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Social media and intergroup contact during contentious episodes in divided societies: Comparative perspectives from Colombia and Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper adds to the emergent literature on social media and intergroup contact in post-conflict societies through a comparative study of contentious episodes in Colombia and Northern Ireland. A qualitative case study approach is used to explore how online social media platforms act as 'connectors' and 'dividers' in these two societies, both of which remain deeply-divided along sectarian lines despite peace settlements being in place. Using case studies such as the UK EU Referendum and the plebiscite on the Colombian peace agreement (both held in 2016), the paper examines whether there is any evidence of the 'agonistic pluralism' envisaged by Mouffe (2013), where former enemies are recast as 'adversaries' who respectfully disagree about contentious issues. The cases show that unstructured online contact during contentious episodes was invariably antagonistic, rather than agonistic. Despite initiatives to foster intercommunity dialogue online, pre-existing 'offline' polarisation was mirrored and intensified by the affective publics mobilised on social media, with online disinformation and misinformation exacerbating tensions between sectarian communities.

Keywords:

Unstructured intergroup contact, polarisation, social media, peacebuilding.

Introduction

Father of peace studies Johan Galtung (1967) predicted that the growth of information and communication technologies would facilitate associative peacebuilding strategies which increase contact between antagonists who have previously been kept apart. Social media has certainly created greater opportunities for intergroup contact in deeply divided societies transitioning out of conflict. This can theoretically aid 'informal learning' about the 'other' community in contexts where there are few physical spaces for these groups to meet. However, prospects for peace and reconciliation are not advanced by the disinformation, misinformation and hate speech that invariably circulate on these platforms, especially during elections and contentious public demonstrations where sectarian differences are laid bare.

This paper adds to the emergent literature on social media and intergroup contact in post-conflict societies through a comparative study of contentious episodes in Colombia and Northern Ireland. A qualitative case study approach is used to explore how online social media platforms act as 'connectors' and 'dividers' in these two societies, both of which remain deeply-divided along sectarian lines despite peace

settlements being in place. Using case studies such as the UK EU Referendum and the plebiscite on the Colombian peace agreement (both held in 2016), the paper examines whether there is any evidence of the 'agonistic pluralism' envisaged by Mouffe (2013), where former enemies are recast as 'adversaries' who respectfully disagree about contentious issues.

The paper begins by exploring the literature on social media and intergroup contact on divided societies, providing background on the two countries, and presenting the results of the two case studies. The paper concludes by identifying recommendations for policymakers on how best to respond to hate speech and misinformation, which has the potential to undermine peace in 'post-conflict' societies.

1. Literature review

As far back as the late sixties, Galtung (1967) predicted that the rapid growth of media technologies would favour associative peacebuilding approaches, which increased contact between antagonists, rather than dissociative ones that kept them apart. First articulated by Allport (1954) and elaborated more recently by scholars like Pettigrew et al (2011), the 'contact hypothesis' suggested that positive intergroup contact would help reduce negative stereotyping of the 'other' community, especially in those circumstances when these groups enjoy equal status and are able to cooperate in areas of mutual interest. Although direct contact has been linked to the greatest reduction in prejudice against outgroups, the act of observing ingroup members interacting civilly with outgroup individuals also has a positive impact on such attitudes (Cao and Wan-Ying, 2017; Vezzali et al, 2014).

However, it should be noted that negative contact with outgroup members, whether experienced directly or vicariously, can increase discrimination and prejudice towards such groups (Barlow et al, 2012; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy, 2009). The effects of intergroup contact are more likely to improve the attitudes of the majority group towards the minority, rather than vice versa (Cao and Wan-Ying, 2017). Crucially, a recurring theme in the literature is that increased intergroup contact would not end conflict in and of itself. Indeed, the agonistic pluralism theorised by Mouffe (2013) asserted that it was neither feasible nor desirable to eradicate conflict within pluralist democracies; rather, a more realistic objective was to foster a 'conflictual consensus' where former enemies were recast as 'adversaries' who respectfully disagreed about contentious issues. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a consensus amongst researchers that positive intergroup contact in divided societies can generally "reduce anxiety and promote better inter-ethnic relations" (Hughes et al, 2011:972).

Much of the early literature on 'cyberspatial' technologies suggested that the internet had the potential to facilitate intergroup contact within highly segregated societies, where neutral space might be difficult to access or not exist (Dahlgren, 2005). Probably the most well-known framework for using ICTs to facilitate intergroup contact was the

'gradual model' articulated by Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006). The authors posited that text-based interactions might help address the initial anxiety of participants and provide the basis for 'richer' forms of contact using audio and video, which would ultimately result in regular face-to-face interaction between members of different social groups. In this way, the internet not only "created opportunities to alter perceptions", but also addressed the practical problems of facilitating intergroup contact in the real world (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008:223). Subsequent research has explored the impact of *contact quality* on prejudices towards outgroups; video-based communication was found to be more effective than its text-based equivalent in improving attitudes towards individual outgroup members, with the opposite being true when it came to attitudes towards the outgroup as a whole (Cao and Wan-Ying, 2017).

While there has been much research into how ICTs facilitate supervised, structured intergroup contact, there have been relatively few studies exploring the peacebuilding implications of unstructured intergroup contacts on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Amichai-Hamburger, Hasler, and Shani-Sherman, 2015). Projects such as "Peace on Facebook" claim to have facilitated 'friendships' between individuals drawn from a range of antagonistic groups, such as Israelis and Palestinians, however there is little information available on the nature of these interactions and it appears to be based on the information provided by users on their profiles. John (2019:1) characterised the initiative as an example of 'social media bullshit' designed to convince users that Facebook was a 'force for world peace', while providing scant evidence to corroborate these claims of 'cross-conflict friending.'

Furthermore, the empirical evidence thus far has suggested that prospects for peace are unlikely to be enhanced via intergroup contact on social media, with platforms such as Twitter more likely to be used to spread hatred and violence than resolve sectarian conflicts as seen in Israel-Palestine and India-Pakistan (Kumar and Semetko, 2017; Wolfsfeld, 2018). It has even been argued that the architecture of these platforms 'energises hatred and bigotry' and 'turbocharges' the spread of misinformation and disinformation that undermines public trust in news media and democratic political institutions (Vaidhyanathan, 2018:24). However, to date there has been no comparative study of the intergroup contact facilitated by these platforms in 'post-conflict societies' during contentious episodes.

2. Methodology

A case study approach was used in this paper to explore the nature of intergroup contact via online platforms in two different contexts. This method was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth analysis of events in a real-world setting, using diverse data sources to explore relationships and processes (Denscombe, 2010; Yin, 2014). Colombia and Northern Ireland are our two chosen case studies due to their similar trajectories in their transition from conflict to peace. Both have used referenda to legitimise peace accords with varying degrees of success, with the subsequent

'post-conflict' period characterised by political disagreements over how to deal with the legacy of conflict and to promote reconciliation between former antagonists (Brewer, Simic, Saba, and Perazzone, 2017). Despite these difficulties, the Northern Ireland model has frequently been held up as an exemplar for Colombia to follow, especially in relation to how it should manage the complex and emotive issues associated with re-integrating FARC into civilian life alongside efforts to disarm and demobilise the guerilla group (Poole, 2016).

Our focus here is how online social media platforms facilitate intergroup contact in these societies during contentious episodes, defined here as moments in which existing levels of polarisation within a society are 'inflamed' by "takeoff issues" (Bode et al, 2018:217). These are derived from the contentious politics framework first articulated by Tilly and Tarrow (2015:7), which refers to actors making "claims bearing on other actors' interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties". Such episodes might therefore include elections, contentious parades and public demonstrations, and any 'wedge' issue which polarises opinion within these two societies.

Building on the literature reviewed above, the following research question was identified:

RQ1: How do social media platforms connect and divide citizens during contentious episodes in divided societies, such as Colombia and Northern Ireland?

Primary and secondary documentary data and social media statistics and posts are used to examine the research question in both cases.

3. Social media as 'sectarian battlegrounds' in Northern Ireland

Two decades from the 1998 Belfast Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society transitioning from the thirty-year conflict known colloquially as the 'Troubles'. Ethno-sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland have been consolidated rather than confronted by a democratically dysfunctional system of mandatory coalition between unionist and nationalist parties, in which public confidence has declined in the wake of scandals, such as 'irisgate' and the renewable heating incentive scandal.¹ Such democratic dysfunction has been compounded by the inability of political leaders

¹ Irisgate refers to the revelations in January 2010 that DUP MP Iris Robinson had broken parliamentary rules to arrange a £50,000 loan for her teenage lover Kirk McCambley. The Renewable Heating incentive scandal revolved around a botched scheme to encourage businesses and farms to move from fossil fuel heating to wood-burning boilers. The failure of DUP Ministers to cap the scheme resulted in a significant cost to the taxpayer. At the time of writing, this is the subject of a judicial inquiry. For more see: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/q-a-what-is-the-northern-ireland-cash-for-ash-scheme-1.2907866> (accessed 10 October 2018).

to find a common purpose in dealing with the legacy of conflict and contentious issues such as parading rights. Hence, it has been argued that contentious parades, such as the Ardoyne parade dispute, were an inevitable consequence of the “fixed interpretative horizons” of leaders on both sides (Hayward and Komarova, 2014).

Throughout the post-Agreement period there has been sporadic intercommunal violence between Catholic and Protestant youths in interface areas where rival communities remain divided by ‘peace walls’. Social media has frequently been implicated in the organisation of so-called ‘recreational rioting’ in these areas, an oxymoron used by news media to characterise this violence as non-political (Leonard, 2010; Reilly, 2011). Indeed, youth workers, community groups and the PSNI have been among those to identify the “powerful role” played by these platforms in organising “arranged fights” between young people in interface areas (McCourt, 2019:8).

3.1 The 2013 union flag protests

The first mass mobilisation within Northern Ireland mediated by ICTs was the union flag protests between December 2012 and March 2013. The demonstrations, sparked by the decision of Belfast City Council to alter the protocol on the flying of the union flag over City Hall, were a lightning rod for broader loyalist dissatisfaction with the peace process and their allegations of partisan policing towards the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Public Facebook pages like Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater (LPPU) played a key role in the coordination of the street protests that disrupted arterial routes in towns and cities across the region throughout this period (Reilly, 2021).

Social media were characterised as ‘sectarian battlegrounds’ during the flag protests due to the noticeable increase in anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant sentiments on various platforms during this period (Nolan et al, 2014:70). YouTube videos purporting to show ‘PSNI brutality’ against loyalists was contested within their respective comments sections, with many commenters perpetuating negative class-based stereotypes of the protesters (Reilly, 2020).

There was also a noticeable increase in online misinformation and disinformation surrounding these protests. LPPU, for instance, was used to share false claims in January 2013 that An Garda Síochána, the police service of the Republic of Ireland, had been involved in policing the flag protests (Reilly and Trevisan, 2015). Twitter was also used by citizens to share unsubstantiated allegations of police brutality and physical assaults by flag protesters on members of the public. The responses to these claims, which were rarely corroborated by visual evidence, were unsurprisingly polarised. Critics of the flag protesters were quick to condemn any wrongdoing on their part, while claims of PSNI brutality against loyalists were held up as further evidence of its complicity in Sinn Féin’s war against unionist and loyalist culture. Citizens were

likely to believe and share mis- and disinformation on social media if it was congruent with their pre-existing views on the loyalist culture war narrative (Reilly, 2021a).

3.2 The 2016 UK EU Referendum

Intercommunal tensions were further exacerbated by the referendum held in June 2016 over the United Kingdom's future membership of the European Union (EU). Northern Ireland faced the economic and political challenges associated with leaving the EU despite 56 percent of voters in the contested entity voting to remain within it.² The only parties in the region to campaign for 'Brexit' were the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV); the former eventually striking a confidence and supply arrangement with the Conservative Party in order to keep Prime Minister Theresa May in office after she failed to win a majority in the 2017 UK General Election. The UK-wide referendum campaign was mired in controversy in no small part due to the use of online platforms to circulate misinformation, the sharing of false information without harmful intent, and disinformation, the "deliberate sharing of false information to cause harm to others" (Wardle, 2017).

For example, pro-Brexit groups such as Vote Leave circulated false claims on Facebook that Turkey was about to join the EU and that the UK government was powerless to place caps on immigration from other member states.³ The UK Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee Report into 'Disinformation and Fake News', published in February 2019, found multiple examples of how Russia had attempted to influence the referendum result using Facebook adverts, criticising social media companies for being "unable or unwilling" to prevent "malicious forces" using its services to influence democratic elections.⁴ However, it should be noted that there has been no evidence to date suggesting that there was a bespoke disinformation campaign for Northern Irish voters, who were receiving many of the same ads as citizens based elsewhere in the UK.

3.3 Northern Ireland riots, April 2021

Social media has continued to be used by a variety of actors to inflame sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland, both before and after the UK's eventual departure from the EU in January 2020. For instance, in June 2019, fabricated stories on Facebook were linked to a Russian campaign to exacerbate Anglo-Irish tensions caused by Brexit (Carswell, 2019), as well as an attempt by conspiracy theorists to frame the

² A full breakdown of the UK EU referendum results can be found here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results (accessed 10 January 2020).

³ For more on Vote Leave's campaign, see here: <https://blog.ted.com/social-media-is-a-threat-to-our-democracy-carole-cadwalladr-speaks-at-ted2019/> (accessed 10 February 2020).

⁴ The full report can be read here: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmds/1791/179109.htm#_idTextAnchor068 (accessed 13 April 2021)

murder of journalist Lyra McKee as a false flag operation.⁵ This was the first digital disinformation campaign identified in the context of Northern Ireland, and was identified by US researchers exploring the coordinated inauthentic behaviour of a fake Irish Facebook account.⁶

However, arguably the most significant digitally-mediated contentious episode since the flag protests came in the form of the loyalist protests and related violence in April 2021. The demonstrations were nominally a manifestation of loyalist anger at the Northern Ireland Protocol, which created a de facto border down the Irish Sea as part of the post-Brexit UK-EU trading arrangements. Clashes between predominantly teenage rioters and the police in loyalist districts in Belfast, Carrickfergus and Derry were variously blamed on paramilitary organisations such as the Ulster Volunteer Force or the widely held perception within these communities that both the PSNI and the Stormont Assembly were biased in favour of republicans and against their interests. Once more, the connective affordances of social media were used by anonymous individuals and organisations to coordinate these protests.

Messages calling for loyalists to “shut down Northern Ireland circulated via Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, similar to those seen in December 2012” (Creighton, 2021). However, like the flag protests, online disinformation was identified as playing a key factor in the protests and related violence. False flag social media accounts, some created a few weeks earlier, were blamed for the rioting at the Lanark Way interface in West Belfast (Morris, 2021). Messages urging loyalist youths to “earn their strips” [sic], were shared on Facebook and WhatsApp in the wake of the rioting in the Sandy Row/Shafesbury Square area close to Belfast city centre; these were condemned by loyalist activist Jamie Bryson as “malicious and false”, with republicans accused of running these anonymous accounts.⁷ The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), an umbrella group for loyalist paramilitaries, sought to distance itself from the violence in a statement warning unionists and loyalists “to remain vigilant to the dangers of fake and anonymous social media accounts, and we urge our people not to get drawn into violent confrontations” (Scott, 2021).

There were also similarities between the flag protests and the April 2021 riots in terms of the role of social media in facilitating the emergence of affective publics, those online formations “connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment”

⁵ The false flag accusations were revealed by journalist Leona O’Neill, who criticised Facebook and Twitter for not doing more to protect her from these accusations. For more on this, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/27/twitter-facebook-act-online-abuse-lyra-mckee-friend> (accessed 27 June 2019).

⁶ For more on this investigation, see here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/russians-suspected-of-spreading-fake-news-about-northern-ireland-1.3935137> (accessed 14 April 2021).

⁷ Bryson’s post can be viewed here: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10216481083134519&set=a.1536977919301> (accessed 14 April 2021).

(Papacharissi, 2015: 5). Footage of protest-related violence shared via online platforms functioned as a focal point for those angered at the economic and reputational harm being inflicted upon Northern Ireland, as well as those who had little sympathy for the loyalist ‘culture war’ narrative underpinning these protests (Reilly, 2021a). Most notably, footage showing grassroots initiatives to prevent violence in interface areas drew widely different reactions from social media users from different political backgrounds. Take, for instance, a video shared on Twitter showing nationalist residents and community workers intervening to stop youths throwing petrol bombs across the ‘peace line’ in West Belfast; it drew largely positive responses from tweeters, with the exception of several loyalist tweeters who framed it as evidence of an “Irish Republican feud” rather than local representatives trying to keep the peace (Reilly, 2021b).

Overall, social media both helps and hinders efforts to moderate sectarian tensions surrounding contentious episodes in ‘post-conflict’ Northern Ireland. While groups such as anti-Agreement loyalists have benefited from online platforms in terms of their ability to choose their own frames and mobilise supporters for public demonstrations, there has been little evidence to date of the ‘conflictual consensus’ theorised by Mouffe (2013) emerging. Unstructured intergroup contact on sites like Facebook and Twitter appears more likely to be antagonistic than agonistic in the intervening period since the 2016 Brexit referendum. Indeed, these platforms appear to pose significant challenges to those who wish to protest peacefully, with misinformation and disinformation invariably circulating online during these contentious episodes.

4. Social media use in the Colombian peacebuilding scenario: Polarisation amidst mobilisation in a 2.0 nameless war

“A war with no name” is how some academics characterise the Colombian conflict (Gutiérrez and Sánchez, 2006). A confrontation with no precise start date, with some historians dating it back to the various conflicts that emerged during Colombia’s consolidation as a State in the nineteenth century (Wills, 2015), in its contemporary form, the conflict refers to the violence that started with the creation of guerrilla groups like the FARC-EP (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia- People’s Army, in Spanish *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), who mobilised in the 1960s around an agenda focused on addressing political, economic and social exclusion experienced in Colombia (Gutiérrez, 2015; Duncan, 2015; Torrijos, 2015).

In the 1980s, drug trafficking and paramilitary groups also emerged in the country, with far-reaching consequences illustrated by the 9,134,347 victims of conflict-related crime since 1985.⁸ Several guerrilla and paramilitary groups have demobilised after peace negotiations with the Colombian Government, such as in the case of the FARC-

⁸ Number of victims by the 10th of May, 2021 included in the Victim’s Registry of the Colombian Agency for Victim’s Reparation: <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394>

EP in 2016. Still, violence has continued between the State and other guerrilla groups, with new paramilitary forces and criminal gangs continuing to financially benefit from the illegal drug trade.

Since the late-2000s, social platforms have also been used to mobilise, express, denounce, fight, inform and misinform about violence and peace. Two incidents in particular illustrate how social media shape intergroup contact during the Colombian conflict. First, the role of Facebook in protests against violence in 2008. Second, social media was used during the referendum to endorse a peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla.

4.1. Polarisation during the 2008 protests against violence in Colombia

"No more kidnappings, no more lies, no more deaths, no more FARC", was the slogan of a Facebook group created by engineer Óscar Morales, with the support of five young Colombian citizens on January 4 of 2008. The Facebook group, "One Million Voices Against FARC", mobilised against FARC-EP after it failed to release kidnapped people. The Facebook group quickly gained traction, up to the point that the administrators decided to take their indignation to the streets, by organising a mobilisation against the guerrilla group, to be held on February 4 of 2008. By January 31st of 2008, 250.000 people, the equivalent to 50% of the active Colombian Facebook users at the time, belonged to the group (Giraldo, 2009).

The protests gained national and international attention due to a combination of the support it received from the Colombian government and the traditional media coverage it garnered. The initiative triggered emotions of many citizens that had suffered crimes by the FARC-EP, living both inside and outside the country (Jaramillo & Molina, 2010). One estimate suggested that as many as 12 million protesters were mobilised worldwide during the 4 February demonstrations (Velásquez, 2013). The size of this civil society movement was unprecedented in Colombia's history, as was the role of social media in organising this collective action in support of peace (El Tiempo, 2008a). This sparked much optimism about the potential impact of such cyberactivism in Colombia (Morales, 2008). In a review of the march, Mario Vargas Llosa (2008) noted that it "showed the powerful weapon that modern technology can be if it's used to serve truth and freedom".

Despite this act of national unity, social media retained a potential to both divide and unite citizens. The campaign proved controversial once politicians began to assume leadership roles in place of Morales and other citizens. There were accusations that it was a form of propaganda for the president Uribe Velez and the military, which overlooked the crimes committed by the State (Giraldo, 2009).

A turning point occurred shortly after the demonstrations against FARC-EP had ended, when Iván Cepeda, son of a former leftist senator of Colombia killed by the State,

invited citizens to mobilise against the crimes committed by the State and paramilitary groups on 6 March 2008. Polarisation around this march grew, up to the point that the Colombian Government, through the presidential advisor José Obdulio Gaviria, spoke against the protest and claimed that it was led by the FARC-EP guerrilla (El Tiempo, 2008b). Offline polarisation was mirrored online, with several disagreements inside the Facebook group “One Million Voices Against FARC”, about the March 6 mobilisation, with a range of discussions in favour and against the protest. Despite the controversies, the mobilisation took place on the day announced with around one million demonstrators in Colombia and worldwide (Semana, 2008). These protests show how social media was not only facilitating the mass mobilisation of citizens, but also polarising opinion in relation to the legacy of the conflict.

4.2. A game of emotions in the peace plebiscite

In October 2012, the Colombian Government and FARC-EP guerrillas announced the formal start of negotiations to end the conflict between the parties. In August of 2016, a peace agreement was announced, which was going to be put forward for its public endorsement by Colombian citizens through a referendum (henceforth, the ‘peace plebiscite’). The plebiscite was held on 2 October 2016, when citizens voted to approve or reject the agreement; a controversial issue in the country, given that during the years that the peace process lasted, the public opinion was divided between supporters and opponents, expressing their views both offline and online. Former president Álvaro Uribe was the opposition’s main spokesperson, questioning Juan Manuel Santos’ leadership and leading the campaign against the agreement.

Social media platforms were used by critics and supporters of the peace agreement to share mis- and disinformation, not only during the one-month plebiscite campaign period but also after the result was announced (Dajer, 2019). Memes, hashtags, voice notes, texts and videos were deployed as part of this effort to spread false information about the terms of the agreement; these were amplified by citizens using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. Such content was shared by a diverse set of actors in social media to trigger emotional responses among voters and influence their perceptions of the agreement’s legitimacy, such as the false images of famous people expressing support or opposition to the settlement (Cerón, 2016), or content portraying FARC-EP members as presidents of the country (El Tiempo, 2016).

The Colombian Government attempted to counteract this false information by sharing technical information about the agreement. It also adopted a more confrontational approach that framed the social media posts of the opposition as “myths about the peace process” (Dajer, 2019:8). Given the complexity of the 297-page agreement, and the high levels of public distrust towards the Government and FARC-EP, these Government initiatives failed to mobilise the majority of public opinion in favour of the agreement (Dajer, 2019). In contrast, the opposition adopted a campaign strategy based on triggering citizens’ emotions against the accord. In the words of Juan Carlos

Vélez, manager of the 'no' campaign, they “wanted people to vote enraged” (La República, 2016). Although supporters of the agreement also sought to mobilise people’s emotions through messages of hope about ending the conflict, the rejection of the agreement suggested that the anger of citizens had trumped other emotions.

High levels of political polarisation were consolidated and increased via inflammatory content circulating on social media platforms that encouraged division, preventing intergroup interaction (Rincón, 2016; Salazar, 2017). However, as was the case during the 2008 mobilisations, social media helped civil society organise in support of the peace agreement, for instance by leading initiatives to debunk disinformation or inform citizens about the agreement’s content (Quiroga, 2016), such as in the case of 297p, live-streamed video-sessions to read and discuss the 297 pages of the accord with opponents and supporters. In other cases, citizens also created initiatives to foster dialogue and reconciliation between people with diverse views, pushing citizens to surpass discussions between like-minded individuals and favour intergroup contact.

Moreover, social media was also used to foster mobilisations to pressure the Colombian Government and FARC-EP to renegotiate the agreement once rejected in the plebiscite (Perilla, 2018). The new deal was signed on November 24, 2016, and later endorsed by the Colombian Congress. Since then, citizens have increasingly used social media to lobby for the agreement to be fully implemented. However, early optimism towards social media to foster for collective action has been gradually replaced by pessimism and caution, especially after the plebiscite’s campaign showed how social media can be weaponised to sow divisions within Colombian society.

In sum, the two events analysed from the Colombian case show that social media has both been used to organise public opinion in massive mobilisations to change the peacebuilding agenda, and enhance polarisation between groups with opposite standings about the conflict. Mis- and disinformation spread through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter inflamed emotions and deepened existing offline polarisation, leading to antagonistic rather than agonistic unstructured group contact.

5. Antagonistic and agonistic unstructured contact in Northern Ireland and Colombia

In the cases presented above, unstructured contact on social media was unlikely to be positive and help promote reconciliation during contentious episodes. Despite initiatives to foster intercommunity dialogue online, pre-existing ‘offline’ polarisation was mirrored and intensified by the affective publics mobilised on these platforms. It was clear from the analysis above that conflict-legacy issues continue to polarise publics in these countries, both on and offline.

Social media’s main contribution to peacebuilding in both Colombia and Northern Ireland appeared to lie in its use by citizens and professional journalists to debunk and

factcheck false information that has the potential to spark intercommunal violence. Digital listening via online platforms could also help political elites respond better to issues that have the potential to destabilise peace processes, such as how to deal with contentious episodes.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The cases analysed in this paper from Northern Ireland and Colombia show that unstructured online contact during contentious episodes was invariably antagonistic, rather than agonistic. This was perhaps no surprise given the contentiousness of these issues, which polarised opinion between rival sectarian communities. Nevertheless, online disinformation and misinformation exacerbated tensions between these communities about complex issues of identity and the legacy of their respective conflicts. Therefore, a key lesson from this study is the need for greater support for fact checking organisations and peace journalism projects to combat misinformation that might inflame sectarian tensions or provoke violence. Potential funding sources might include government subsidies for fact checking initiatives or imposing financial penalties upon social media companies for failing to remove hate speech and false information from their sites.

Furthermore, critical media and information literacy is needed, so citizens learn how best to identify misinformation and disinformation, could limit its spread; this could include "think before sharing" and online accountability campaigns. Greater funding for solutions journalism could also help people understand the origins of contentious issues in divided societies such as Colombia and Northern Ireland.

Unstructured intergroup contact via social media is shaped to a large extent by the socio-political context; during episodes which polarise opinion it is highly likely that these sites will be awash with inflammatory content that hinders efforts to improve community relations. Therefore, political leaders should commit to resolving contentious issues pertaining to the legacy of conflict. Policy priorities in this regard should include the need to provide spaces for intercommunity dialogue, as well as combating hate speech and misinformation spread via 'old' and 'new' media.

There also remains a need for social media companies to do more to remove hate speech content and misinformation, with current systems of content moderation. This should not come at the expense of anonymity, which remains vitally important for civil rights activists and citizens who might face censorship or legal sanctions if they were identified online. Governments should apply financial penalties to compel social media companies to take more decisive action on hate speech and misinformation.

This paper provides qualitative insights from two societies where social media is increasingly integral to the mobilisation of public opinion, both in support of and in opposition to peace processes. Nevertheless, more qualitative and quantitative

research is needed to better understand how unstructured online contact, including via IM apps such as WhatsApp, shapes collective actions during contentious episodes. A better understanding of these issues could lead to the re-imagining of online platforms as spaces for positive intergroup contact and cooperation in divided societies.

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