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10. DIGITAL DISINFORMATION IN A DEEPLY DIVIDED SOCIETY

Reflections from Northern Ireland

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite its supposed central role in electoral 'shocks' such as Donald Trump's election as US President in November 2016, 'fake news' remains one of the most popular misnomers of the 21st century. Members of the public broadly agree that it refers to 'news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false'.[1] Yet, it is also a pejorative term used by politicians to discredit media outlets that are critical of their conduct in office. By way of response, scholars characterise the current 'post-truth' era as a crisis born of the entire information ecosystem, not just the mainstream media. They argue that information disorders, such as the intentional sharing of false information to cause harm to others (disinformation) and the inadvertent sharing of such information (misinformation), are more appropriate conceptual frameworks for analysing the threat of information pollution to liberal democracies.[2] Nevertheless, much of the empirical research in this field has concentrated on the supposed effects of digital disinformation, manufactured in 'fake news factories' for the financial gain of their 'workers' and amplified on social media by bots, on voting behaviour during national elections and referenda between 2015 and 2017.[3] This is despite the fact that these 'pure' forms of 'fake news' have been virtually non-existent in most countries during this period.[4]

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1 H. ALLCOTT and M. GENTZKOW, 'Social media and fake news in the 2016 election' (2017) 31(2) *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 211, p.213.

2 C. WARDLE 'Fake news. It's complicated', *First Draft News*, 2017, available at: https://firstdraftnews.com:443/fake-news-complicated.

3 D. GHOSH and B. SCOTT, '#Digitaldeceit: the technologies behind the precision propaganda on the Internet', New America, Public Interest Technology and Shorenstein Center, 2018.

4 A. CHADWICK, C. VACCARI and B. O'LOUGHLIN, 'Do tabloids poison the well of social media? Explaining democratically dysfunctional news sharing' (2018) *New Media & Society*, 1, 4.

There have been few studies exploring the impact of digital disinformation within deeply divided societies. Anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar in July 2014 were blamed on an unsubstantiated rumour spread on Facebook claiming that the proprietor of a Muslim tea shop had raped a Buddhist employee.[5] The circulation of false stories on the same platform suggesting that Muslims were planning to violently overthrow the Buddhist majority were linked to sectarian violence in Sri Lanka in March 2018.[6] Although there have been no such incidents in Northern Ireland to date, the limited empirical data available thus far suggests that false or fabricated content about contentious parades and related protests have a very short lifespan on social media and thus have limited influence on 'real-world' events.[7] This chapter builds on this work by presenting the first in-depth study of digital disinformation in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland. It does so by providing an overview of the emergent literature on information disorders, as well as efforts to mitigate their impact on democratic processes such as elections and referenda. It then moves on to explore how propaganda was deployed by state and non-state actors during the 30-year conflict known colloquially as 'the Troubles'. Recent empirical research on the role of Facebook and Twitter in spreading disinformation during contentious parades and related protests will be elaborated upon in order to explore how Northern Irish citizens have responded to deliberately false content shared via social media. Public opinion data from organisations such as Ofcom will also be analysed in order to explore the apparent decline in public trust in both professional news media and political institutions in the divided society, which are key characteristics of the information crisis facing contemporary democracies.[8]

2. THE CHALLENGE OF 'FAKE NEWS' TO MEDIA AND POLITICS

Over the past 18 months, the term 'fake news' has become synonymous with US President Donald Trump's efforts to cast doubt upon the credibility of the mainstream media, presumably in response to their unfavourable coverage of him in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election. Subsequent research showed that there were in fact nearly three times as many fake news items

5 S. STANLEY, 'Misinformation and hate speech in Myanmar', 16 May 2017, available at: https://firstdraftnews.org/misinformation-myanmar.

6 A. TAUB and M. FISHER, 'Where countries are tinderboxes and Facebook is a match', *New York Times*, 22 April 2018.

7 P.J. REILLY, 'Rumours, mis- and disinformation in divided societies: Twitter and the Ardoyne parade dispute', *New Social Media, New Social Science?*, 12 April 2018.

8 LSE COMMISSION ON TRUTH, TRUST AND TECHNOLOGY, *Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience.* London: LSE Press, 2018.

that were supportive of Trump compared to his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton; these were said to have had a modest but significant impact on the voting decisions of those who had previously voted for Barack Obama in 2012, resulting in Trump victories in key swing states including Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.[9] Far-right groups were said to have wielded undue influence on the news agenda in the run-up to the election through their strategic use of disinformation, memes and social bots to share content with partisan news outlets and mainstream media.[10] Trump may have been the most well-known, but he was not the only politician during this period to accuse professional journalists of peddling 'fake news'. Pertinent to this chapter, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MLA Jeffrey Donaldson dismissed the 'fake' media reports in October 2017, which suggested that £1 billion funding resulting from the party's confidence and supply deal with the minority Conservative government was under threat.[11]

Whether similar efforts to de-legitimise mainstream media are successful or not remains to be seen. Certainly, perceptions of media bias and sensationalism have been linked to a decline in public trust in news media organisations in countries such as Germany, Spain and the UK in recent years.[12] However, a public consultation into disinformation across EU Member States found that traditional newspapers were still the most trusted information source, with social media being the least trustworthy.[13] An audience-based study conducted across nine EU countries also found that more participants agreed (40 per cent) that the news media did a good job in helping separate fact from fiction than disagreed (25 per cent).[14] The UK 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer pointed to a significant increase in public trust in traditional media (from 48 per cent in 2017 to 61 per cent in 2018); in contrast, social media was only trusted by 24 per cent of respondents, with many calling for greater government regulation of these companies.[15] One interpretation of these findings is that this 'renewal' in public

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9 H. ALLCOTT and M. GENTZKOW, *supra* note 1; R. GUNTHER, P.A. BECK and E.C. NISBET, 'Fake news may have contributed to Trump's 2016 victory', 8 March 2018, available at: https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4429952/Fake-News-May-Have-Contributed-to-Trump-s-2016.pdf.

10 A. MARWICK and R. LEWIS, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*. New York: Data & Society Research Institute, 2017.

11 A. MCGONAGLE, 'Jeffrey Donaldson brands claims that DUP's £1bn from Tories under threat as "fake news"', *The Irish News*, 31 October 2017.

12 N. NEWMAN and R. FLETCHER, *Bias, Bullshit and Lies: Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2017*.

13 EUROPEAN COMMISSION 'Summary report of the public consultation on fake news and online disinformation', 2018, p. 2, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/summary-report-public-consultation-fake-news-and-online-disinformation.

14 N. NEWMAN and R. FLETCHER, *supra* note 12, p. 6.

15 A total of 70 per cent of respondents felt social media companies did not do enough to prevent 'illegal and unethical' behaviours on their platforms. For more, see: https://www.edelman.co.uk/magazine/posts/edelman-trust-barometer-2018.

trust in traditional media correlates with an increasing cynicism about social media companies' commitment to eliminate 'anti-social' behaviour from their respective platforms.

2.1. INFORMATION DISORDERS

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'Fake news' fails to encapsulate the complexities of how false information is created and shared on social media in order to sow confusion and disunity in democracies. It has been characterised as a 'floating signifier' deployed by politicians to project an image of how they think society should be structured.[16] The term was specifically criticised for being a form of propaganda on behalf of populist, reactionary ideologies such as those espoused by Trump.[17] Much of the empirical work in this area has characterised it as a problem co-constructed by a small but vocal minority of professional journalists and politicians and distributed via social media platforms.[18] A more nuanced framework for understanding this 'information crisis' was provided by researcher Claire Wardle, who asserted that these are problems relating to the pollution of information ecosystems, rather than being confined to professional news media. She identified three different types of 'information disorder' affecting democratic states:

1. misinformation: sharing false information without harmful intent;
2. disinformation: intentionally sharing false information to cause harm to others; and
3. malinformation: sharing accurate information with the purpose of causing harm to others.

This chapter focuses primarily on the second of these, namely the use of social media to disseminate false information with the intention of causing harm to others. It builds on a long history of scholarship addressing the use of propaganda, which can be defined as the purposeful manipulation of representations (including images, texts and videos) with the 'intention of producing any effect in the audience (e.g. action or inaction; reinforcement or transformation of feelings, ideas, attitudes or behaviours) that is desired by the propagandist'.[19] As far back as the late 1980s, it was argued that corporate

16 J. FARKAS and J. SCHOU, 'Fake news as a floating signifier: hegemony, antagonism and the politics of falsehood' (2018) 25(3) *Javnost – The Public, Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture* 298.

17 J. HABGOOD-COOTE, 'Stop talking about fake news!' (2019) 62(9) *Inquiry* 10.

18 R.K. NIELSEN and L. GRAVES, '"News you don't believe": audience perspectives on fake news', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2017, p. 1.

19 E.L. BRIANT, *Propaganda and Counter-terrorism: Strategies for Global Change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015, p. 9.

media were ideological institutions that employed distorting filters in order to manipulate populations and 'manufacture consent' for elite hegemony.[20] Indeed, contemporary definitions of disinformation are congruent with the black and grey propaganda identified in this work; the former refers to covert campaigns that use falsehoods to generate behavioural change within a target audience, while the latter is characterised by uncertainty about the accuracy of the information as well as the validity of the source.[21] While acknowledging that these are not digitally oriented practices, it is undeniable that they can be 'turbocharged' by social media, which host public expression and organise access to it via mobile devices.[22] Yochai Benkler and colleagues defined this as a form of 'network propaganda' insofar as the 'architecture of a media ecosystem makes it more or less susceptible to disseminating these kinds of manipulations and lies'.[23] Much of the disinformation about Clinton and Trump during the 2016 US presidential election emanated from an insular right-wing media ecosystem, in which conspiracy theories and 'fake news' created by far-right groups online were amplified by partisan news outlets such as Breitbart and Fox News.[24] Repetition, a key component of such disinformation campaigns, was facilitated by online platforms that encouraged users to click, like and share content.[25] Its 'virality' was said to be considerably higher if it had a powerful narrative, a visual component, provoked high-arousal emotions and originated from sources that were trusted by digital citizens.[26] There has also been some research indicating that a new generation of tech-savvy journalists consider tweets to be as 'newsworthy' as headlines from more established sources, which may increase the risk that they will inadvertently focus attention on disinformation being shared online.[27] This suggests that, for the foreseeable future, social media will remain a fertile terrain for those who attempt to sow disunity through the sharing of disinformation online, especially when it is amplified by the news media.

While network propaganda may have shaped some voting decisions during the US presidential election and UK EU referendum in 2016, its agenda-setting

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20 E.S. HERMAN and N. CHOMSKY, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

21 E.L. BRIANT, *supra* note 17, p. 9.

22 T. GILLESPIE, 'Governance of and by platforms' in J. Burgess, T. Poell and A. Marwick (eds), *SAGE Handbook of Social Media*. London: SAGE, 2017, p. 1.

23 Y. BENKLER, R.M. FARIS and H. ROBERTS, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 24.

24 Ibid, p. 220.

25 C. WARDLE, *supra* note 2.

26 L. SHIFMAN, *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015; C. WARDLE, *supra* note 2.

27 S.C. MCGREGOR and L. MOLYNEUX, 'Twitter's influence on news judgement: an experiment among journalists' (2018) *Journalism* 1.

power should not be overstated.[28] False information shared on social media with the intention of polarising opinion does not necessarily have uniform effects on audiences. Citizens use heuristics to evaluate the credibility of political information encountered online.[29] Like journalists, they invariably check the source and content of the message before deciding whether it is authentic.[30] External sources, such as pre-existing social networks, are consulted in cases where it is difficult to determine the veracity of this content. This feeds into the ongoing debate over whether social media platforms create 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' in which the algorithmic curation of newsfeeds, as well as the tendency of people to only engage in online groups populated by like-minded individuals, limits exposure to opposing views and reinforces pre-existing opinions. The empirical investigation of these claims has been a primary focus of Internet studies for the past decade. For example, one study found that people are exposed to ideologically diverse opinion courtesy of the sharing of content produced by traditional media on Facebook, albeit that they are still most likely to click on those stories that are congruent with their opinions.[31] This appears to corroborate the characterisation of news consumption as a ritual that *confirms* rather than *challenges* worldviews.[32] Recent research by Dubois and Blank has argued that much of the evidence for the echo chamber thesis is based on studies of news consumption practices on Twitter.[33] They argue that political information seeking and news consumption practices are invariably conducted across multiple platforms; those with diverse media diets and an interest in politics are less likely to find themselves in 'echo chambers' due to their constant exposure to alternative viewpoints. Yet, one should be cautious about ascribing rationality to the information behaviours practised by social media users. There is already some evidence that 'civic-minded' citizens share tabloid news via their social media accounts, irrespective of its accuracy, in order to spark debate with others. While the intentional sharing of fabricated news may be subject to the correction of other social media users, many 'democratically dysfunctional news sharing behaviours' on these platforms remain unchallenged.[34]

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28 C.J. VARGO, L. GUO and M.A. AMAZEEN, 'The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016' (2018) 20(5), *New Media & Society* 2049.

29 E. THORSON, Belief echoes: the persistent effects of corrected misinformation' (2016) 33(3) *Political Communication* 460, p. 475.

30 E.C. TANDOC, Z.W. LIM and R. LING, 'Defining "fake news": a typology of scholarly definitions' (2018) 6(2) *Digital Journalism* 137.

31 E. BAKSHY, S. MESSING and L.A. ADAMIC, 'Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook' (2015) 348(6239) *Science* 1130.

32 J. CAREY *A Cultural Approach to Communication from Communication as Culture*. New York, Routledge, 1992.

33 E. DUBOIS and G. BLANK, 'The echo chamber is overstated: the moderating effect of political interest and diverse media' (2018) 21(5) *Information, Communication & Society* 729. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656.

34 A. CHADWICK et al., *supra* note 4.

3. THE PROPAGANDA OF WAR AND PEACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

In order to contextualise this study of digital disinformation in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland, it is necessary to first develop a historical understanding of the role of propaganda in the deeply divided society. Disinformation has frequently been deployed by both elites and non-elites in support of the two main competing narratives on the constitutional status of the contested entity. For the sake of brevity, their complexities cannot be fully elaborated here, but the conflict (known colloquially as 'the Troubles') was invariably framed as the clash of two distinct strands of ethnic nationalism.[35] Catholics, nationalists and republicans tended to oppose partition and support reunification with the rest of Ireland, whereas Protestants, unionists and loyalists supported the maintenance of the union with Great Britain.[36] Prior to the conflict, news media were complicit in efforts by both the UK and the regional Stormont government to portray a 'society without division', going so far as not to mention the word 'partition' in their coverage.[37] They were subject to even more restrictions in their reporting of the 30-year conflict (1968–1998). The Troubles were frequently characterised as a 'propaganda war supported by a shooting war'.[38] The news media were effectively banned from interviewing or transmitting footage of republicans and had to rely instead on 'official' sources such as the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the British Army in their coverage of terrorist atrocities. In this way, the UK government actively promoted the notion that journalistic norms of 'impartiality' should be abandoned in favour of coverage that designated these groups as 'the enemy' of the state.[39]

The republican movement established newspapers such as *An Phoblacht* to counter media coverage that framed them as 'terrorists' who were unrepresentative of the nationalist community.[40] Publications such as *The Loyalist* were launched to provide a similar narrative stream for loyalist terrorist groups, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). However, both loyalists and republican paramilitaries were unable to match the 'psyops' of the British Army in the early 1970s, the term used to describe the use of propaganda to 'influence the

35 K. O'SULLIVAN-SEE, *First World Nationalisms: Class and Ethnic Politics in Northern Ireland and Quebec*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 148.

36 A. EDWARDS and C. MCGRATTAN, *The Northern Ireland Conflict (Beginners Guide)*. London: Oneworld, 2010.

37 D. MILLER, *Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media*. London: Pluto Press, 1994, p. 28.

38 R. CLUTTERBUCK, *The Media and Political Violence*. London: Macmillan, 1983, p. 87.

39 P. SCHLESINGER, and P. ELLIOTT, *Televising Terrorism: Political Violence in Popular Culture*. London: Comedia, 1983, p. 121.

40 L. CURTIS, 'Reporting republican violence' in B. Rolston and D. Miller (eds), *War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1996, p. 324.

opinions, emotion, attitudes and behaviour of enemy, neutral and friendly groups during a military action'.[41] The Information Policy Unit in Northern Ireland, created by the British Army in 1971, was charged with discouraging publicity for violence perpetrated by loyalist paramilitaries and the security forces while simultaneously discrediting the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the republican movement. Early successes included the British media blaming PIRA for the McGurk's Bar atrocity in December 1971, with one journalist reproducing the army's version of events 'word for word'.[42] In reality, a group identifying themselves as the 'Empire Loyalists' (later identified as the UVF) had claimed responsibility for the attack on the North Belfast bar. Although these operations ceased a few years later, both direct and indirect pressure continued to be placed upon broadcasters to reproduce the British narrative on the conflict and portray republican terrorists as 'criminals'. There was also evidence that official sources were 'placing' stories with unsuspecting media organisations and were working with academics and journalists in order to promote 'good news stories' showing the British Army helping local communities.[43]

Despite Sinn Féin's burgeoning electoral success, the UK government continued to attempt to limit media coverage devoted to the political wing of the PIRA. Most notably, the 1988 UK Broadcasting Ban made it illegal for Sinn Féin members to make statements on television.[44] Propaganda was also deployed by the NIO and the UK government in order to protect security forces personnel from prosecution for their role in 'extra-judicial executions'. For instance, unidentified 'official sources' were responsible for the false story circulated in the British media in March 1988 stating that three PIRA members shot dead by the Special Air Service (SAS) in Gibraltar were armed and had planted a car bomb.[45] Despite some evidence of a 'belief echo' amongst British audiences when evidence first began to emerge casting doubt on these claims, this incident demonstrated the limits of the UK government's information management policy in shaping media coverage of the conflict. *Death on the Rock*, a Thames Television documentary that aired in April 1988, provided evidence that the three PIRA members had been unarmed and shot dead by the SAS team without warning. UK Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe failed in two attempts to ban the programme from being aired.[46] This illustrated the tension between the public service remit of UK broadcasters and the efforts by the British state to use

41 L. CURTIS, *Ireland, the Propaganda War: The Media and the 'battle for Hearts and Minds.* Belfast: Sásta, 1988, p. 229.

42 Ibid, p. 91.

43 D. MILLER, *supra* note 37, p. 124.

44 E. MOLONEY, 'Closing down the airwaves: the story of the broadcasting ban' in B. Rolston (ed.), *The Media and Northern Ireland*. London: Palgrave, 1991, p. 46.

45 D. MILLER¸ *supra* note 37, p. 212.

46 R. BOLTON, 'Death on the Rock' in B. Rolston and D. Miller (eds), *War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1996, pp. 118–141.

these organisations for disinformation campaigns about their 'war on terrorism'. While there may have been severe restrictions placed on news media, it would be misleading to characterise professional journalists and media organisations as a 'subordinate apparatus of the state' during the conflict.[47] Indeed, *Death on the Rock* illustrated how some journalists actively pushed back on state propaganda designed to justify the unlawful use of force against PIRA.

The late 1980s saw the NIO and UK government propaganda shift from portraying terrorists as 'criminals' to 'victims of circumstances'.[48] A series of television commercials were commissioned for the 'Confidential Telephone Number, a service designed to gather intelligence about the activities of loyalist and republican paramilitaries. Probably the most well-known of these was 'I Wanna Be Like You Dad', which depicted the son of a paramilitary prisoner getting involved in terrorist activity and ended with the father standing at the graveside of his son, killed due to his involvement in terrorism.[49] This was followed by a series of adverts after the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires which 'sold' the benefits of peace to citizens in the deeply divided society. The news media were not immune to these efforts to bolster support for the fledgling peace process. Op-eds and editorials in newspapers such as the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish News* were overwhelmingly supportive of the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement, and their coverage purposefully differentiated political fronts such as Sinn Féin from the violence of their respective terrorist organisations.[50] At the same time, the republican party developed a sophisticated public relations capacity that enabled it to consolidate internal support for the peace process while expanding its electoral base.[51]

Dissidents have had little opportunity to articulate their opposition to the peace process in the news media over the past two decades. McLaughlin and Baker argued that this was indicative of the pervasiveness of the 'propaganda of peace', which mobilised citizens in support of a neoliberal agenda that conflated economic prosperity with peace and treated the Agreement as a 'self-evident good' beyond critique.[52] This has resulted in loyalist and republican dissidents being branded as 'dangerous and transgressive threats to the peace

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47 P. SCHLESINGER, and P. ELLIOTT *Televising Terrorism: Political Violence in Popular Culture*. London: Comedia, 1983, p. 110.

48 A. FINLAYSON and E. HUGHES, 'Advertising for peace: the state and political advertising in Northern Ireland 1988–1998' (2000) 20(3) *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 397, p. 397.

49 Ibid, p. 404.

50 G. WOLFSFELD, *The News Media and Peace Processes: The Middle East and Northern Ireland*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001, p.36.

51 I. SOMERVILLE and A. PURCELL, 'A history of republican public relations in Northern Ireland from "Bloody Sunday" to the "Good Friday Agreement"' (2011) 5(3) *Journal of Communication Management* 192, p. 208.

52 G. MCLAUGHLIN and S. BAKER, *The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of the Media and Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process*. Bristol: Intellect, 2010.

process', irrespective of whether they were engaged in 'spoiler' political violence campaigns.[53] While it appeared relatively benign in comparison to the disinformation campaigns of the Troubles, this helped elites manufacture consent for a consociationalist peace settlement that entrenched divisions between the two ethno-sectarian blocs and did little to address conflict-legacy issues experienced by both communities. In this context, dissidents resorted to using digital media to articulate their opposition to the peace process. A study of websites maintained by political actors and residents' groups in the mid-2000s suggested that the Internet had limited value as a propaganda tool for these actors.[54] Political parties used their websites to position themselves as either critics or supporters of the Good Friday Agreement. For example, there were few references to PIRA in the history section of the Sinn Féin website, which asserted its democratic credentials and used rhetorical appeals similar to those of the Socialist Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).[55] Yet, there was little evidence to suggest that this online propaganda had a significant impact upon the political attitudes and behaviour of citizens. These websites appeared to function as 'islands of political communication' that were unlikely to provide a high degree of visibility for groups who received very little coverage in the mainstream media. Indeed, their relative obscurity arguably made them ideal platforms for the sharing of internal propaganda with like-minded individuals, rather than fomenting disunity amongst the general population.[56]

4. SOCIAL MEDIA, DISINFORMATION AND HYBRID MEDIA EVENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The early signs were that Web 2.0, the section of the Web revolving around user-generated content, would make it easier for dissidents to disseminate black and grey propaganda designed to undermine public confidence in the Agreement. In contrast to the limited interactivity afforded by their websites a decade earlier, they could use these platforms to share disinformation with target audiences such as professional journalists, who were increasingly likely to source stories on social media.[57] This was potentially very significant for those groups who were marginalised due to their perceived threat to the peace process and

53 P. HOEY, *Shinners, Dissos and Dissenters: Irish Republican Media Activism since the Good Friday Agreement*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, p. 8.

54 P.J. REILLY, *Framing the Troubles Online: Northern Irish Political Groups and Website Strategy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.

55 Ibid.

56 P. HOEY, *supra* note 53, p. 55.

57 A. CHADWICK, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford: Oxford Studies and Digital Politics, 2013.

wished to counter mainstream media narratives that presented the Agreement as sacrosanct. The evidence to date suggests that social media have ushered in a new era of political partisanship amongst a small but vocal minority of citizens who use these sites to find and share political information. In the case of Sinn Féin, the party with the most sophisticated online communication strategy, its social media profiles were frequently flooded with sectarian comments made by anonymous loyalists and unionists in the late noughties.[58] Since 2014, the republican party itself has been linked to orchestrated social media campaigns by so-called 'Shinnerbots' that seek to attack and silence its critics. For example, these anonymous Sinn Féin supporters were responsible for the online bullying and harassment of Maíria Cahill in October 2014, in the wake of her allegations that senior PIRA figures had attempted to cover up her sexual assault by a senior republican.[59] Researchers such as Hoey argued that they have effectively 'drowned out' other voices during partisan political debates online.[60] Yet, with the exception of the aforementioned UK EU referendum in 2016, there has been little evidence to date suggesting that digital disinformation has influenced the voting decisions of citizens in Northern Ireland. The region's only fact-checking organisation conducted 49 fact-checks between April 2016 and September 2018, none of which referred to disinformation shared via social media.[61]

4.1. THE 2012 UNION FLAG PROTESTS

In contrast to elections, there has been mounting evidence that disinformation is being shared online during hybrid media events, those 'media events whose significance for media professionals, politicians, and non-elites is being reconfigured by the growth of social media'.[62] Loyalist and republican dissidents have invariably been responsible for the sharing of false or misleading information on social media, designed to inflame sectarian tensions surrounding contentious parades and protests. Fears amongst community workers and other key stakeholders that the spread of false information online

58 P.J. REILLY, 'Ourselves alone (but making connections): the social media strategies of Sinn Féin' in P. Nixon, R. Rawal and D. Mercea (eds), *Chasing the Promise of Internet Politics*. London, Routledge, 2013, p. 168.

59 N. EMERSON, 'Just whose side are the Shinnerbots on?', *Irish News*, 30 October 2014.

60 Hoey argues that this is illustrative of Sinn Féin's command of social media and has an antecedent in their strategies to circumvent British censorship during the conflict. For more on this, see: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/ireland/shinnerbots-drown-out-unionists-on-social-media-xsv02q9q8.

61 For more on this and the other fact-checks, see: https://factcheckni.org/category/facts.

62 C. VACCARI, A. CHADWICK and B. O'LOUGHLIN, 'Dual screening the political: media events, social media, and citizen engagement' (2015) 65 *Journal of Communication*, 1041, 1044.

might spark intercommunal violence (see Reilly,[63] for instance) appeared to be realised during the union flag protests in December 2012. Loyalists took to the streets to demonstrate their anger at the decision of Belfast City Council to alter its protocol on the flying of the union flag over City Hall, reversing its previous policy of flying the flag all year round in favour of only doing so on 18 designated days. The Alliance Party bore the brunt of loyalist anger as this was its amendment to an original proposal by Sinn Féin seeking its permanent removal. Several of its constituency offices were picketed on a daily basis in the weeks following the vote, with a death threat made against its East Belfast MP Naomi Long and a petrol bomb attack on a police vehicle outside her constituency office in December 2012.[64] The DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) were widely criticised for distributing 40,000 'anti-Alliance' leaflets to households across Belfast in the run-up to the vote, which presented the party as a threat to unionist and loyalist identity.[65] Yet, irrespective of the link between the leaflet and this campaign of intimidation, none of the parties could have anticipated the scale of the protests, with approximately 10,000 people recorded as being involved in protest-related incidents in the week before Christmas.[66]

While much of the media coverage focused on the role of public Facebook pages in the coordination and organisation of the flag protests, they would also provide a platform for those who wished to post sectarian comments about the 'other' community and 'troll' public figures, including the spokespersons for the flag protest movement.[67] Facebook and Twitter were frequently characterised as a 'sectarian battleground' due to the noticeable increase in anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant sentiments on these platforms during this period.[68] There was also a noticeable increase in rumours and misinformation rather than disinformation on social media during the flag protests. Public Facebook pages such as Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater (LPPU) were used to share misinformation, such as claims that An Garda Siochána had been involved in the policing of the flag protests and that security staff from a Belfast office building had been approached by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)

63 P.J. REILLY, 'Community worker perspectives on the use of new media to promote conflict transformation in Belfast' (2012) 49(15) *Urban Studies* 3385.

64 P. NOLAN, D. BRYAN, C. DWYER, K. HAYWARD, K. RADFORD and P. SHIRLOW, 'The Flag Dispute: Anatomy of a Protest', Supported by the Community Relations Council & the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland, 2014.

65 A. KANE, 'Confidence requites more than a flag', *Eamonn Mallie*, 14 December 2012, http://eamonnmallie.com/2012/12/confidence-requires-more-than-a-flag.

66 P. NOLAN et al., *supra* note 64, p. 4.

67 O. YOUNG, 'New media and young people in interface areas of Belfast' (2014) 14 *Shared Space*.

68 P. NOLAN et al, *supra* note 64, p. 70.

for CCTV footage of the flag protesters.[69] In terms of the former, it should be noted that commentators in the same thread asked for corroborative evidence and several categorically refuted this claim. It was also one of the few rumours spread on social media that surfaced in media coverage of the protests, with Justice Minister David Ford and a PSNI spokesperson denying the claim in a newspaper article published on 8 January 2013.[70] Twitter was also used by citizens to share claims about alleged police brutality and threatening behaviour and physical assaults inflicted on members of the public by flag protesters. The responses to these claims, which were rarely corroborated by visual evidence, were unsurprisingly polarised. Critics of the protesters were quick to condemn any wrongdoing on their part, whereas claims of PSNI brutality were held up as further evidence of its complicity in Sinn Féin's war against unionist and loyalist culture. In sum, citizens' acceptance of rumour and misinformation shared on social media at the height of the flag protests depended upon whether it was congruent with their view on the loyalist culture war narrative.

4.2. THE 2014 AND 2015 ARDOYNE PARADE DISPUTES

In contrast to the flag protests, there was more disinformation than misinformation during the Ardoyne parade disputes. The Ardoyne parade dispute provided further evidence of how social media were being used to promulgate disinformation during hybrid media events in Northern Ireland. The Parade Commission decision to reroute the annual Twelfth of July parade away from the nationalist Ardoyne district of North Belfast in July 2013 led to several nights of violence between loyalist protesters and the PSNI. The parade passed off without incident in July 2014, despite the efforts of several disinformation propagators on Twitter to inflame sectarian tensions surrounding the parade. A study of 1,842 #Ardoyne tweets posted between 11 and 14 July 2014 revealed that rumours and disinformation about the contentious parade had a very short lifespan and typically went unreported by the news media.[71] Most notably, there were two Photoshopped images shared on the microblogging platform presumably with the intention of generating further hostility between the nationalist residents and loyalist protesters. The first appeared to show a picture of Oscar Knox, a five-year-old who had died from a rare form of cancer, on an 'Eleventh Night'

69 P.J. REILLY and F. TREVISAN, 'Researching protest on Facebook: developing an ethical stance for the study of Northern Irish flag protest pages' (2015) 19(3) *Information Communication and Society* 419.

70 A. MCKERNON, 'Flags crisis – "no substance" to claims about drafting Gardai', *Irish News*, 8 January 2013, p. 5.

71 P.J. REILLY, 'Tweeting for peace? Twitter and the Ardoyne parade dispute July 2014' (2016) 21(11) *First Monday.*

bonfire near Randalstown. This provoked outrage amongst many tweeters, but was quickly refuted by the Randalstown Sons of Ulster Flute band, who posted a picture of their Eleventh night bonfire to show that the image had been digitally altered.[72] By way of response, loyalists also distributed disinformation on social media depicting the nationalist Ardoyne residents as intolerant towards their culture. At 7.30 pm on 12 July, a picture was shared on Twitter showing one of the nationalist protesters holding aloft a placard with a mock road sign declaring that the Orange Order were not welcome in the area. The crude Photoshopping of the placard led to much scepticism amongst tweeters about its authenticity. Like the Knox case, it took only a few minutes before visual proof that the photograph had been manipulated was shared on Twitter. A picture uploaded by BBC Northern Ireland journalist Kevin Sharkey revealed that the slogan had in fact read 'Love Thy Neighbour' rather than expressing local opposition to the contentious parade.[73] In both cases, it was notable that the number of retweets of these digitally manipulated images declined sharply after corrections were shared. Tweeters also directly challenged the disinformation propagator responsible for manipulating the image of the protester with the placard.[74]

The 2015 parade was marred by loyalist rioting after protesters faced off against PSNI officers enforcing the Commission ruling prohibiting the march from returning home via its traditional route. A total of 24 police officers were hurt after loyalists began to throw missiles at their lines, with erroneous rumours circulating online that PSNI Chief Constable George Hamilton was amongst those injured. A study of 5,546 tweets posted between 12 and 15 July 2015 provided further evidence of how Twitter was used by citizens to share and debunk misinformation.[75] Claims and counter-claims were made about the incident in which John Aughey, a member of the Orange Order, drove his car into a crowd of nationalist residents in North Belfast, critically injuring a 16-year-old girl. The West Belfast Ulster Political Research Group shared reports that his car had been attacked by republicans, making no reference to Aughey's attempted murder of the teenager.[76] Loyalists speculated whether the victim had been trapped under the vehicle as had been claimed by other tweeters. Within a few minutes, journalists confirmed that the girl had been seriously injured and that Aughey had been arrested at the scene.[77] There were few tweets alleging that the

72 'If everyone could retweet this and confirm! There was no Oscar Knox memorabilia/flags or objects on Randalstown bonfire. Oscar was a hero!' @RandalstownSOU, Twitter, 12 July 2014, 12.30 am.

73 P.J. REILLY, *supra* note 7.

74 P.J. REILLY, *supra* note 71.

75 P.J. REILLY, *supra* note 7.

76 P.J. REILLY, 'Local journalists have key role to play in combating "fake news" in Northern Ireland', *Democratic Audit UK*, 10 September 2018.

77 P.J. REILLY, *supra* note 7.

car had been attacked by republicans after these media reports began to circulate on social media. Further corrective information about the status of the victim was provided a few hours later, when local MLAs including Sinn Féin's Gerry Kelly confirmed that her injuries were not life-threatening.

The Chief Constable himself was the subject of misinformation later that evening. A viewer of Russia Today's livestream showing the standoff tweeted that a senior police officer closely resembling Hamilton had been injured by an object thrown by one of the rioters. This misinformation flow was corrected within a few hours by local journalist Rodney Edwards, who confirmed that the Chief Constable had not been present at the scene during the riot.[78] Further corroborative evidence of this 'debunk', a 'corrective message that establishes that the prior message was misinformation',[79] was provided by the Chief Constable later that evening; Hamilton tweeted that he had not been injured and thanked members of the public for their concern. Elsewhere, tweeters worked to prevent the spread of rumours and misinformation that might incite violence in North Belfast. One tweeter apologised for one of their own tweets, posted a few days prior to the Twelfth and retweeted three times, disclosing a rumour they had heard about a deal being struck to allow the return leg of the parade to proceed past the Ardoyne shops.[80] This correction showed how some citizens were aware that such misinformation might have a negative impact on community relations in the contested interface area.

These were crudely Photoshopped images and unsubstantiated claims rather than the sophisticated disinformation campaigns seen during elections and referenda in 2016. While it was highly unlikely that these 'agents' were motivated by financial gain like those 'workers' in 'fake news factories', it was more plausible that they were seeking to inflame sectarian tensions surrounding these events. North Belfast remains a highly segregated area where the logic of inter-community separation embedded during the conflict has remained largely intact.[81] Rival interface communities remain engaged in a form of ethnic poker, whereby both retain zero-sum perceptions of space and politics.[82] In these circumstances, it might be argued that disinformation spread on social media was likely to reinforce existing (negative) attitudes towards 'out-groups'. However, the potential impact of such activity on events on the ground should not be overstated. Professional journalists played an active role in fact-checking

78 Ibid.

79 M.S. CHAN, C.R. JONES, K.M. JAMIESON and D. ALBARRACIN, 'Debunking: a meta-analysis of the psychological efficacy of messages countering misinformation' (2017) 28(11) *Psychological Science* 1537.

80 P.J. REILLY, *supra* note 7.

81 P. SHIRLOW and B. MURTAGH, *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City.* London: Pluto Press, 2006.

82 W.J.V. NEILL, *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity.* London: Routledge, 2004, p. 205.

unsubstantiated claims and refrained from amplifying disinformation in their coverage. There was also no clear evidence to suggest that false information circulated on social media contributed to the violent clashes between loyalists and the PSNI during the 2015 Ardoyne impasse, nor any similar incident of civil unrest.

4.3. EFFECTS OF DIGITAL DISINFORMATION MAY BE DIFFICULT TO DETECT

There are two caveats that should be acknowledged when analysing the circulation of disinformation on Twitter during these contentious parades and protests. First, it is difficult to make too many inferences about the attitudes of those who viewed this content but did not comment on it. Indeed, many of these 'watchers' may have continued to believe such false information, even after it had been debunked. The empirical evidence to date suggests that 'debunks' may unintentionally provide a degree of legitimacy to the original claim and deliver the publicity sought by those agents responsible for its creation and dissemination.[83] Thorson asserts that even in those cases where misinformation is debunked, there will still be some people who will refuse to believe the correction.[84] These 'belief echoes' are caused by the affective 'pull' of the original piece of misinformation being much stronger than the correction, as well as the extent to which the false information appears to corroborate pre-existing political views and prejudices.[85] There has also been evidence of 'partisan selective sharing', when citizens only share fact-checking messages that are congruent with their political ideologies and ignore those that appear to support the views of their political opponents.[86] The failure of elected representatives to resolve the Ardoyne parade dispute meant that loyalists and nationalist residents were perhaps more likely to believe misinformation and disinformation that correlated with their respective views of each other. In this context, it is conceivable that loyalists would believe that nationalist protesters carried anti-Orange Order placards, even after the evidence for such a claim had been debunked.

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83 C. SHAO, G.L. CIAMPAGLIA, O. VAROL, A. FLAMMINI and F. MENCZER, 'The spread of low-credibility content by social bots' (2018) 9 *Nature Communications* 4787; C. WARDLE, *supra* note 2.

84 E. THORSON, *supra* note 29.

85 D.J. FLYNN, B. NYHAN and J. REIFLER, 'The nature and origins of misperceptions: understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics' (2016) 38(1) *Political Psychology* 127.

86 J. SHIN and K. THORSON, 'Partisan selective sharing: the biased diffusion of fact-checking messages on social media' (2017) 67(2) *Journal of Communication* 233.

Second, this chapter has drawn on easily obtained data from Twitter rather than 'hard' data that are out of reach of the researcher.[87] Only an estimated 18 per cent of Northern Irish adults were said to be using Twitter during this period.[88] It is inconceivable that disinformation about the flag protests and the Ardoyne dispute was not being shared on private Facebook pages, encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp or indeed via face-to-face conversations. In contrast to the aforementioned propaganda campaigns of the British state and paramilitaries during the Troubles, which were extensively documented, much of this content is ephemeral and therefore inaccessible to researchers. Therefore, it may not be possible to fully assess the current scale of digital disinformation in the deeply divided society due to the many channels through which it originates and circulates.

5. BUILDING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AGAINST DIGITAL DISINFORMATION

Perhaps the most pertinent issue is how Northern Irish citizens respond to political disinformation shared on social media. As discussed earlier, public perceptions of the Troubles were heavily influenced by a combination of the psyops of the British Army and the news media's reliance on 'official sources'. In these circumstances, citizens might be understandably wary of the veracity of information they encounter on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Certainly, there has been some evidence to suggest that the online news consumption practices may inadvertently increase their exposure to digital disinformation. One recent survey found that only 59 per cent of Northern Irish Internet users checked the accuracy of factual information found online, compared to 67 per cent of users across the UK.[89] This was congruent with a 2016 study that found that only 55 per cent of Internet users understood that the accuracy of the information generated in search engine results was variable, below the UK average of 62 per cent.[90] Yet, paradoxically, there are also some signs that Northern Irish citizens are increasingly sceptical of all information they encounter online. For example, one survey found that only half of participants (50.2 per cent) trusted content posted on websites of news

87 J. BURGESS and A. BRUNS, 'Easy data, hard data: the politics and pragmatics of Twitter research after the computational turn' in G. Langlois, J. Redden and G. Elmer (eds), *Compromised Data: From Social Media to Big Data*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 93–111.

88 OFCOM, 'Internet use and attitudes: 2017 Metrics Bulletin', 3 August 2017, p. 10.

89 Ibid, p. 12.

90 OFCOM, 'Internet use and attitudes: 2016 Metrics Bulletin', 4 August 2016, p. 15.

media organisations. Northern Irish social media users were rated as slightly more trustworthy than either professional journalists or elected representatives at Stormont, albeit that all three groups were ranked amongst the least-trusted groups. Reasons why participants did not trust the news media included their 'dumbing' down of the news, the tendency to exaggerate the differences between the main political parties, and the failure to promote healthy debates on key political issues.[91]

The media diets of Northern Irish citizens may, at the very least, ensure that they are only likely to be inadvertently exposed to the information pollution spread by disinformation propagators on social media. Recent research suggests that, despite the perceived low level of public trust in journalists, television remains the main source of news for 72 per cent of adults aged over 16 in Northern Ireland.[92] UTV Live, independent broadcaster UTV's flagship early-evening news programme, regularly achieves 47.2 per cent audience share in its 6 pm timeslot, making it one of the most-watched regional news bulletins in the UK.[93] In contrast, just seven per cent of respondents said that they used a website or app as their primary source of news.[94] Furthermore, another study found that only 21.2 per cent of citizens said they trusted social media as a source of information.[95]

These news consumption practices have a number of implications for the 'resilience' of Northern Irish citizens towards online misinformation and disinformation. On the one hand, the widespread scepticism about information posted online appears to be a positive development. The dominant position occupied by television news in the regional information ecosystem would also appear to assuage fears that they were getting their news from unverified sources. While acknowledging that media consumption is a ritual that typically reinforces worldviews, the diversification of media diets could potentially help address the mutual suspicion that surrounds contentious parades such as Ardoyne, which provides a fertile terrain for digital disinformation during the annual Twelfth demonstrations. If the predominantly unionist readership of the *News Letter* read the *Irish News*, the largest nationalist paper in the region, and vice versa, it would at the very least provide more communicative spaces in which both sides could discuss these contentious issues. Yet, declining trust in professional journalists is arguably a more pressing problem and is particularly problematic in a society emerging from a 'propaganda war'. If these trends continue, then they might threaten the long-term survival of an independent and free news media

91 S. MCGOOKIN, 'Lucidtalk poll: local media – old and new – face issues of trust and performance', *Northern Slant*, 12 March 2018.
92 OFCOM, 'Communications Market Report: Northern Ireland', 3 August 2017, p. 28.
93 Ibid, p. 27.
94 Ibid, p. 28.
95 S. MCGOOKIN, *supra* note 91.

within Northern Ireland, which is a pre-requisite for reducing the pollution of the information ecosystem.

The fact-checking and professional norms of mainstream media are not in and of themselves a solution to the so-called 'fake news' problem in this deeply divided society. The tendency of professional journalists to source stories online increases the possibility that they themselves will inadvertently contribute to these flows on social media, especially given their role as key influencers on platforms such as Twitter. Belief echoes and partisan selective sharing also militate against the simplistic notion that debunks issued via mainstream media will automatically nullify disinformation shared on social media. The central role of tabloid media in democratic dysfunctional news-sharing practices suggests that some forms of journalism may be directly and indirectly contributing to the polarised political debates seen on these platforms. Similarly, calls for mass digital literacy initiatives to tackle digital disinformation fail to acknowledge the impracticalities of training millions of people on how to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' content;[96] they also perpetuate the false premise that a digitally literate population will not be vulnerable to these information disorders. Even if a consensus could be reached on how to define digital literacy, it would seem unrealistic that the entire media ecosystem could be transformed in such a way as to fully eradicate the sources of disinformation. After all, the evidence from the 2016 US presidential election was that disinformation emanated from a small right-wing media ecosystem that accounted for no more than 30 per cent of the population.[97] Rather, politicians, journalists and community representatives in Northern Ireland should work together to develop collective narratives on contentious issues that resonate with members of both main communities, thus making it much harder for disinformation propagators to share false information that inflames sectarian tensions around these issues. Future research should explore how such collective narratives on contentious issues can be constructed in a 'post-conflict' society that remains deeply divided along sectarian lines.

6. CONCLUSION

Propaganda has frequently been deployed by both elite and non-elite actors in support of the two main competing narratives surrounding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. While the British state used psyops and information management to frame the PIRA as 'criminals' and protect security forces' personnel from prosecution, loyalist and republican paramilitaries developed

96 S. VAIDHYANATHAN, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

97 Y. BENKLER, R.M. FARIS and H. ROBERTS, *supra* note 23, p. 189.

their own media to counter negative media representations and articulate their respective ideologies. Information disorder in the 'post-conflict' society shares many of the same traits as this 'propaganda war'. Although there has been no evidence to date showing that it has influenced the voting decisions of citizens, loyalist and republicans have spread disinformation on social media with the intention of inflaming sectarian tensions and reinforcing negative stereotypes of outgroups during contentious parades and protests. Thus far, its effects appear to have been stymied by the corrections issued by citizens and professional journalists on platforms such as Twitter. Citizens directly challenged those responsible for sharing disinformation during the Ardoyne parade dispute, while news media organisations fact-checked unsubstantiated claims and refrained from amplifying misinformation in their coverage of both of these hybrid media events. The absence of a coordinated approach also appeared to contribute to the relatively short lifespan of these misinformation and disinformation flows. These were crude Photoshopped images created by seemingly unaffiliated tweeters, not the sophisticated disinformation campaigns of the 2016 US presidential election and UK EU referendum. Clearly this may have raised suspicions amongst some tweeters about the authenticity and veracity of the information provided by these disinformation propagators. However, the potential impact of social media upon 'real-world' events in Northern Ireland should not be overstated. Previous research has suggested that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are more likely to host antagonistic debates about contentious political issues, as opposed to directly influence events on the ground. There have also been no incidents of sectarian violence thus far that have been attributed to false information shared online. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to presume that disinformation on social media has the potential to cause harm to citizens in deeply divided societies, especially in contested interface areas such as North Belfast, who continue to be affected by sporadic low-level intercommunal violence. Future research should focus on how such information circulates on encrypted messaging apps and private social media profiles during contentious parades and related protests. A particular focus should be the interplay between intentionally and verifiably false information and civil disturbances that occurs during contentious episodes.

Despite a recent decline in public trust in professional journalism in Northern Ireland, television news remains the main source of news for most adults, with social media being the least trusted. However, the growth in democratically dysfunctional sharing of tabloid news on social media suggests that accidental exposure to false and misleading information remains a strong possibility, as does professional journalists' increasing reliance on social media to source stories. Moreover, evidence from the 2016 US presidential election suggests that disinformation can emanate from a small part of the media ecosystem. This raises questions as to the feasibility of 'cleansing' the Northern Irish information ecosystem, or any other for that matter, of all forms of misinformation and disinformation. News consumption is after all a ritual designed to confirm

worldviews; those who believe loyalists or nationalist residents are sectarian are more likely to believe Photoshopped images confirming these prejudices are authentic, even when faced with evidence to the contrary. In the absence of a political consensus on how to address complex conflict-legacy issues, digital disinformation looks likely to persist and possibly thrive in the deeply divided society. In this regard, the current genre of information disorders may have much more in common with the 'propaganda war' than previously thought.