to establish the age of the officer but it was confirmed that she had over three years experience working in this role. Contact with the community workers was arranged through the Belfast Interface Project (BIP), an umbrella non-governmental organisation incorporating 22 community groups across Belfast whose purpose is to promote positive intercommunity relationships in contested interface areas across Belfast. A total of 13 community groups did not respond to the invitation to participate in the project. Characteristics of groups who responded and those who did not were examined for systematic differences between the two groups and none were found in terms of group size, community identification, or area of Belfast in which they were based. Face-to-face interviews were held with six of the community workers in their respective community centres in Belfast, one in a city centre coffee house, and two of the interviewees were contacted via telephone. All of the community workers had at least two years experience working in interface areas and all were male and aged between 25 and 40 years old. Due to the persistent threat of violence against community workers and police officers in these areas over the past three decades (Community Relations Council 2008), it was agreed that the identity of each interviewee would not be revealed in the study. Thus, interviewees are identified in this study according to the area in which they were based. All of the participants agreed that the interviews could be recorded for analysis after the period of data collection.

Ten questions were asked during each community worker interview relating to how social media were used by members of rival interface communities and community groups to interact with one another. The community workers were asked to comment on how sites such as Bebo were being used by young people in interface areas and what strategies, if any, were being deployed to prevent social networking sites being used to plan anti-social behaviour. They were also asked to give an opinion on the role of community groups in the promotion of the responsible and safe use of sites such as Bebo.

The interview with the PSNI Educational Officer consisted of 15 questions relating to the role of new media in their community safety programme, and in particular the strategies deployed by the police to prevent the use of social networking sites by young people to plan street riots. In order to investigate Morozov's thesis about social

networking sites being used for surveillance, the officer was asked whether the PSNI were monitoring these sites to gather intelligence about potential incidents of street riots in interface areas. The interviewee was also asked to comment on the resources that were used by the PSNI Community Safety Branch to promote Internet Safety and how effective they felt these campaigns had been in Northern Ireland.

## Results

1. Stakeholder awareness about 'anti-social' networking is based primarily on anecdotal evidence.

All of the community workers confirmed that they were aware of incidents of street rioting that had been organised on social networking sites. Two of the North Belfast community workers stated that the violence that marred the lighting of the Christmas tree at Belfast City Hall in December 2009 had been organised on Bebo. A West Belfast community worker also asserted that violence between youth gangs on the Springfield Road/Shankill interface was organised via SMS text messaging and Bebo. A common theme in the interviews was that many of the participants in these street riots were friends with members of the 'other' community. An East Belfast community worker reported that the so-called 'recreational rioting' in their area had been organised on Bebo by children who knew each other from the local integrated college. This interviewee stated that the violence in their areas should be characterised as anti-social behaviour rather than a return to the sectarian violence synonymous with the 'Troubles':

*Rioting is designed to get a bit of craic with the PSNI, young people self-justify their violence, defending their community, feel as if they have missed out on the conflict*  
(East Belfast community worker 1)

There was much support amongst the interviewees for the thesis that this was anti-social behaviour rather than a return to the 'Troubles', with one community worker suggesting that some people were always likely to use social networking sites 'for what its not mean to be used for.' However, two of the interviewees were uncomfortable with the use of the term recreational rioting, which they felt depoliticized this violence. In the words of one West Belfast community worker:

*I think there is also a sectarian dimension to it, children and young people may not know, or have met, anyone on the other side but there is a sense that they are the enemy*  
(West Belfast community worker 1)

The study found that only one of the interviewees maintained a social networking profile themselves. One of the West Belfast community workers reported that he had been 'so scared' by the CEOP training that he had received that he had cancelled his membership of social networking sites such as Facebook and had refused to allow his children to set up their own profiles. Much of the evidence pointing towards the use of sites such as Bebo by young people to organise anti-social behaviour was anecdotal in nature:

*It's anecdotal, no hard evidence. Kids tell you, teachers, different community workers.*

(East Belfast community worker 2)

There was a perception shared by all of the interviewees that community workers often lacked the technical skills to use social media effectively. One East Belfast community worker stated that he had until recently used an administrative assistant to answer his emails for him and was ‘something of a backwoodsman’ in relation to the use of mobile technology. This often left the interviewees reliant upon others for information on the use of sites such as Bebo for anti-social purposes. For example, one North Belfast community worker stated that his teenage daughter had made him aware of discussions amongst young people in their area about a planned street riot between Catholic and Protestant youths. Another interviewee suggested that youth workers often had greater awareness of the ‘anti-social’ networking practices adopted by young people than community workers, by virtue of their familiarity with new media technologies:

*Young youth workers get it [Bebo], and they use it, and they’ve used it for years. Sometimes with community workers, sometimes teachers as well, it’s a bit more this dangerous thing that you need to be very careful with.*

(North Belfast community worker 2)

The PSNI Educational Officer declined to comment on their level of awareness of this activity or on what impact social networking sites were having on community relations in Northern Ireland in general. The interviewee suggested that the PSNI were aware of the use of social media by young people in Northern Ireland to plan street riots but that this should be viewed in the context of UK-wide initiatives to limit anti-social behaviour in the online sphere. The officer stressed that the PSNI needed to use these sites to engage more with not just young people but also the general public:

*The Internet is as prevalent and popular a communication medium in Northern Ireland as it is in any other part of the UK. Bearing this in mind, PSNI have adopted the use of social networking sites to address not only young people, but also the general public.*

2. These stakeholders do not routinely monitor social networking sites to obtain information about street riots.

There did not appear to be a coordinated approach towards the monitoring of publicly available social networking profiles for signs of anti-social behaviour. These stakeholders did not look at social networking profiles for information that might help prevent incidents of so-called ‘recreational rioting’ in interface areas. Community workers reported that they were only able to crudely monitor social networking practices of young people by ‘peering over their shoulders’ when they used communal computing facilities in their community centres:

*We keep an eye on what they are using it [Bebo] for. They use it to communicate with people in the same room, not with the outside.*

(West Belfast community worker 1)

One East Belfast community worker confirmed that young people were banned from using Bebo because they had been using it for anti-social activities such as drug dealing:

*They are not allowed to use Bebo on it, cos we found them mucking about on it. We didn't like some of the things they were doing on it.*

(East Belfast community worker 2)

It was acknowledged by all of the interviewees that they could only influence the social networking practices of young people within their community centres. However, one of the North Belfast community workers stated that the PSNI had been monitoring social networking traffic prior to the violent clashes in Belfast city centre in December 2009 at the request of the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium, an umbrella organisation for community groups across Belfast.

The PSNI Education Advisor confirmed that there were no specific PSNI strategies to monitor the use of sites such as Bebo by young people to organise anti-social behaviour in Northern Ireland. The PSNI did not monitor social networking sites on a regular basis due to the privacy settings on these sites, and there needed to be a legitimate purpose for them to do so:

*We don't routinely monitor social networking sites. There are new privacy settings on most and some of this is now deemed private information, therefore we require a specific purpose to be monitoring.*

There was a strategy in place to address anti-social behaviour in interface areas. The interviewee asserted that in 2009 the PSNI had run a series of drama workshops for young people aged between 13 and 16 years old that dealt specifically with the topic of so-called recreational rioting. These workshops had been designed in conjunction with local councils and the Northern Ireland Policing Board and delivered in schools across Northern Ireland:

*The drama was designed specifically to deal with the topic of rioting, and peer pressure placed on young people to become involved. The drama looked at consequences, both long term and short term, which young people will face if they engage in anti-social behaviours such as rioting.*

The interviewee also confirmed that these workshops were supplemented by 'bespoke lessons' in secondary schools that dealt with issues such as Public Order Offences and Gang Behaviour.

### 3. CEOP plays a key role in Internet Safety campaigns in Northern Ireland

The study suggested there was a coordinated approach towards the promotion of Internet Safety in interface areas between these key stakeholders. One community worker referred to CEOP training as the reason why they encouraged young people to restrict public access to their social networking profiles. Three of the community workers confirmed that they had received CEOP training from the PSNI and that this Ambassador training programme was to be rolled out in other interface areas shortly.

One of the interviewees stated that their community group intended to send its staff on this course again after it had proved popular in 2009:

*Training is going to happen in other interface areas, we did Ambassador training and we intend to do it again*

(West Belfast community worker 1)

The 'bespoke lessons' in secondary schools were a key part of the PSNI strategy to engage with young people in these areas. One module entitled 'Uses of the Internet' was specifically designed to promote safe and responsible use of the Internet amongst school children. This was said to have been amongst the most requested lessons for PSNI officers to deliver in schools:

*As a requested topic, this would be in the top 5 of our most requested lessons for officers to deliver as part of our Citizenship and Safety Education programme.*

Resources were also provided to parents, children, and community groups upon request, as per the CEOP strategy to promote Internet Safety in the rest of the United Kingdom. This included information on how to report cyberbullying and harmful material using the CEOP red button on sites such as Bebo. In terms of resources, the PSNI Educational Officer confirmed that she was a member of the CEOP Education Advisory Board and often adapted CEOP training materials for use by PSNI officers in schools:

*All PSNI officers who deliver these messages to young people, parents, teachers and community groups have received training and resources from CEOP and from the PSNI's own Education Advisor.*

The PSNI Education Officer was unable to provide copies of these lessons due to copyright restrictions. However, it was made clear that industry partners such as Microsoft and Hewlett Packard played a key role in the promotion of Internet Safety in Northern Ireland, in much the same fashion as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. For example, the interviewee referred to the role played by these corporations in promotion of the most recent European Union Safer Internet Day and in the delivery of Internet Safety lessons in secondary schools across Northern Ireland.

4. Key stakeholders feel that Internet Safety campaigns are effective but may not reduce the level of anti-social behaviour in interface areas.

The consensus amongst the interviewees was that these campaigns had been well received by people in Northern Ireland but were unlikely to stop young people using sites such as Bebo to organise anti-social behaviour. While by the very nature of their work these stakeholders might be expected to report that these campaigns were successful, this was a persuasive theme throughout all of the interviews. For example, the PSNI Educational Officer reported that they had received positive feedback from the public about their 'bespoke lessons' in Internet Safety:

*The public are very receptive to having appropriately trained PSNI officers delivering talks and lessons on Internet Safety.*

Three of the community workers suggested that strategies to promote safe and responsible use of social networking sites would have little or no impact on the level of anti-social behaviour in interface areas. SMS text messaging was said to be as important a tool of communication for young people who participated in anti-social behaviour such as street riots in interface areas:

*Texting, to a lesser extent social networking sites, are being used to arrange these sorts of activities.*

(North Belfast community worker 2)

*Bebo would be one of the means of doing it [organizing street riots]. Mobile phones another one, text messages and stuff.*

(East Belfast community worker 2)

The consensus amongst these stakeholders was that young people were likely to organise anti-social behaviour using other communication tools if their access to sites such as Bebo is restricted.

## Conclusion

This paper suggests that there is a multi-agency approach towards the promotion of Internet Safety in Northern Ireland and that key stakeholders perceive that this is an effective and proportionate response to the anti-social networking practices of young people in interface areas. Bespoke Internet Safety lessons are provided by the PSNI to secondary schools throughout Northern Ireland in conjunction with stakeholders such as community groups, industry partners, and agencies such as CEOP. However, this preliminary study of stakeholder perspectives on Internet Safety suggests that these strategies are unlikely have any significant impact upon the level of anti-social behaviour in interface areas. The consensus amongst the interviewees was that this form of anti-social behaviour could be organised via SMS text messaging if sites such as Bebo were no longer available to young people situated in or around interface areas.

There are three issues that emerge from this preliminary study that merit further investigation. First, the perspectives of young people should be explored in relation to the use of social networking sites to organise anti-social behaviour in interface areas. With the exception of the Lloyd and Devine study (2009), most recent empirical studies in Northern Ireland have tended to focus on adult perspectives on Internet Safety and have neglected the attitudes of young people towards social media. What is clear from this study is that children and young people are being shown how to report content on these sites such as pornographic images, online harassment, or approaches from online predators. However, these strategies do not appear to empower young digital citizens to take appropriate action against their peers who use these technologies to plan anti-social behaviour in the real world.

Second, this study also suggests that youth workers might have a greater awareness of the social networking practices of young people in Northern Ireland than the older community workers who operate in these areas. Much of the evidence about the use of Bebo to organise street riots presented here is anecdotal in nature and appears to resonate with the discourse of moral panic that surrounded the reports of sex predators



on MySpace in the mid-nineties. One of the interviewees suggested that many of the community workers were suspicious about new media technologies and lacked the technical skills of youth workers who were members of sites such as Bebo. Further exploration of the attitudes of these two stakeholders is needed in order to develop strategies that address the online risk behaviours of children in Northern Ireland.

Finally, there remains a need to address the causes of so-called 'recreational riots' in interface areas. This study suggests that efforts to promote Internet Safety have had little or no impact upon the behaviours of those young people who engage in street riots in interface areas. While community workers and the PSNI consider this behaviour to be comparable to anti-social behaviour in other regions of the United Kingdom, a more convincing thesis is provided by Leonard (2010) in her study of young people's attitudes towards interface violence. She argues that violence between young people in interface areas is a product of the political context in which its participants grow up, and positive intergroup contact is needed to promote better community relations in areas such as North Belfast. Future research should consider the role of sites such as Bebo in consolidating both negative and positive offline friendships in these interface areas, and the implications of these interactions for community relations in Northern Ireland.

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