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Can social media really ‘End the Harm? Stakeholder perspectives on the public awareness campaign against paramilitary-style attacks in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Paramilitary-style attacks (PSAs) continues to blight working-class loyalist and republican communities two decades after the Belfast Agreement. This paper explores the efficacy of public awareness campaigns designed to challenge those who justify these actions. It does so by reviewing the literature on PSAs, analysing previous public information campaigns in Northern Ireland and overseas, and providing an overview of Ending the Harm, the campaign launched by the Department of Justice (NI) to address PSAs. These issues were explored through a thematic analysis of interviews (N=7) conducted with key stakeholders including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and restorative justice organizations.

Introduction

Two decades on from the Belfast Agreement (the Agreement), paramilitary-style attacks (PSAs) remain endemic within working-class loyalist and republican communities in Northern Ireland. This is a tactic used by paramilitaries to 'deal' with anti-social behavior in these areas, where the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) remains distrusted and PSAs are viewed as providing 'swift' justice. In response, the Department of Justice (NI) launched the Ending the Harm (ETH) campaign in October 2018 to promote a new public discourse regarding PSAs. Advertisements posted on digital and traditional media captured the perspectives of those involved, including the victim and the paramilitary. Citizens were encouraged to access the campaign website, where they could find out more information about PSAs and how to contact the PSNI.

This paper explores how ETH challenges the views of citizens who justify or defend these attacks. It does so by first reviewing the literature on public information campaigns in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, examining the prevalence and long-term impacts of PSAs, and providing an overview of the ETH campaign. A particular focus was the extent to which online platforms raised awareness of PSAs amongst young people. These issues were explored through a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews (N=7) conducted with representatives from key stakeholder groups between June and October 2019.

Paramilitary-style attacks as legacy of conflict

PSAs are assaults and shootings by republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups to ‘deal’ with what they saw as antisocial behavior in their communities” (Smyth, 2017:6). They have continued unabated following the Agreement, with 4,336 paramilitary style assaults reported between January 1990 and October 2014, an average of one per week (Torney et al. 2015). These attacks inflict long-term trauma on the victims, who are predominantly young men living in economically deprived urban working-class districts. Recent trends indicate that assaults are associated with loyalist groups, whereas republicans are more likely to shoot those deemed guilty of anti-social behavior (Independent Reporting Commission, 2019:38). There has also been increasing evidence that young people are both the victims and perpetrators of PSAs. In May 2019, the United Nations Committee on the Convention Against Torture expressed concern about paramilitary assaults on eight children under the age of 18 between February 2017 and February 2019 (UNCAT, 2019).

These attacks are implicitly accepted by many citizens in the deeply-divided society as suitable ‘punishment’ for anti-social behavior. Research conducted in 2017 found that 35 percent of respondents believed that PSAs could be justified in certain cases (Independent Reporting Commission, 2019). Such attitudes are a manifestation of the political contention about policing that persists twenty years after the Agreement. During the conflict, nationalist and republican communities had distrusted the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the predominantly Protestant police force which was perceived as an extension of the unionist-controlled Stormont government during the conflict (Hearty, 2017). While there was undoubtedly some resistance within these communities towards this vigilantism, PSAs were often popular within communities who felt the RUC was not doing enough to address anti-social behavior (McEvoy and Mika, 2002:535).

Despite Sinn Fein’s historic decision to publicly support the newly-constituted PSNI in 2007, paramilitaries have continued to fill the ‘policing vacuum’ in many urban working-class districts in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Many republican communities believe policing has “simply gotten worse” since the Agreement, with many residents supporting ‘paramilitary justice’ due to their reluctance to engage with the PSNI (Topping and Byrne, 2012: 46). Meanwhile, loyalist communities accuse the ‘PSNIRA’ of being complicit in Sinn Fein’s war against unionist and loyalist culture (Reilly, 2021). An alternative but not mutually exclusive interpretation is that this is a manifestation of the embeddedness of hostility towards the police within these communities. Citizens are more likely to respect police authority if they feel they have been treated fairly by officers in the past, with childhood experiences unlikely to shift significantly in adulthood (Worden and McLean, 2017). Therefore, it is highly unlikely

that the PSNI would be able to quickly build positive relationships within loyalist and republican communities who perceived they had been treated poorly in the past.

There has been an observable decrease in public support for the ‘swift justice’ delivered by PSAs. Between 2017 and 2018, the percentage of participants believing these attacks could be justified in certain circumstances declined from 35 to 19 percent (Independent Reporting Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, activists have expressed concern at the “societal shrug” towards PSAs, where people implicitly justify these attacks (Smyth, 2017). Campaigns such as #StopAttacks, launched in 2009, sought to hold the PSNI accountable for low clearance rates and provided a platform for victims and families affected by PSAs. It evolved into the Stop Attacks Forum, a coalition of youth workers, activists and academics who have lobbied the media and the police to highlight the life-changing injuries endured by victims (Gordon and Reilly, 2018). Stop Attacks has challenged these stakeholders to communicate the consequences of PSAs “more accurately and in ways that diminish support for this practice” (Smyth, 2017: 12).

Public discourse about PSAs is a manifestation of how institutions perceive and even tolerate this type of violence within contemporary Northern Ireland. Media framing of ‘punishment attacks’ arguably reflects the attitudes of the British and Irish governments to these incidents. The guarantors of the Belfast Agreement were clearly willing to tolerate this level of violence in order to sustain the peace process. Whether changing the language around ‘punishment attacks’ reduces support for them remains to be seen; however, the current discourse appears to contribute to the tacit acceptance of their legitimacy within loyalist and republican communities.

Advertising for Peace? Public information campaigns in Northern Ireland

ETH is a Public Information Campaign (PIC), defined as a government-sponsored effort to “communicate to the mass public or a segment of the public in order to achieve a policy result” (Weiss and Tschirhart, 1994: 82). PICs aim to produce “non-commercial benefits” in areas such as public health and energy conservation through persuasive messaging emphasising the reason why the audience should adopt the advocated action, attitude or behavior (Atkin and Rice, 2013). Effective PICs capture the attention of the right audience, use clear, understandable messages, deliver content that influences how citizens understand the issue, and create a social context conducive towards the desired outcome (Weiss and Tschirhart, 1994). They use multiple channels to engage primary and secondary target audiences, the latter referring to those in positions to influence the former (Atkin and Rice, 2013). That is not to say that there are many successful PICs on which ETH could draw on. As far back as 1947, Hyman and Sheatsley warned that these campaigns were limited in terms of their potential to change attitudes, and that people may interpret the same piece of information differently based on their prior beliefs. Mendelsohn (1973) went further in suggesting that practitioners should assume that most of the audience are only mildly interested in the issue or not at all, and make efforts to understand the roots of this apathy. The empirical evidence to date suggests that PICs have modest and often undetectable impacts on behavior in policy areas such as preventing AIDS/HIV infections (Singer, Rogers, and Glassman, 1991) and reducing air pollution (Henry and Gordon, 2003). A reinforcement effect has been attributed to crime prevention campaigns, which have the strongest impact on those already predisposed to follow such advice (O’Keefe, 1985). Hence, scholars such as Rogers and

Storey (1987) have suggested that it is often easier for PICs to raise awareness rather than change attitudes and behaviors.

The Confidential Telephone information campaign

ETH is not the first PIC designed to change attitudes towards paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. During the conflict, citizens were encouraged to use the Confidential Telephone number to share information on paramilitary activity with the authorities. Between 1988 and 1998, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) commissioned 25 television advertisements from McCann Erickson to produce a PIC publicising this number, with a view to gathering intelligence on republican terrorist organizations such as PIRA and their loyalist counterparts like the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The adverts initially conformed to the media stereotyping of paramilitaries as violent criminals, before moving towards a 'qualified humanisation' in the mid-nineties, a strategic framing to lay the groundwork for political fronts such as Sinn Fein to participate in the peace negotiations (Finlayson and Hughes, 2000). McLaughlin and Baker (2010) characterized these as 'mini-domestic dramas' showing a human side to the paramilitaries conspicuously absent from the ads that preceded it. Probably the most well-known one was *I Wanna Be Like You*, 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.ⁱ Whether this campaign had the desired effect or not remains to be seen. Viewers of the Confidential Telephone advertisements were likely to interpret them according to their existing views on policing and paramilitary vigilantism. While those involved in the campaign claimed that it increased the number of 'useful calls' received by the RUC, loyalists and

republicans believed that this ‘advertising for peace’ was merely an overt form of propaganda designed to delegitimize their ‘military campaigns’ and demonize paramilitaries as criminals (Owens, 2018).

The origins of the Ending the Harm campaign

ETH emerged from the Northern Ireland Executive’s Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organized Crime, published in July 2016. The Executive committed to “use all avenues” to “increase public awareness of what people can do about criminality in Northern Ireland” and to “promote active citizenship in building a culture of lawfulness”.ⁱⁱ The first public awareness campaign, ‘I Am Your Money’ (IAYM), focussed on the harm caused by the criminality of paramilitary groups. Citizens were encouraged to report these crimes anonymously using the CrimeStoppers line. Further information was provided on a government-hosted website highlighting how the purchase of counterfeit goods was funding organized criminal gangs.ⁱⁱⁱ

ETH launched in August 2019 and focused specifically on the ‘societal shrug’ towards PSAs. The human cost was conveyed via a multi-media campaign involving the use of billboards, adverts published in newspapers, radio, television, and short films shared on social media platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat. A narrative approach was adopted in these films which showed a ‘shooting by appointment’ from the point-of-view (POV) of the victim, their mother, the paramilitary and the witness. These ads were aired in cinemas and during prime-time television slots in order to maximize the number of citizens exposed to its messaging.^{iv} While radio and television advertisements were used during the public information campaigns of the conflict, it

was the sharing of these films on social media that differentiated ETH from its predecessors.^v Elsewhere, billboard and print media adverts deployed graphic imagery to show the victims' injuries, accompanied by the slogan "Paramilitaries don't protect you, they control you". In this respect, the ETH shared some of the same characteristics of the Confidential Telephone adverts a few decades earlier, which also used violent imagery to illustrate the harm caused by paramilitaries actions upon others. However, it is unclear to what extent these ads directly influenced ETH, or if they were any more effective in challenging societal attitudes towards paramilitarism.

Methods

Two research questions emerging from the preceding literature were investigated:

RQ1: What factors influenced the design of the Ending the Harm campaign? Were the NIO Confidential Telephone advertisements a reference point?

RQ2: To what extent has social media helped the campaign reach communities blighted by PSAs?

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study, which allowed for flexibility and openness to unanticipated findings. Semi-structured interviews (N=7) were conducted with key stakeholders in the ETH campaign between June and October 2019 in order to address these research questions. A purposive sampling strategy was deployed to capture the perspectives of those responsible for creating the campaign, like the Creative Director of Ardmore Advertising (Paul Bowen). The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme was represented by its Communications and Engagement Manager (Debra

Whyte) and operational lead (Bobby Singleton). Other interviewees had either played a key role in the ETH steering group or were in a position to comment on its impact within working-class loyalist and republican communities. These included representatives from the Northern Ireland Office (Lyndon Hughes-Jennett), Stop Attacks Forum (Paul Smyth), restorative justice programme Northern Ireland Alternatives (Debbie Watters), and Children and Young People's Services (Arlene Kee).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in venues across Belfast and also via Skype. In accordance with the ethics approval received from the host institution, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw and asked to sign consent forms confirming they could be identified in the study before the interviews began. The interview schedule consisted of questions about ETH, the role of digital and traditional media in its promotion, and its perceived impact on public attitudes to PSAs. Supplementary questions were added as appropriate to discuss each interviewee's engagement with the campaign. The schedule was subjected to an internal reliability check by the researchers prior to issue in order to ensure it was comprehensible and fully addressed the research objectives discussed above. All interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. The qualitative thematic framework devised by Braun and Clarke (2013) was utilized, beginning with the initial reading of the transcripts and ending with the definition of key themes from the entire dataset. The researchers did this individually and then compared their fieldnotes in order to collectively agree upon these. Quotations are provided below to illustrate key themes.

Results

Multi-stakeholder approach distinguishes ETH from previous PICs

All of the interviewees praised the multi-stakeholder approach underpinning ETH. Key tasks such as identifying target audiences and testing campaign visuals were conducted in collaboration with an insight development group including members of the PSNI, restorative justice organizations, and youth workers. The campaign reference group helped the Department of Justice (NI) develop the tender for the campaign, which had been won by Ardmore Advertising, an agency with little previous experience of public communication campaigns. Its Creative Director detailed their extensive preparatory research, which included interviews with police officers and surgeons about the injuries sustained by the victims of PSAs. Singleton acted as a de facto on-set technical adviser during the filming of the videos, providing insight on everything from the clothing worn by the victim to the way the paramilitary held their firearm.

Ardmore were praised by the other interviewees for their level of engagement with local communities. These consultations informed the decision to use ‘paramilitary’ rather than ‘terrorist’ in campaign literature, although it was acknowledged that even that framing might prove controversial within some sections of society. Both Ardmore and the DOJ organized focus groups to test the narrative, storytelling approach in the videos:

“The real core believers, the point of view with the shooting just landed more with them [...] And then the four points of view was almost that kind of real “let’s put a narrative around this, let’s make a story, let’s have the characters” (Whyte)

Nevertheless, the decision to use graphic imagery closely resembling the injuries inflicted upon PSA victims provoked some controversy amongst key stakeholders. Several interviewees mentioned that feedback from Koulla Yiasouma, the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner, on mock-ups of the billboard images had led to these being toned down. Bowen highlighted the fine line Ardmore had to walk in terms of not wanting to either glamorize these attacks or repel the audience. Therefore, it was decided that the four POV films should be recorded using handheld cameras to make these stories feel more relatable to the audience. Bowen also suggested that the 'intimate' nature of the films made it feel as if viewers were receiving a personal message on Snapchat.

Community consultations fed into the controversial decisions to drop the DOJ branding and remove the appeal to contact the PSNI with any relevant information. The rationale for these omissions was that focus group participants completely disengaged when the CrimeStoppers number was provided in the final frame. Singleton was initially unhappy at this decision, but admitted this "degree of independence" from the police meant that the campaign was more likely to 'land' with its target audience. Whyte was quick to emphasize that this was not an effort to disguise the fact that this was a government-sponsored PIC, as the DOJ was clearly referenced in the footer at the bottom of the ETH website.

The decision to omit the PSNI branding was praised by Hughes-Jennett for framing PSAs as complex societal issues that could not be fixed by law enforcement. Smyth went further in framing PSAs as a public health rather than a policing issue; suggesting

that “*instead of criminalising the problem*” conversations needed to happen with young people to explain that these attacks did not happen in “*normal societies*”.

Like Confidential Telephone ads but with violence toned-down

Those responsible for the campaign hoped ETH would emulate the perceived impact of the Confidential Telephone campaign from the nineties. Whyte expressed her aspiration for a “*water cooler moment*”, where viewers might reflect on whether they had the “*civic courage*” to report PSAs to the PSNI. Singleton was the only interviewee to be unequivocal about the links between the two campaigns, pointing to a recent BBC documentary on the NIO ads as “*reinforcing the approach taken by the DOJ*” during ETH. However, they didn’t appear to have directly influenced the campaign brief, which had been drawn up in consultation with the advisory group. Moreover, the comparisons between the two campaigns appeared to lie in their aim to shock people about the human cost of PSAs and their qualified humanisation of their perpetrators. Perhaps reflecting the feedback from the Children’s Commissioner, Bowen argued that the ETH ads were comparatively less graphic than the McCann-Erickson ones:

“I suppose when you look back to the campaigns that did run back in the 90s and the confidential telephone lines. They were graphic. You know, they shocked, they were done to shock and we still wanted to shock people with our campaign but not with a graphic sense.”

The toning down of these images also reflected the increased awareness of the impact of the conflict upon the mental health of citizens. Indeed, there was a sense that it would

not be possible to produce a campaign as graphic as the one promoting the Confidential Telephone in the early nineties. Hughes-Jennett observed that was “*why a campaign in 2019, can't just be as hard hitting as it once was, because we're more aware of mental health issues because of the legacy of the past here*”.

Campaign has impressive online ‘reach’ but limitations recognized by stakeholders

The unanimous verdict of the interviewees was that ETH had been successful. Whyte went as far as to suggest that it should be a template for future DOJ PICs, especially in terms of its use of Snapchat to micro-target ‘social media savvy’ young people. An impressive number of social media ‘engagements’ had been collected by the DOJ, which suggested the campaign had reached over 80 percent of the population:

“In terms of reach it was millions of engagements. Millions of people seeing those points of view. I think 81% of the people saw at least three of them, which is really good” (Whyte)

Bowen confirmed that two thirds of the comments about ETH online were positive and supportive. However, there had been a need to remove some comments from the public Facebook page, which accused people of involvement in PSAs. Watters provided anecdotal evidence of how ETH had been well-received within working-class loyalist communities:

“I have heard more discussion about this and more positive affirmation of this social media campaign, or advertising campaign, than I've heard of any other [...] Our young

people are all across it. They're on Facebook and Twitter, all of that, and they talk about the campaign constantly”

Singleton confirmed that the DOJ had already collected some evidence of a ‘correlation’ between the campaign and attitudinal changes towards PSAs. This evidence base was also mentioned by Smyth, who expressed surprise at how effective it appeared to have been. It was not made available to the researchers due to confidentiality reasons, but it is reasonable to presume that it included the aforementioned analytics, and survey data showing a decline in the proportion of citizens condoning the use of PSAs during this period. Kee was perhaps the most cautious about the impact of ETH, confirming that few of the young people she wasn’t sure *“how much young people have engaged in the conversation”*.

While the majority of the interviewees were enthusiastic about ETH’s impact on attitudes towards PSAs, they also recognized its limitations. Bowen confirmed that this was only the first phase of the campaign; phase 2, a collection of interviews with surgeons, youth workers and victims of PSAs distributed online, was to have a specific call for citizens to contact the PSNI to report these attacks:

“what we’ve got to do is move them from that rejection. From the acceptance to rejection. Then phase one and then phase two is moving them from the rejection to actually doing something about it.”

Hughes-Jennett and Smyth concurred that ETH was the first step in a long road towards weakening the grip of the paramilitaries on these communities, the latter arguing that

there needed to be more “consistent messaging from the state” to challenge the permissive attitude towards PSAs. Kee argued that such attitudinal changes were only possible if those sanctioning these attacks were arrested. Others framed PSAs as a societal problem, which could only be addressed through the implementation of the recommendations of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. Watters highlighted the failure to build capacity within loyalist and republican working-class communities as one of the reasons why people in these areas still relied on ‘informal justice mechanisms’. She also argued that restorative justice initiatives had the potential to change the behavior of those who condoned and participated in these attacks. Overall, the consensus was that ETH had been effective at raising awareness of PSAs; however behavioral change required a long-term multi-stakeholder approach.

Discussion

ETH provided further evidence of how social media can increase the reach of PICs. Our interviewees were enthusiastic about the ‘virality’ of the POV films, with impressive analytics showing how many people had viewed and commented on this content online. Snapchat in particular was considered an effective vehicle for delivering this content to young people in working-class loyalist and republican districts. Such was its perceived success, the DOJ suggested it was an exemplar for future public communication campaigns. However, this was not a purely digital campaign. Many of the characteristics of effective PICs were present, including the use of multiple media channels and the delivery of a clear, understandable message. Like the Confidential Telephone advertisements, visuals were designed to shock citizens out of their collective ‘shrug’ at PSAs. This is perhaps where the comparison between the two

finished; ETH was the first PIC in Northern Ireland to draw so heavily on the input of key stakeholders such as youth workers, academics and restorative justice organizations. The study found that the campaign reference group played a key role in toning down graphic images due to be displayed in public spaces, and focus group feedback had resulted in the removal of the CrimeStoppers number from these advertisements. This helped shape a campaign, to paraphrase one of the interviewees, that didn't feel as if it had been designed by middle-class professionals and imposed on working-class communities.

The DOJ attributed the decline in the number of citizens condoning PSAs to the campaign. Data that was not available to the researchers was held up as evidence that it was influencing young people living in those working-class loyalist and republican districts where PSAs remain endemic. However, like the Confidential Telephone ads, ETH was unlikely to address the causes of the perceived illegitimacy of the PSNI in those neighbourhoods most affected by PSAs. Our interviewees confirmed that transforming attitudes towards paramilitaries depended as much on the promotion of alternatives, like restorative justice, as it did showing the consequences of these attacks. This was a long-term project that would ultimately need to address the causes of public dissatisfaction and distrust of the PSNI in order to loosen the grip of the paramilitaries in these areas. Yet, congruent with previous PICs, raising awareness of PSAs was only a middle-range goal for ETH. It was anticipated that the next phase would build on this by moving target audiences towards rejecting these attacks and addressing their 'policing needs' through the PSNI rather than paramilitaries.

This study contributes to the literature on PICs in two main ways. First, it suggests that public communication campaigns about politically contentious issues are unlikely to reverse long-held partisan attitudes and beliefs, unless they are accompanied by other policy interventions over a lengthy period. It is no coincidence that many of the most effective PICs relate to public health concerns, which do not polarize audiences to the same degree as policing. Advertising campaigns are an insufficient response to the historic injustices experienced by certain communities that undermine their trust in policing and make them more likely to look to paramilitaries for ‘swift’ justice. Second, measuring the ‘effectiveness’ of PICs on social media requires much more than counting ‘engagements’ on platforms such as Facebook. As acknowledged here, focus groups and surveys arguably remain the most important feedback mechanisms for PICs in the era of digital media due to the granularity of the data they generate. While social media platforms may provide impressive statistics, longitudinal studies are essential in order to accurately capture public knowledge of salient issues before, during and after exposure to PICs. Nevertheless, public communication campaigns appear best suited towards raising public awareness rather than directly changing behaviors in key policy areas.

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ⁱ The advert can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5PuYLHFtWI> (accessed 15 June 2020).

ⁱⁱ See here:

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/newnigov/Executive%20Action%20Plan%20-%20Tackling%20Paramilitary%20Activity.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2019).

ⁱⁱⁱ The ads can be viewed here: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/end-harm> (accessed 23 June 2020)

^{iv} The ads aired during peak viewing hours. For more, see:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-45881781> (accessed 22 June 2020)

^v The radio ads can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/ending-the-harm-campaign/sets/ending-the-harm-1> (accessed 22 June 2020).