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Abstract

Cyber enthusiasts as far back as Rheingold (1994) have suggested that cyberspatial technologies such as the Internet have the potential to transform space-time relations and create new social spaces, thus ameliorating social conflict in these contested areas. However, a more skeptical view of cyberspatial communication is provided by Hampton (2004), who argues that online interactions cannot be artifically separated from their offline contexts. This article will analyse whether these technologies are changing the nature of territorial disputes and patterns of social interaction between Protestant and Catholic interface communities in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Interviews were conducted with nine community workers to investigate this issue. Focusing on the potential of social media as tools to facilitate inter-group contact, the paper argues that online interactions alone do not appear at present to have the potential to build the mutual understanding and trust that facilitate positive interface relationships, and indeed community workers fear they may exacerbate community tensions.

New media technologies and the reconfiguration of socio-spatial relations.

Much of the early literature on the relationship between online interactions and offline contexts suggested that cyberspatial technologies such as the Internet had the potential to transform both space-time relations and the nature of territorial boundaries. The Internet was said to liberate people from their offline contexts, with traditional concepts of political geography such as territoriality less relevant in what was a 'profoundly antispatial' cyberspace (Mitchell, 1995). The theme of deterritorialisation was also present in the work of authors who suggested that the growth of online communities meant that the concept of community was no longer limited to groups of people who were based in the same geographical location (Wellman, 2001). More recent work has focussed on the pervasiveness of information technology in everyday life and the potential use of software to both create space and reconfigure socio-spatial relations (Dodge and Kitchin, 2005). Cyber enthusiasts such as Dahlgren (2005) have also argued

that new media technologies have the potential to facilitate public debate in communicative spaces that are not present in offline contexts, opening up the possibility that in situations of community conflict, where neutral space may be difficult to access, online spaces may provide a viable alternative for improving community relations.

However, a more skeptical interpretation of the use of cyberspatial technologies and their impact on the concept of territoriality has also emerged. Kitchin (1998) argues that online spaces 'exist in a symbiotic relationship with real space' (403). Inequalities in terms of access to new media technologies are said to show how cyberspaces remain dependent upon spatial fixity (Zook and Graham, 2007). Recent empirical work has tended to suggest that online and offline relationships have become inextricably intertwined, with sites such as Facebook primarily used to sustain pre-existing social relationships rather than to befriend strangers (Ellison et al, 2006).

This article adds to this debate by focusing on the potential role of social media to create new social spaces for inter-group contact in contested urban interface areas in Belfast. An interface area is defined here as a "conjunction or intersection of two or more territories or social spaces which are dominated, contested, claimed by some or all members of the differing ethno-national groups" (Jarman, 2004: 8). These areas, often demarcated by 'peace walls', are disputed by Loyalist communities, the mainly Protestant districts from which Loyalist paramilitaries drew support for their use of political violence to preserve the union with Britain, and their Republican counterparts, the predominantly Catholic neighbourhoods from which Republican paramilitaries drew support for their use of political violence in support of reunification with the rest of Ireland. City centre regeneration, evidence of the so-called 'peace dividend,' has not provided a panacea for the antagonism that exists between these communities. Rather, segregation has persisted in Belfast as it has in other contested cities such as Beirut and Jerusalem, due to the politicization of ethnic identity, fear of outsider groups, and the 'silence' about the underlying causes of ethno-national conflict, such as contested national sovereignty and the struggle for cultural dominance (Morrissey and Gaffikin, 2006; Silver, 2010).

The paper builds on the work by O'Dochartaigh (2007), which suggested that new communication technologies were used by young people from rival interface communities to 'extend territoriality as a strategy for exercising power' (489). Recent media reports have suggested that online interactions between rival interface communities continue to undermine efforts to foster better inter-community relationships, as demonstrated by the use of social networking sites to organise street riots in Derry/Londonderry (April 2008) and the posting of videos showing rioting at the Ardoyne shops in North Belfast (July 2009). The article explores the potential use of Web 2.0 by community groups and local residents to foster better inter-group relationships in disputed territories, and maps this case study onto geographical perspectives on cyberspace. It does so by reviewing theoretical perspectives on segregation in Northern Ireland, analysing the role of new media technologies in the processes of conflict transformation in and around sectarian interfaces, and presenting the findings from a series of interviews with community workers.

Residential segregation in Belfast

Residential segregation has persisted in Belfast since the 1950s, at least in part due to the inability of policymakers to foster support for a common civic identity to which members of the unionist/loyalist and republican/nationalist communities could subscribe (Neill, 2004). Most of Northern Ireland's peace walls are located in urban working class districts in North and West Belfast, where Protestant and Catholic populations are highly interspersed (O'Halloran et al: 2004). According to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (2010), these two constituencies were amongst the most deprived in Northern Ireland, with the Falls and the Shankill districts in West Belfast the worst affected.[i] Sectarian crime has also remained relatively high in these areas over the past decade. In the year 2010/11, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) reported that there had been 57 'offences recorded with a sectarian motivation' in the Upper Ardoyne/Ballysillan ward in North Belfast, with only the Cityside ward in

Derry/Londonderry having recorded more sectarian crimes during this period (NINIS, 2011).

Urban interface areas in Belfast also endured disproportionate levels of political violence during the conflict with approximately one third of the victims of political violence between 1966 and 2001 killed within 250 metres of an interface, (Shirlow, 2003:81). Hence, the temporary security barriers built to separate Protestant and Catholic communities have become permanent landmarks through which territory is demarcated in disputed interface areas. A study of the Ardoyne/Glenbryn interface in North Belfast by Shirlow (2003) suggested that the peace walls also appointed the opposing community as a 'menacing spatial formation,' with many participants citing the fear of attack as the primary reason for their low level of interaction with members of the 'other' community (p.85). While it might be expected that segregation would sharpen in response to increasing violence and then decline during periods of relative tranquility, Boal (1996) argues that higher levels of segregation have been seen in urban interface areas after each violent outburst, providing a platform for the next phase of segregation to be initiated (152). The reduction in sectarian violence in many of these areas over the past decade does not appear to have reversed this 'segregation ratchet,' as demonstrated by the 88 peace walls that continue to separate Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods across Belfast (CRC, 2009).

One explanation for the persistence of spatial segregation in Belfast is that rival interface communities remain engaged in a form of ethnic poker, whereby both sides retain zero-sum perceptions of space and politics and 'unrealistically up the ante' against the other ((Neill, 2004: 205). This ethnic poker has been left both unchallenged and unresolved by the processes of conflict transformation. Although the violent conflict may have ended, the competition over public sector housing, education, and the delivery of services persists (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Sectarian divisions appeared to be highlighted, and perhaps even encouraged, through the single identity community development projects that emerged from the Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement).

The consociational framework of the Agreement further entrenched this competition through its emphasis on 'parity of esteem' between the two ethno-sectarian blocs, rather than the rights of those individuals who wished to move beyond ethno-sectarianism (Aughey, 2007). Differences would be managed through elite cooperation within institutions that included representatives from each segment. Critics argued that this focus on group equality made it even more difficult to heal sectarian divisions and reinforced zero-sum perceptions of space and politics held by members of rival interface communities (Dixon, 2004; Wilford and Wilson, 2003).

Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) suggest that segregation also continues to exist in Belfast because of the embedded logic of intercommunity separation and the operationalisation of the differences between rival communities by political representatives (79). Efforts to foster a common civic identity are undermined by these actors who promote discourses of 'imagined hurts' in order to promote unity of purpose amongst their respective constituents (Murtagh et al, 2008). The community situated on the other side of the peace wall is inevitably blamed for the inter-community violence and socio-economic deprivation that blight each urban interface area. This activation of memory and victimhood is said to have contributed towards the feelings of alienation and powerlessness felt by members of rival interface communities, which in turn make it even more difficult to cultivate better community relations in these areas (Lewis et al, 2008).

The necessity to oppose the 'other' community has long been considered an integral part of social identity formation in both communities (Byrne 2001). Social Identity Theory (SIT) is often used to investigate cross-community relations in Northern Ireland. According to SIT, identity is shaped by membershp of social groups and categories such as class, gender, nationality and race. Membership of these social groups encourages stereotyical perceptions of both the individual's own group and out-groups, with the latter compared less favourably to the former (Tajfel, 1974). Despite potential cross cutting cleavages of these groups along the lines of issues like language and class, conflicting national aspirations have undermined efforts to reduce negative stereotyping of outgroups in both communities. Although a recent study suggested that the social identities adopted

by the two communities in Northern Ireland may be more permeable now than at any time during the Northern Irish conflict (Muldoon et al, 2008), there is no evidence to suggest that this mitigates negative stereotyping of out-group members in interface communities.

This negative stereotyping is particularly evident in the spatial imaginations of people who live in close proximity to the peace walls. Both sides frequently accuse each other of ethnic cleansing. Protestants perceive that many of 'their' areas are turning 'green,' (a colour associated with Republicanism) as a young Catholic community displaces the declining Protestant community (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Accusations of ethnic cleansing are also levelled at Protestant communities. This perception is probably influenced by the past experiences of many Catholic residents in interface areas, many of whom have vivid memories of being driven out of their homes due to the violence of their Protestant neighbours in the late 1960s (O'Connor, 1993). Yet, many of these claims of ethnic cleansing are unverified and subject to much debate by rival interface communities. Take for example the departure of the few remaining Protestant residents from the Torrens estate in North Belfast in 2005. While the residents claimed they had been forced to leave due to Republican intimidation, Sinn Fein councillor Eoin O'Broin claimed that their exit had been negotiated and that much of the violence in the area was perpetrated by Loyalist paramilitaries against Catholic residents (McKittrick, 2004). Although it may be difficult to establish the veracity of these competing narratives, what is clear is that incidents such as these reflect the discourses of fear that perpetuate ethno-sectarian divisions and militate against positive inter-community contact in contested areas such as North Belfast.

The Contact Hypothesis and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland.

Bollen (2006) suggests that community relations in interface areas will only improve through negotiations in the street rather than the "well-publicised handshakes of national political elites" (67). This was acknowledged in 'A Shared Future,' the Northern Ireland Executive's strategy to address segregation (CRU, 2005). With its emphasis on inter-community contact as a pre-requisite for conflict transformation in interface areas, it was

arguably influenced by the Contact Hypothesis. This concept outlined first by Allport (1954) and updated more recently by authors such as Hewstone et al (2006) suggests that increased inter-group contact may lead to less negative stereotyping within social groups. A synthesis of this literature suggests that there are at least five conditions that may need to be met for sustained bias reduction including the existence of cross-group friendships and whether the individuals involved are working towards common goals (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

There are a number of factors that might militate against the Contact Hypothesis including inter-group anxiety and the need to find an appropriate venue for these interactions (Forbes, 2004). Some scholars claim that increased intergroup contact in multi-ethnic societies is more likely to lead to conflict rather than improve inter-community relations. Putnam (2007) suggests that diversity within modern polities is likely to encourage people to 'hunker down' and withdraw from society, with increased intergroup contact unlikely to modify prejudices against outgroups. However, this critique of the Contact Hypothesis has been challenged by recent studies in Northern Ireland that suggests that positive intergroup contact reduce prejudices against outgroup members and that 'hunkering down' is only a temporary response to threats such as sectarian violence (Hughes et al, 2011). While the conditions for sustained prejudice reduction first outlined by Allport may not all be present, positive intergroup contact in non-violent contexts such as integrated schools appear to have the potential to foster better community relations (Paolini et al, 2004).

Recent developments suggest that interface residents themselves are cognisant of the importance of inter-group contact in promoting better community relations in interface areas. The success of mobile phone networks demonstrated how increased communication flows between rival interface groups could help moderate tensions across peace walls. The Community Development Centre (CDC), a non-governmental organisation set up to promote inter-community cooperation in North Belfast, piloted one such scheme in the summer of 1997 to try and reduce the inter-communal tensions generated by the contentious 'Tour of the North' Orange Order parade passing through the predominantly Catholic Ardoyne district.[ii] The phones enabled community

representatives , including a number of former prisoners, to inform their counterparts about any potential flashpoints where crowds had gathered on either side of the peace wall to throw missiles at each other. Buoyed by the success of the pilot, similar schemes were set up in 25 interface areas across Belfast between 1997 and 2000 (Jarman, 2005). These networks highlight the important role played by former Loyalist and Republican prisoners in the processes of conflict transformation in interface areas. Former prisoners have been working together in mediation networks such as the North Belfast Interface Network to promote positive cross-community interactions and discourage sectarian violence near the peace walls. Shirlow and McEvoy (2008) suggest that this work demonstrates a 'political generosity' that is often lacking in political elites who exploit intercommunity differences for electoral gain (p.144).

Nevertheless, concerns remain over the availability of safe and secure spaces for inter-group contact and this has been a recurring theme in much of the research conducted in interface areas over the past decade. Although the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council has used evidence from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys published since 1995 to lobby for mixed religion neighbourhoods, interface residents continue to express concerns for their personal safety should the peace walls come down and do not think secure shared spaces exist at present. This has been reported by both adults and young people who live in close proximity to sectarian interfaces (Lewis et al, 2008). The Whitewell Youth Mediation Project reported that young people from both communities wanted to 'create and maintain social connections but felt they had no safe place in which they could interact' (Cownie 2008: 55). It would be fair to say that key stakeholders such as local community activists see the creation of a secure shared space for inter-group contact as a necessary first step towards the amelioration of community relations in interface areas.

New Media and the Contact Hypothesis

The potential use of online spaces to facilitate intergroup contact has been subject to much debate in recent years. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is said to have the potential to liberate people from their offline identities through the strategic self-

presentation that is possible online (Walther, 2007). The hyperpersonal model went as far as to suggest that the Internet has the potential to reduce the anxiety associated with contact with members of outgroups, with interpersonal cues appearing to overcome group norms and attitudes (Wang et al, 2009). There is already some evidence to suggest that new media technologies are being used to counter negative stereotypes of outgroups in multicultural societies. Mamadouh (2003) suggests that websites offer a platform for communication exchanges between specific groups and anyone who wishes to interact with them. Her study found that Dutch-Morroccan opinion makers used their websites in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks to challenge extremist views held by members of their own community and anti-Muslim groups. There was an inherent potential for these sites to promote bridge building between Muslims and non-Muslims who visited these websites and engaged in these debates. Mamadouh suggests that these sites may also help shape public perception of the Dutch-Moroccan community through the reporting of these discussions in the media.

However, a more pessimistic view of these online interactions is articulated through the literature on the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effect (SIDE). This model suggests that the relatively anonymity of CMC may in fact make some Internet users more highly sensitized to the social cues that appear in virtual communities (Postmes and Baym, 2005). This may have the effect of reducing individuality and reinforcing group norms, particularly amongst young people. For example, Cho and Lee (2008) found that students in both Singapore and the United States tended to select information sources from within their own social networks rather than from other cultural groups online. Individuals were only likely to look beyond the websites of members of their own social networks if they needed to obtain information immediately. However, the SIDE model tends to provide little support for the notion that CMC facilitates identity reconstruction and suggests that differences between ingroups and outgroups are likely to persist in online spaces.

What is clear from both these models is that online contact is unlikely to be a panacea for the negative stereotyping of the 'other' community that persists in areas such as North

Belfast. The development of cross-group friendships in interface areas would still appear to rest upon face-to-face contact emerging from online interactions. Also, there must be a will amongst the participants for positive intergroup relations to emerge from their interactions both online and offline. Therefore, a more useful approach might be to conceptualise online contact as the first stage in a process that leads to richer contact capable of reducing prejudices against members of rival communities. Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006) suggest that the Internet has the potential to facilitate a gradual model of interaction between rival groups in divided societies. A contact organizer would oversee this process starting with text-only interaction, moving onto videoconferencing, and culminating in face-to-face interaction between members of the different social groups.

Recent ICT developments, collectively dubbed Web 2.0, have aroused renewed interest in this cyberoptimist conception of the Internet in light of their emphasis on user-generated content. Peace on Facebook, a joint project between Facebook and Stanford University, has been designed to promote the dialogic potential of social networking websites, the most visible elements of Web 2.0. This project uses Facebook to facilitate communication between people who are divided by race, religion, and even political affiliation. It claims that it has already facilitated dialogue between rival ethnic groups who have limited interaction with one another in the real world (Peace on Facebook, 2010). Although it is not possible to verify the nature of these interactions, the existence of this project suggests the perception that CMC may have a role to play in encouraging positive inter-group contact in divided societies. This paper will examine the potential use of these sites by local residents to transform inter-ethnic relations in urban interface areas.

New media and community relations in Northern Ireland.

The infrastructure for 'wired' cross-group relations would appear to be almost in place in Northern Ireland. Internet penetration has reached 68 percent, comparable with the UK average of 70 percent and slightly higher than the 65.8 percent recorded in the Republic of Ireland (OfCom, 2009). Social networking is an increasingly popular online activity

amongst both communities, with one in four households claiming to use at least one social networking site. OfCom also found that 36 percent of adult respondents from Belfast, where the majority of 'peace walls' are located, used sites such as Facebook and Youtube on a regular basis. However, evidence is emerging that young people from rival interface communities are using social media to organise inter-communal violence. A recent report from the Centre for Young Men's Studies (2009) suggested that young men aged between 13 and 16 were using Bebo and MSN Messenger to threaten members of the 'other community' and to organise fighting in interface areas.

Jarman and O'Halloran (2001) suggest that the clashes between young people from rival interface communities are recreational as they 'occur out of boredom and bravado rather than having an overtly political basis' (p.3). While most of these incidents could be categorised as 'youth thrill seeking behaviour' given that the participants are said to be young men aged between 10 and 17 years old (Jarman and O'Halloran, 2001; Goldie and Ruddy, 2010), there has also been evidence that paramilitary organisations have helped organise recent street riots in North Belfast (Belfast Telegraph, 2010). Leonard (2010) argues that these street riots are the product of the wider prevailing situation' and illustrate the ethno-sectarian divisions synonymous with interface areas (p.48). Her study of Catholic and Protestant teenagers from North Belfast suggested that territorial strategies established during the conflict continued to influence how young people defined both in-group and out-group identities. What is clear from the literature is that these 'youth thrill-seeking behaviours' continue to hinder efforts by key stakeholders such as community groups and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to foster better community relations in interface areas (Goldie and Ruddy, 2010).

There have also been a number of incidents of so-called 'recreational rioting' between rival groups that have been organised on social networking websites. The PSNI reported in April 2008 that a riot involving an estimated 100 youths in the Rosemount area of Derry/Londonderry had been organised on Bebo. Videos have also appeared on Youtube showing young people in the Ardoyne district of North Belfast throwing missiles at the PSNI during disturbances that surrounded a controversial Orange Order march in the area in July 2009 (Belfast Telegraph 2009). A preliminary analysis of these videos showed

that much of the footage had in fact been taken from the television coverage of the event provided by Sky News. Only one of these videos appeared to have been shot by a member of the local community, from a bedroom window in a house situated across the road from where the police were coming under attack. These events illustrate how online communication tools have been used to facilitate negative intergroup contact rather than the amelioration of community relations.

This article explores the perspectives of community workers on the potential use of new media to reconfigure socio-spatial relations in contested interface areas in Belfast. In this way it will analyse how the use of ICTs to organise and justify street riots relates to the long-held territorial claims of Loyalist and Republican communities situated in close proximity to peace walls. Recent studies have suggested that new media technologies are used by some interface residents to project their respective spatial imaginations in cyberspace, thus reinforcing negative stereotypes of out-groups in contested areas. O'Dochartaigh (2007) found that three websites associated with the Whitewell/White City interface in North Belfast provided an arena in which Loyalist and Nationalist youths used sectarian language to reproduce the segregated spaces of interface communities in cyberspace. Reilly (2011) also found that the prospects for better community relations in Northern Ireland were not enhanced via the websites of rival residents' groups. Both Loyalist and Republican residents' groups used their websites to strengthen in-group identities, which were based around a perception of victimhood caused by the actions of the 'other' community. This study will build upon this work by focusing on community worker perspectives on the potential use of new media to create new social spaces for intergroup contact. They were chosen for this study due to their frequent interactions with local residents and their role in promoting positive inter-community relationships in these areas (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). It was anticipated that this regular contact with local people would allow them to comment on the nature of cross-community interactions in online spaces and their potential to foster cross-group friendships.

Research questions

From the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed, three research questions relating to the dialogic potential of the Internet emerged:

1) Do community workers perceive that new media technologies can be utilised by local residents to reconfigure socio-spatial relations in contested interface areas in Belfast?
2) How do the community workers' conceptualisations of these online interactions map onto the gradual model of intergroup contact?
3) To what extent do these community workers believe that the use of social media by young people to organise interface violence relates to the territorial strategies of rival groups in these areas?

A qualitative approach was adopted for this pilot study, allowing for flexibility and openness to unexpected findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine community workers between April and May 2009 to investigate these three research questions.

Participants were contacted through the Belfast Interface Project, an umbrella non-governmental organization incorporating 22 community groups whose purpose is to promote positive intercommunity relationships in contested interface areas across Belfast. A total of 13 community groups from the 22 initial contacts did not respond to the invitation to participate in the project. Characteristics of those groups who did and did not respond were examined and no systematic differences were found in terms of community identification, size and their geographical location within Belfast. Face-to-face interviews were held with seven of the participants in their respective offices with a further two interviews conducted via telephone. All of the participants were male and aged from mid-twenties to mid-forties with at a minimum of two years experience working in interface areas across Belfast. It was agreed that the identity of each interviewee would not be revealed in the study, thus all participants are identified with reference to the area of Belfast in which they work.

The interview schedule was subjected to an internal reliability check prior to issue. A thematic approach was adopted to analyse the data after transcription and themes were identified and discussed until agreement was reached with a colleague, who had extensive experience in qualitative data analysis. Quotations are provided here to illustrate these themes.

Results

Community workers do not believe that inter-group contact in online spaces can improve community relations in interface areas.

There appeared to be no support amongst the interviewees for the use of online spaces to promote positive intergroup contact in interface areas. The community workers expressed doubts about the reliability of text-only interactions between members of rival interface communities, as the recipient of the message might misinterpret its tone or content. One interviewee went as far as to suggest that email was the least desirable method of communication for inter-group contact in interface areas as 'one word in Belfast can have two very different meanings.' The potential manipulation of online content was cited as one reason why community activists were not keen for such a space to be created:

I would say that is too easy for sites to be hacked, manipulated, it might impact upon community relations. You cannot interpret [the] meaning of [the] message. One word in Belfast could be taken [the] wrong way.

(North Belfast community worker 1)

One community worker suggested that the hacking of two websites maintained by residents' groups in North Belfast had served to highlight the risks associated computer-mediated communication between rival interface communities.

The consensus amongst the community workers was that only face-to-face meetings between members of rival interface communities could lead to better community relations in contested areas of Belfast. Three participants confirmed that this was also considered best practice for community groups working in interface areas. Guidelines provided by the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium advised community workers to clarify telephone conversations and email exchanges with other activists via face-to-face meetings, to be held no more than a day after the original interaction. While one East Belfast community worker acknowledged that their group had used email to share details of cross-community projects with their counterparts situated at the other side of the peace wall, it was still considered a supplementary rather than primary communication tool:

Most of our stuff is face-to-face we talk about hard issues. It [email] is a tool for us though. [It is] Not [the] driving force behind what we are doing.

(East Belfast community worker 2)

All of the interviewees confirmed that there were now regular meetings between community workers from rival Loyalist and Republican interface communities, courtesy of their involvement in mediation networks such as the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium. Shared projects such as the CDC mobile phone network were said to have played an instrumental role in routinising inter-group contact in these areas over the past five years. Representatives from rival interface communities were said to be communicating with each other on a regular basis:

The level of dialogue across interfaces has seen a dramatic increase over the past five years. Almost day to day in some cases.

(West Belfast community worker 1)

Community leaders now have the phones. Loyalists talk to Republicans and vice versa. I *don't think the net can duplicate this. Face*-to-Face is preferable.

(North Belfast community worker 2)

While by the nature of their work community activists might be expected to favour face-to-face meetings in shared spaces to build relationships between interface groups, this was a consistent and persuasive theme throughout all of the interviews and was congruent with literature in the field (Leonard, 2010).

Community workers do not believe that the use of social media by young people to organise street riots is a manifestation of the conflict.

All of the interviewees confirmed that social media were more likely to facilitate negative intergroup contact rather than improve community relations, as demonstrated by their use to organise 'recreational rioting' in interface areas. Although the community workers found the scale of this activity hard to estimate, the consensus was that these incidents were the work of a 'small but vocal' minority. One community worker felt that the use of social media to organise street riots in interface areas had received extensive media coverage due to the history of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. This interviewee suggested that young people in most multicultural societies were likely to use new media technologies to engage in some form of anti-social behaviour.

Two community workers from rival interface communities in East Belfast confirmed that both social media and text messaging were used by young people to organise violent confrontations in contested areas:

They're doing this [talking on Bebo] to sorta [sic] say, *'right we'll meet at 7 o'clock at* Bryson Street*', that's the interface in Newtownards Road and Short Strand. […] And the next thing they're having a bit of a riot.*

(East Belfast community worker 1)

Facebook and Bebo are used prior to the meet; the arrangements are finalised at the last minute via text message.

(East Belfast community worker 2)

This violence was not always directed towards members of rival interface communities. One interviewee stated that a teenage boy had been attacked by members of his own community after arranging to meet a teenage girl from a rival interface community on Bebo. The assailants had found out about the meeting on his social network site and attacked the teenager at the location that he had agreed to meet the girl from the 'other' community:

[You] Get wee girls who get to know wee lads through Social Networking, [and] arrange to meet [the] other side,[then] people from their own community find out and young girls target guys for attack.

(North Belfast community worker 1)

Another community worker also claimed that young people were creating fake Bebo profiles in order to lure members of rival interface communities to shared spaces where they could be attacked. This was characterised by interviewees as anti-social behaviour rather than the strategic use of violence to project the territorial claims of Loyalist and Republican communities in contested areas such as North Belfast.

The consensus amongst the community workers was that this violence was different in character to the sectarian violence that had occurred in interface areas during the Northern Irish conflict. Four of the community workers referred to a 'new brand of sectarianism' that was being cultivated by young people from interface areas on social networking sites such as Bebo. Young people were said to be using language and symbols associated with the Troubles on their profiles in order to justify violent confrontations with their counterparts on the other side of the peace wall:

Young people tend to adopt images of Troubles to prove themselves, even though they have had no direct experience of the Troubles.

(West Belfast community worker 1)

What was clear from the study was that the community workers believed that young

people were using sectarian language to justify what they saw as 'a social activity.' The interviewees suggested that recreational rioters were naïve in their use of sectarian language to frame their violent confrontations with youths from rival interface communities and the PSNI:

Whether they understand what they are doing or not, or [the] politics of it, is another *thing. I don't think they do.*

(East Belfast community worker 1)

There was implicit support amongst the community workers for SIDE model, with young people in interface areas said to use social media to sustain existing friendships rather than to talk to strangers. One interviewee reported that so-called 'recreational rioting' in their area had been organised in the shared spaces provided by a local integrated school. The fact that many of the recreational rioters were friends from the same school was cited as evidence that this form of violence was not politically motivated. However, two of the interviewees felt that the use of social media to mobilise young people against a real and sometimes imagined 'enemy' had to be viewed as politically motivated in the context of residential segregation in areas such as North Belfast.

Community workers base their conceptualisations of these cyberspatial interactions on hearsay.

Participants were skeptical about the potential of cyberspatial technologies to reconfigure socio-spatial relations in interface areas. The interviewees appeared wary of social networking sites and perceived that their use by young people undermined cross-community projects in these areas:

[Social media] defeat a lot of [sic] purpose of the work that we do.

(North Belfast community worker 1)

However, much of the evidence provided by the interviewees about the use of social media to organise street riots was based on rumour and what young people in their neighbourhoods had told them:

[I have] heard kids talking. [....] about what they are doing. [sic] very much into symbolism, 'I sent him IRA messages' and all this. [sic].sure it happens in [sic] Loyalist/Unionist side as well.

(East Belfast community worker 1)

A recurring theme in the interviews was that community workers did not feel comfortable using new media technologies, as demonstrated by the fact that only one of the interviewees maintained a Facebook profile. Several community workers suggested that they felt they were 'too old' to maintain a social networking profile and that they lacked the technical skills required to use new media technologies effectively. One interviewee revealed that he monitored social media indirectly through his teenage daughter who used these sites regularly:

I don't use these websites. I have never been keen on Facebook or Bebo. I am perceived as something of a backwoodsman.

(East Belfast community worker 2)

My wee girl looks at stuff [social media] for me, lets me know about it.

(North Belfast community worker 1)

It was suggested that youth workers affiliated to local churches had greater awareness of how young people from rival interface communities used social media sites, as they were more familiar with these technologies than many of the community workers who worked in these areas.

Two of the interviewees raised concerns over whether community workers should monitor the social networking practices of young people from their areas. One community worker had recently received training from the Child Exploitation and Onlne Protection Centre (CEOP) on how to safeguard children from 'online sex predators.' This

interviewee confirmed that this training 'had scared him so much' that he had cancelled his own Bebo membership and restricted the Internet use of his children. Another community worker reported that they always encouraged young people to make their social networking profiles private to prevent the disclosure of personal information to strangers on the Internet. However, it was acknowledged by all of the interviewees that community groups were powerless to prevent young people using social media to engage in anti-social behaviour elsewhere.

Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study suggest that, on the evidence available to date, community workers believe that socio-spatial relations in segregated urban areas in Belfast are more likely to be transformed through increased inter-group contact in offline contexts than in the virtual community networks of Web 2.0 as they currently stand. The interviewees were skeptical about the potential of social media to transform territorial boundaries in urban interface areas. There was a perception amongst the community workers that face-to-face communication between members of rival interface communities was preferable as the content and tone of online communications could be misinterpreted. The hacking of websites was also cited as a reason why CMC was not likely to reduce the risks associated with intergroup contact at both individual and community levels.

This skepticism about the potential use of online spaces to foster positive intergroup contact in interface areas was also attributed to the online interactions between young people from rival interface communities that culminated in 'recreational riots.' However, there was implicit support for the notion that there was a symbiotic relationship between online and offline relationships, as demonstrated by the suggestion that the teenagers who used social media to organise street riots were often friends with each other in offline contexts. Young people from rival interface communities were said to be naïve in their use of sectarian language and symbols of conflict to justify what was essentially anti-social behaviour. One interviewee pointed to the example of young people from an integrated college using social media to organise violence as evidence that this was not

related to long held territorial disputes in these areas. However, it would be premature to depoliticise this violence on the basis of this evidence, particularly given that community workers' knowledge about the use of social media by young people in relation to street riots appeared to be based on rumour and hearsay. It also seems implausible that young people who used sectarian language on their social networking profiles to justify interface violence would be completely unaware of the socio-spatial contexts in which they lived. To paraphrase Leonard, this form of anti-social behaviour 'does not occur in a political vacuum' (p.48).

This study illustrates the potential role of new media in the development of cross-group relationships, both good and bad. CMC may be used by students at integrated colleges to organise street riots in contested areas, but it also being used by community groups from both sides for more positive forms of intergroup contact. Despite their misgivings over online communication, community workers from both sides appear open to the use of cyberspatial technologies in these contexts provided it is not seen as a substitute for face-to-face contact. One interviewee noted that all email and telephone exchanges had to be followed by real-time meetings the next day to avoid any potential misinterpretation of these messages. The use of cyberspatial technologies does not appear to have reduced the importance of group salience nor has it ended the ethnic poker between rival interface communities. However, these tools do provide opportunities for cross-community interaction that are essential for the processes of conflict transformation in these areas. The attitudes of the interviewees suggest that the gradual contact model is unlikely to find much support amongst community workers, who remain the most obvious candidates to organise these contacts given their prominent role in cross-community projects and their leadership skills (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Without their support it is difficult to see how this process could develop in these areas. Further research involving a larger sample of community workers would be desirable in order to establish the prevalence of these views.

By the very nature of their work community workers might be expected to favour shared projects over the use of online spaces for inter-group contact in interface areas. An

alternative interpretation is that their views are indicative of the reluctance of Northern Irish adults to engage with one another in online spaces. In Northern Ireland adults appear to demonstrate a low level of trust in new media technologies and believe that there are inherent risks attached to the disclosure of personal information in the online sphere. The recent OfCom UK Adults' Media Literacy Audit (OfCom, 2010) showed that people in Northern Ireland are the most cautious in the United Kingdom when it comes to entering their personal details online. Therefore, Northern Irish adults may be more susceptible to the discourses of media panic that highlight perceived risks rather than benefits associated with the use of new media technologies. Further research should explore whether the reluctance of adults to post messages and personal information in the online sphere is yet another legacy of the conflict or whether there are other factors that contribute towards this phenomenon.

Further research is also needed into the motivations of young people who participate in these events and how they conceptualise this 'new brand of sectarianism.' The views of youth workers should also be included as per the suggestion from one of the interviewees. This would also allow for further exploration of Leonard's (2010) thesis that the term 'recreational rioting' misrepresents what is essentially a form of anti-social behaviour that has been politicised by virtue of its location in urban spaces contested by rival Catholic and Protestant communities. This work would also provide further insight and more direct evidence of the extent to which Web 2.0 may be said to transform the nature of territorial boundaries.

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[i] This is the official measure for spatial deprivation published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency in May 2010. The report can be accessed here:
http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/archive/Updateof2005Measures/NIMDM_2010_Report.pdf

[ii] The route of this annual Orange Order march passes the Ardoyne, a predominantly Catholic neighbourhood. There have been a number of street riots in this location both before and after the march over the past decade.