Social Media, Parades and Protests

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council into social media, parades and protests. The aim of the research was to explore how social media sites are being used in relation to both parades and protests and what impact this is having on communities.

This research involved four separate approaches to the area of interest. In the initial stages of project, a review of the literature in the area was carried out. Secondly, a series of one to one interviews were conducted with community workers, band members, members of the Loyal Orders, representatives of statutory agencies, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Thirdly, focus groups were conducted with bands from both rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland. Finally, Twitter activity relating to parades and protests were monitored between 11th and 14th July 2014.

This research found that social media is perceived as being a positive feature of communication in relation to parades and protests for a number of reasons:

- Social media sites were described as empowering individuals and groups to communicate their perspectives on issues, as well as ensuring these views were heard by a wider audience, effectively giving many "a voice";
- It was described as at times providing a semblance of a "safe space" or distance for individuals and groups to express their views on what may be viewed as emotive issues (such as parading and protests). This was described as creating opportunities to hear alternative views and positions on these issues that may have not been available in an "offline" context; and
- A key positive for those living in contested spaces such as interface areas, as well as the PSNI, was that the sites afford the opportunity to counteract counteract rumours and misinformation during controversial marches and protests on a large and far reaching scale thus countering potential negative repercussions at the community level;

The negative impact of social media was also detailed and included:

- The instantaneous nature of reactions it facilitates and how emotive these can be. The resulting reaction to such expressions of views were viewed as being potentially detrimental to inter-communal relations in certain areas;

- There was a recognition that social media is used to spread false information and rumours and this is resulting in an increase in both inter-communal tensions and fear within communities; and

- Social media was described as vilifying protestors and those engaging in parading practices in that it was viewed as distorting their narratives.

This research also engaged with a range of statutory agencies working with groups and individuals in relation to parades and protests. Key findings included:

- The majority of statutory agencies are actively avoiding engaging with social media in meaningful way. This was attributed to a perception that it has the potential to harm relationships between communities and the agencies themselves. Other agencies simply felt that their work meant that they could simply not be seen to engage with public discussions on particular protests or parades;

- Those who are using it are mindfully using it to enable them to act as a conduit between the various "levels", for example "grassroots" based groups and government; and

- There was a view that there needs to be substantial dedicated resourcing for social media to enable groups and agencies to use it effectively in their work. For the most part, this is currently lacking and as such many agencies feel their engagement with communities via social media is curtailed as a result.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) also engaged with this research and emphasised the following areas in relation to social media, parades and protests:

- Social media has become a central feature of the community engagement strategy of the PSNI in that it facilitates communication between the service and communities who have been traditionally disengaged from policing in Northern Ireland;

- It is also increasing the transparency of the policing of both parades and protests in Northern Ireland in that and requires the PSNI to be answerable on accessible platforms such as Facebook and Twitter;
- While PSNI representatives acknowledged that social media is often the source of misinformation and rumours in relation to parades and protests, it also affords them the opportunity to provide accurate information in these situations.

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of Twitter activity during the Twelfth:

- The Orange Order, and its supporters, highlighted the positive experiences of those who attended these parades through the innovative use of hashtags such as #twelthieselfie;

- The users that contributed to the Twelfth hashtags tended to be full of praise for the peaceful and non-violent conduct of the Orange Order. In particular, there was much support for its 'graduated response' to the Parade Commission's decision to ban the return leg of the Ligoniel Orange lodges from passing by the Ardoyne shops;

- Twitter provided users with an array of information sources courtesy of the citizen and professional journalists who were tweeting their perspectives on events as they unfolded. The latter were more influential in these information flows, primarily due to the high number of retweets for content produced by journalists from BBC NI and UTV;

- Citizens were quick to check the veracity of the reports emerging from the scene. There were also several examples of citizens using the site to refute rumours and expose those responsible for photoshopping images, as was seen with the Randalstown bonfire and the picture of a protester in Ardoyne;

- The relatively short lifespan of these rumours, not to mention the lack of media coverage they received, illustrated how effectively tweeters corrected misinformation during this period; and

- While acknowledging that social media has often been used to reinforce divisions between rival communities in Northern Ireland, the study suggested

Twitter facilitates modes of communication that have the potential to diffuse sectarian tensions around the marching season.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on our research findings outlined in this report:

- Social media had been harnessed by some individuals and groups in a manner to challenge what they perceived as the negative and inaccurate portrayals of protests and parades. This reveals the potential for social media to be harnessed as an empowering tool for communities, groups and individuals in how they are being represented;

- Social media was described as having the potential to be a powerful tool for education. This was also relevant to both parades and protests, and in particular the Loyal Orders who viewed as a mechanism to develop mutual understanding. However, this was described as being on *ad hoc* basis, and requires a more formalised approach in terms of training and awareness raising on the potential for social media for organisations, groups and individuals engaging in parades and protests; and

- Reflecting the findings of previous research, there is still a need for training on the impact of the immediacy of social media and how this can adversely affect inter-communal relations. The issue of rumours in relation to specific parades and protests are still impacting perceptions of these events. There is a need to provide groups and individuals with knowledge on the online mechanisms to counter false information and reduce the harmful impact of rumours.

Statutory agencies

- This research revealed that statutory agencies are all taking different approaches to social media, particularly in relation to parades and protests. While some agencies and groups are utilising social media as a mechanism to engage with communities, others are completely avoiding it. There is a need for a joint up approach to the use of social media in relation to parades and protests.

- The lack of resourcing for social media as a tool for engaging communities is currently limiting many of the organisations and agencies in how they are using it. While social media is not the only communication tool for these organisations and agencies, it is nonetheless an important aspect of ensuring that "linking" social capital is developed and maintained;

- The nature of the use of social media was also inconsistent across various agencies with some of them neglecting or avoiding social media altogether due to a concern about its use in terms of protecting organisations. There needs to be training for staff of these agencies to ensure that social media is used and employed in an effective manner;

- It is clear from this research that communities, groups and individuals want positive messages about work engaging with parades and protests to be disseminated through social media by statutory agencies and organisations. However, at present, it is viewed that these agencies are reluctant to do this and that this use of social media needs to be developed and applied.

Policing

- This research evidenced the centrality of social media to current community policing strategies. There are opportunities for this to be further developed and to be part of the wider policing approach throughout Northern Ireland;

- There is evidence that social media is currently being used by the police to counter harmful narratives about parades and protests. This approach could be actively promoted by the police and adopted by other sectors to ensure positive engagement with parades and protests;

- Social media is increasing the transparency of policing in relation to parades and protests. The dissemination of videos and images of policing in public order situations means that the police are more accountable in how they are policing these events. This is already being embraced by the PSNI, who have engaged with complaints over social media and should continue to be a key feature of their online strategy; and

- Social media is a key feature of community engagement particularly in relation to parades and protests, while also requiring significant resources. This

research evidences the importance of continuing this approach and ensuring that it is developed on despite budgetary restrictions.

Part 1. Social Media, Parades and Protests: An Introduction

Recent events in Northern Ireland have demonstrated the power of social media in relation to the nature of parades and protest in Northern Ireland. Protests in the wake of the decision by Belfast City Council in December 2012 to alter the protocol on the number of days the Union Flag flies at Belfast City Hall were often organised over social media sites. In addition to this, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were used to express views and to share eyewitness perspectives on both the protests and the violence witnessed in the most intense period of protest between December 2012 and January 2013. Much of the media attention focused on the integral role of Facebook in the organisation of what became referred to colloquially as "the flag protests". Facebook pages such as *Save Our Union Flag* functioned as spaces over which Loyalist flag protesters could not only share information on upcoming demonstrations but also discuss related issues such as allegations of police heavy-handedness in policing the protests, particularly in east Belfast.[1] Similarly, when sectarian remarks were made about the Catholic residents of Short Strand in the wake of the violence seen in east Belfast in January 2013, they were reported to Facebook and the page administrators were forced to remind users that offensive remarks would be deleted. A number of cases, including the enforced removal of two Facebook pages after the posting of threats against an unidentified Catholic man, led Justice Minister David Ford to call on the PSNI to gather information about those who posted "hate speech" or incited others to committing criminal offences.[2]

In the period since these protests, and particularly since July 2013, loyalist bands have been a central focus and key instigators of both parades and protests in relation to Ardoyne/Twaddell Avenue interface area of North Belfast. Loyalist protests against the Northern Ireland Parades Commission's decision to ban the return leg of an Orange Order parade from going past the Ardoyne shops in North Belfast lead to violent clashes with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in

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[1] "Facebook didn't start the flag riots"
22 February 2013. (http://leicesterexchanges.com/2013/02/22/facebook-didnt-start-the-flag-riots/)
[2] "Flag protests: Loyalty no excuse for violence, says police chief". BBC, 12 December 2012.
(http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20622185)

July 2013. A loyalist "peace camp" was setup in nearby Twaddell Avenue, with nightly parades held in protest at the decision. These ongoing protests have been heavily criticised for elevating sectarian tensions in this contested interface areas and for the estimated cost of £9 million for policing the operation over a nine month period.[3] Like the Union Flag related protests, they have been also been the focus of much debate and discussion on social media sites. Other recent events have also placed emphasis on the role of bands in protests in Northern Ireland and bands from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities have been described as having "gained a new prominence" as a direct result of a YouTube video of one band marching in circles outside a Catholic church in North Belfast that "went viral".[4] This incident involved the Shankill Road-based Young Conway Volunteers being filmed walking in circles, apparently playing prohibited music outside St Patrick's Catholic church in Donegall Street, Belfast.

Controversial parades and protests have also had an adverse impact upon community relations in rural contexts. The Tyrone Volunteers Day Parade in Castlederg on 11 August 2013, which commemorated Republican paramilitaries killed during the Troubles, faced much criticism from both unionist politicians and victims' groups.[5] The latter would organise a counter-demonstration to coincide with the parade passing through the centre of the Tyrone market town. While the parade passed off largely without incident, there was much debate in relation to both its legitimacy and the decision of the Northern Ireland Parades Commission to allow it to proceed (albeit with some restrictions and via a different route than planned by the organisers) on social media sites such as Twitter and blogs such as Slugger O'Toole.[6] There was also much discussion about the broader issues of victimhood and reconciliation in these online spaces. Despite this focus, little consideration has

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[3] "Loyalist Twaddell protest camp policing bill tops £9 million: 10-month operation in north Belfast", *Belfast Telegraph,* 19 May 2014.
(http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/loyalist-twaddell-protest-camp-policing-bill-tops-9-million-10month-operation-in-north-belfast-30286135.html)

[4] See: M. Hall. *Towards a Shared Future (5) Ulster's Marching bands*. (Belfast, NICRC: 2014), 3.

[5] "Northern Ireland parade to commemorate IRA men chills atmosphere in Castlederg". *The Guardian*, 2 August 2013.
(http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/blog/2013/aug/02/ira-men-northern-ireland-parade-castlederg).

[6] "Republican Castlederg parade: the insensitivity of the impotent". July 31 2013 (http://sluggerotoole.com/2013/07/31/republican-castlederg-parade-the-insensitivity-of-the-impotent/comment-page-1/)

been given to the impact of social media on debate, discussion and representation of parades and protests in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is necessary to assess how these online interactions both reflect and influence the nature of relations 'on the ground' in both rural and urban contexts.

Context

Statistics show that the number of parades held in Northern Ireland has nearly doubled over the past decade (from 2,120 in 2005 and 4,637 in 2013).[7] In 2011, it was estimated that there were approximately 700 active bands in the region, the vast majority of which identify as Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist.[8] Groups such as the Orange Order and the Ancient Order of Hibernians are amongst the most well-known of the institutions in the region which are involved in parades. Northern Ireland has been described as having a politically sensitive parading season, with most marches taking place between the months of March and September.[9] Casserly asserts that the parading tradition is generally perceived as "a manifestation of the communal divisions between Catholic and Protestant groups".[10] Indeed, many Loyalist bands were actively involved in the high-profile political demonstrations against the Anglo Irish Agreement in 1985, which brought them into conflict with nationalists and the state security forces.[11] Band members were active participants in the demonstrations that followed the dispute at Drumcree in 1996. Ramsay describes how "this sometimes led them into confrontation with nationalists and with state security forces and the Orange Order frequently blamed the bands for trouble at such events".[12] It is important not only to emphasise that parading culture/s encompass practices and networks which go beyond such negative representations, but also to unpack the perception of parading as *de facto* a contentious issue. Only a small proportion of these parades have proven to be controversial, with the then Chair of the Northern Ireland Parades Commission, Peter Osborne, stating that "just 225 of the total of 4,500 were deemed contentious or sensitive in 2012-2013". Contrary to media reports on parades that emphasise their polarising effects in the contested spaces of interface areas, these statistics suggest that the vast majority of these

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[7] P. Nolan. *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report 3*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council. (2014), 157.

[8] G. Ramsey, "Band Practice: Class, Taste and Identity in Ulster Loyalist Flute Bands. *Ethnomusicology Ireland* 1, (2011).

[9] R Casserly. "Blood, Thunder and Drums: Style and Changing Aesthetic in Ulster Protestant Bands". Yearbook for Traditional Music. Vol. 45. (2013), 143.

[10] R. Casserly. "Blood, Thunder and Drums: Style and Changing Aesthetic in Ulster Protestant Bands". *Yearbook for Traditional Music*. Vol. 45. (2013), 143.

[11] G. Ramsey, Band Practice: Class, Taste and Identity in Ulster Loyalist Flute Bands. *Ethnomusicology* (2011), 2.

demonstrations pass off without any incidents of inter-communal violence. Even so, it remains important for community leaders and policy-makers to consider new approaches towards the improvement of community relations in the context of seemingly controversial parades in contested areas such as North Belfast. Hence, this project examines the potential role of social media in generating positive interactions between communities in such areas during the marching season.

Social Media and the Flag Protests in Northern Ireland

The protests seen in the Twaddell/Ardoyne interface in north Belfast since July 2013 may be viewed as a continuation of the flag protests, which first occurred in December 2012 in the aftermath of Belfast City Council's decision to change the policy on the number of days the Union Flag flies at Belfast City Hall. Recent research characterised events associated with the flags dispute in the following ways:

- On a number of evenings there were co-ordinated street protests which often resulted in roads being blocked for a short period of time;
- Peaceful protests involving large sections of the community;
- The picketing of Alliance Party offices;
- Attacks made against property associated with the Alliance Party;
- Threats made against Alliance Party members;
- Saturday marches to Belfast City Hall and subsequent protest;
- Street disturbances and rioting between protestors and the PSNI;
- Severe criticisms of the policing of the protests from the nationalist community;
- A deterioration in the relationship between loyalists and the PSNI;
- Confusion around what constituted a peaceful and legal protests; and
- Injured police officers and significant numbers of arrests.[13]

It is interesting to note that this study made little reference to the role of social media in the flag dispute. However, statistics obtained on the number of online incidents reported to the police in the period between 2012 and 2013 suggest that social media played a fundamental role in the nature of communication during this period. Data released by the PSNI under the Freedom of Information Act showed that 2887 incidents involving either Facebook or Twitter were reported to the police in 2012.[14] In the first five and half months of 2013, there were 2,111 social media incidents

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[13] Intercomm and J. Byrne. *Flags and Protests: Exploring the views, perceptions and experiences of people directly and indirectly affected by the flag protests*. (Belfast:Intercomm, 2014), 3.

[14] Information accessed at http://www.brianjohnspencer.com/2887-social-media-offences-reported-to-psni-in- 2012/

reported to the PSNI, with 229 of these being reported during the peak of the flag protests in January and the first half of February. This increase in the number of online incidents being reported to the police may be one manifestation of the protests in relation to contentious parades and the flag dispute that were so prominent during this period. [15] However, it should be noted that no specific information is available on the type of abuse that was reported. Conceivably, these might include a range of offences including online fraud, cyber-stalking and the posting of offensive and abusive messages online. Recent research has suggested that social media not only provided people with information about the flag protests but also functioned as a space in which they could express their views on its rationale. [16] Furthermore, many participants expressed the view that the protests would not have gained nearly as much traction with protesters, had social media not existed.[17] This study will interrogate this finding further in order to explore the impact of social media more generally, upon the experiences of those directly involved in parades and related protests in Northern Ireland.

Social media has been identified as a key tool for the organisation and promotion of mass demonstrations in a variety of democratic and non-democratic countries since January 2011, including Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey and the United States.[18] Castells views such developments as indicative of the "counter-power" afforded to social movements through their use of autonomous communication networks in both on and offline contexts. Evidence in favour of this optimistic view of technology as an agent of protest can arguably be found in the so-called 'Twitter Revolution' in Iran in 2009. The microblogging site first rose to international prominence in this capacity when it was used to share images and eyewitness perspectives on the unrest that followed allegations of election fraud made against incumbent Iranian President

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[15] These statistics and information are available in an article by Brian John Spencer "Expect to "have your collar felt" if you break the law" Accessed at http://eamonnmallie.com/2013/08/psni-continues-to-see-rise-in-the-number-of- social-media-incidents-2/ on August 30, 2013.

[16] O. Young, "New Media and Young People in Interface Areas of Belfast", *Shared Space,* 14 (Belfast:NICRC, 2014), 77

[17] O. Young, "New Media and Young People in Interface Areas of Belfast", *Shared Space,* 14 (Belfast:NICRC, 2014), 78

[18] United States Institute of Peace (2010). "Blogs and Bullets: Understanding Online Discourse as a Cause of Conflict and Means of Dialogue". [WWW]
<URL: http://www.usip.org/programs/initiatives/blogs-bullets [Accessed 15 March 2014]

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during elections held in June 2009".[19] Similarly, the impetus for the "Occupy Wall Street" movement was linked to a blogpost that called on supporters to "#OccupyWallStreet". However, it has also been argued that the use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter for the organisation of protests may prove detrimental for protest movements, insofar as it may make it easier for governments to identify and arrest their leaders.[20]

During the flag protests in Northern Ireland in January 2013, social media was used as both a tool to organise street protests against the Belfast City Council decision and a means for citizens to register their dissatisfaction with the protesters themselves. Hashtags such as #takebackthecity and #loveBelfast were used to encourage local people to support businesses in Belfast that suffered a massive downturn in trade due to the period of protests. However, probably the most notable trend during this period was the content posted on Loyalist parody social media pages, such as Loyalists Against Democracy (L.A.D). The L.A.D Facebook and Twitter accounts were used to share sectarian comments posted on Loyalist flag protest pages on Facebook during this period. Supporters have hailed L.A.D for "holding up a mirror" to those loyalists who were articulating their views via social media.[21] However, those individuals responsible for L.A.D have also been accused of perpetuating class-based stereotypes of Loyalist communities. The Protestant Coalition, as well as prominent loyalists such as Jamie Bryson, have used both Facebook and Twitter to challenge the commentary provided by L.A.D, leading to some hostile exchanges on these sites. Similarly, there were also debates between bloggers who took different positions not only on the rationale for the protests but also on the loyalist tropes shared by L.A.D.[22] In this way, social media has appeared to reinforce the 'zero-sum' perception of politics held by many communities within Northern Ireland.

Clearly, there was a disparity between those people who expressed support for the flag protests on Facebook and Twitter and the relatively small number of protesters

[19] P. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets. Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, (London: Pluto Press,2012), 48.

[20] E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World*. (London: Penguin, 2012).

[21] B. Spencer (2013) Loyalists Against Democracy- Unveiling and Assailing Sectarianism, http://eamonnmallie.com/2013/10/loyalists-against-democracy-unveiling-and-assailing-sectarianism/

[22] See: www.dgmagee.wordpress.com and www.brianjohnspencer.com

who have continued to hold weekly demonstrations outside Belfast City Hall since January 2013. The term "clicktivism" has been employed to describe the practice of showing support on social media platforms (such as 'liking' specific Facebook pages or 're-tweeting' on Twitter) while not directly engaging in more traditional, physical forms of protest, such as participating in mass public demonstrations.[23] A similar term, "slacktivism", has been employed to describe those who engage in what Morozov has described as "civic promiscuity".[24] He argues that while online activists feel a sense of self-worth through such engagement with online campaigns much of this activity is unlikely to generate significant political change. Bennett goes as far as to suggest that these practices are emblematic of a new type of "lifestyle politics" which is ultimately built on "weak ties" rather than any complex ideological foundation.[25] Recent work by Tufekci and others has suggested that these weaknesses of online activism have been over-stated, with slacktivism perhaps better understood as an important intervention in an "attention ecology" that encompasses both "old" and "new" media platforms.[26] Nevertheless, there remains concern amongst some commentators that direct forms of political participation, such as voting, might be undermined by the prevalence of social media campaigns that urge supporters to 'like' or 'follow' their online content rather than engage in physical forms of protest.[27]

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[23] M. White, "Clicktivism is Ruining Leftist Activism", *The Guardian.*
(http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism)

[24] E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World*. (London: Penguin, 2012), 190.

[25] W.L. Bennett, "The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity and the rise of Lifestyle Politics", PS: Political Science & Politics, December 1998, 741-761.

[26] Z.Tufekci "Not This One: Social movements, the attention economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism, *American Behavioral Scientist*, (2013) originally published online 26 March 2013 DOI: 10.1177/0002764213479369

[27] M.Gladwell. Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be tweeted, The New Yorker, October 4, 2010: Available at: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell

Social Media and Inter-Group Contact in Northern Ireland

Social media has also been linked to the spread of "networked individualism". This concept was developed by sociologist Barry Wellman to describe how technology enables networked individuals to move within a new "operating system" that lies outside traditional structures such as the family and institutions embedded within local communities.[28] Sites such as Facebook afford people the opportunity to form social connections and share information with geographically dispersed members of online communities.[29] The resulting online networks "help calibrate interpersonal relationships by establishing levels of transparency, privacy, security and inter-personal trust".[30] However, such networks by their nature are not static in their composition and do not adhere to set formations. They are able to adapt to changing situations "across geographic and temporal boundaries".[31] Distinctions have been made between *connective* and *collective* action that further enhance our understanding of the nature of offline networks, which are effectively reconfigured online. While collective action involves getting individuals to contribute to or agitate for a common cause, connective action sees individuals 'opt-in' to certain campaigns that include like-minded groups and individuals.[32] Bennett and Segerberg identify the latter as encompassing various practices including 'sharing' on Facebook and commenting on YouTube, and linking to content via Twitter.[33] These are important points in the wider context of this research, given that protest in Northern Ireland appears to involve both collective and connective forms of action.

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[28] H. Rheingold, *Net Smart. How to Thrive Online*. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012), 192.

[29] B. Wellman et al. "The social affordances of the Internet for networked individualism". *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*. 2003, 8(3)

[30] W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, 'The logic of connective action', *Information, Communication & Society*, (2012) 15:5, 739-768, 753

[31] W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, 'The logic of connective action', *Information, Communication & Society*, (2012) 15:5, 739-768, 753.

[32] W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, 'The logic of connective action', *Information, Communication & Society*, (2012) 15:5, 739-768, 749.

[33] W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, 'The logic of connective action', *Information, Communication & Society*, (2012) 15:5, 739-768, 753

Social media may have the potential to enable new patterns of social interaction and 'make new forms of sociality possible'.[34] In the context of Northern Ireland, this might lead to the transformation of inter-community relations in divided areas such as the Ardoyne/Twaddell Avenue interface in North Belfast. The contact hypothesis, first articulated by Allport (1954), suggests that under the right conditions interaction between members of different groups can reduce negative stereotyping of outgroups in divided societies. Although this theory underpins the majority of community relations work in Northern Ireland, it has been subject to much debate and critique. In particular, the potential role of new media in the countering of negative stereotyping of the 'other' has been described as utopian.[35] Indeed, one study suggested that the Internet reinforced the competition of victimhood between rival residents' groups in Northern Ireland, with the prospects for improved inter-community relations unlikely to be enhanced through their respective website strategies.[36] Reilly (2012) asserts that it may be more appropriate for community groups in interface areas to "conceptualise on-line contact as just one stage in a process that leads to richer contact capable of reducing prejudices against members of rival communities".[37] It has also been suggested that online interactions might reinforce existing divisions and patterns of street violence between rival communities in Northern Ireland[38], with social media often said to have played a key role in the organisation of anti-social behaviour and street riots in interface areas.[39] In some areas, sites such as Facebook have been identified as key tools in the orchestration of 'pitch battles' between young people from loyalist and republican communities.[40] Rather than enlarging or diversifying the social networks of individuals, these sites may in fact *limit* them. Gerbaudo uses Bourdieu's concept of "elective affinities" to

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[34] H. Rheingold, *Net Smart. How to Thrive Online*.(Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012), 192

[35] E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World*. (London: Penguin, 2012).

[36] P.Reilly. Framing the Troubles Online: Northern Irish groups and website strategy, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 167.

[37] P. Reilly. "Community worker perspectives on the use of new media to promote conflict transformation in Belfast". *Urban Studies*, 49:15, pp.3385-3401

[38] N. Ó Dochartaigh, "Conflict, territory and new technologies: Online interaction at a Belfast interface". *Political Geography*, 26 (4) (2007): 474-91, 480.

[39] P, Reilly "'Anti-Social' Networking in Northern Ireland: Policy Responses to Young people's Use of Social Media for Organising Anti-Social Behaviour", Policy & Internet: (2011) Vol. 3: Iss.1, Article 7, 5.

[40] Belfast Telegraph "Out of control in east Belfast: The gangs bringing havoc to Northern Ireland Neighbourhoods blighted by fights arranged online". http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/out-of-control-in-east-belfast-the-gangs-bringing-havoc-to-northern-ireland-30543383.html

explain how new media often results in individuals effectively self-selecting themselves into like-minded social circles.[41] In practice, the structure of sites such as Facebook and Twitter makes it relatively easy for people to search for like-minded groups and individuals. This is pertinent to Northern Ireland, where 'single identity' patterns of social and political engagement have been said to have reinforced and even encouraged sectarian divisions.

Nevertheless, online networks, which are based on mutual interests, may have benefits for communities affected by parades and protests in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to event coordination and information sharing. Gerbaudo asserts that social media provide such groups with the "choreography of assembly" enabling activist groups to tap into both the personal and cultural symbols of the individual. However, online networks are likely to remain a fundamental pre-requisite for effective protest campaigns. Bennett and Segerberg suggest that such networks "help calibrate relationships by establishing levels of transparency, privacy, security and inter-personal trust".[42] This study will explore these issues in the context of bands and local communities, which already demonstrate these qualities in the offline world. In this way, it will provide further evidence in relation to the potential role of social media in fostering positive intergroup contact in contested areas of Northern Ireland.

The reproduction of offline social networks in online spaces brings into focus the relationship between online behaviour and social capital. The concept of social capital has become synonymous with Robert Putnam, who uses the term to refer to the "features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, than can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions".[43] He suggests that this may take the form of either 'bonding' or 'bridging' social capital. The former refers to *intra* group networks and relationships and the latter to *inter* group networks and relationships. Previous research has tended to suggest an overall positive relationship between internet use and political engagement,[44] with some indications

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[41] P. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets. Social Media and Contemporary Activism*,(London: Pluto Press,2012).

[43] R, Putnam, *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. (Princeton, N.J. ; Chichester : Princeton University Press,1993).

[44] D. Romer, K.H. Jamieson & J. Pasek, Josh (2009) 'Building Social Capital in Young People: The Role of Mass Media and Life Outlook,' *Political Communication* 26 (5): 65-83.

that the use of social media sites might be linked to the creation of social capital. For example, a study conducted involving college students in the United States identified a positive correlation between Facebook use and all forms of social capital amongst its participants, including 'linking' capital with those in positions of power.[45] This research not only explored the nature of social capital in relation to individuals and groups, but also between citizens and those in positions of power, i.e. "linking" social capital. It is important to note that new media differs the mass media, and rather than focus on the type of social capital it may help foster in certain communities. This changes the understanding of a generalised social capital as being formed in "bottom up" manner to one more relational to "linking" social capital specifically. A more critical consideration of platforms such as Twitter would engage with it in terms of the vertical power relationships that are evident on the microblogging site and the way in which they influence emerging networks. This is consistent with the work of self-styled cyber-realist Evgeny Morozov, one of many researchers to argue that the focus should be on how online networks interact with pre-existing power structures rather than the potential of new media to revolutionise both political and non-political group behaviour.[46]

Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that individuals are influenced by the behaviour of people they do not know directly.[47] There are two possible implications for the present study that emerge from this 'contagion' effect. First, "virtual proximity" may strengthen the ingroup identities of those who participate in parades and protests in Northern Ireland. This has been referred to as "cyberbalkanisation," where online groups consist mainly of like-minded individuals and interactions with members of outgroups are often fractious.[48] However, Gauntlett argues that while this may be true in certain instances, other areas of interest (such as hobbies and leisure pursuits) do bring together a diverse range of individuals in

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[45] N.B. Ellison, C. Steinfield, & C. Lampe, C. The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, (2007)12(4), article, 1143.

[46] E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World*. (London: Penguin, 2012).

[47] N. Christakis and J. Fowler, *Connected: The Amazing Power of Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. (London: HarperCollins, 2010).

[48] C. Sunstein. *Republic: 2.0* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2007).

ways that are both more convivial and inclusive.[49] Second, virtual proximity may lead to the remediation of parades and protests, whereby people construct new meanings and expressions from pre-existing social interactions and relationships[50]. An example of this may be seen in how Facebook has effectively changed the meaning of the term "friends" insofar as "friendship" is now viewed as having the potential to exist on new media platforms and/or in reality.[51] This raises the possibility of altering the nature of boundaries between groups of people by simultaneously de-territorising and re-territorising spaces.[52] This study will examine such a scenario in the context of Northern Irish communities directly affected by parades and related protests. In this way, it will explore the potential use of social media to transform perceptions of space in divided societies.

Conclusion

The emergence of social media in recent years has added a new dimension to the networks associated with parades and protest in Northern Ireland. While there has been extensive research into the role of social media in protests in countries as diverse as Egypt and the United States in recent years, very little detailed analysis has emerged in relation to how these tools are being used in Northern Ireland. In particular, the potential use of social media by community groups to ease sectarian tensions during the marching season merits attention. Hence, this study will focus not only on how social media is being used by relevant stakeholders during parades and related protests, but also on its broader impact upon public perceptions of such issues. In this way, it will help identify examples of good practice in relation to the use of social media for the promotion of good relations in Northern Ireland.

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[49] D. Gauntlett. *Making is Connecting. The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0.* (Cambridge: Polity Press,2011)

[50] J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, R. Remediation: Understanding New Media. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 45.

[51] H. Rheingold, *Net Smart. How to Thrive Online*. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012), 232.

[52] N. Ó Dochartaigh, N. "Conflict, territory and new technologies: Online interaction at a Belfast interface". *Political Geography*, 26 (4) (2007): 474-91, p474.

Part 2. The Impact of Social Media on Parades and Protest in Northern Ireland

This section of the report will identify and explore two distinct areas in relation to social media and parades and protests in Northern Ireland:

- How social media sites are being used in relation to both parades and protests in both urban and rural contexts, both positively and negatively; and
- Examples of how social media has been employed in work with a community relations focus in Northern Ireland.

This research project sought to gauge the views and experiences of groups and individuals relevant to this research area. Formal focus group discussions with approximately forty band members from three different areas of Northern Ireland were conducted. These focus group discussions were based on a pre-agreed set of questions, to ensure focus and standardisation. Representatives from Statutory agencies and bodies such as: Belfast City Council; the Police Service of Northern Ireland; and the Parades Commission of Northern Ireland were also consulted in this process. This multi-levelled approach was with a view to ensuring this research provided a comprehensive overview of the issues at stake with regard to social media and parades and protests.

Given the sensitive area of focus of this research there were many ethical issues to consider. Our approach was framed by two central approaches: (a) How we treat the people whom we conduct research; and (b) Are there activities in which we should or should not engage in our relations?[53] With this in mind, ethics approval was sought from the University of Leicester, and, with the permission of the participants, the first author digitally recorded these discussions.[54] All comments have been anonymised at the request of those participating in the research.

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[53] A. Bryman. *Social Research Methods*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 476.
[54] The University of Leicester Ethics reference number for this project was pr93-0b930.

Positive uses of social media in relation to parades and protests

This study set out to identify the ways in which stakeholders felt that social media had made it easier for them to manage the heightened sectarian tensions during the marching season. A number of themes emerged from the interviews: the perceived agency and empowerment of using these sites for collecting and sharing information; the opportunities for greater inter-group contact and cultural understanding; and the ability to counteract rumours and misinformation during controversial marches and protests. There was also a sense amongst the participants that social media could help them share positive experiences of such events, and perhaps even form new social networks that have the potential to transcend the long-established in-group identities of interface communities.

The theme of empowerment in relation to social media was repeated throughout many of the interviews and focus groups. Sites such as Twitter, which were said to be a valuable tool for communities to share their views on parades and protests. The nature of these networks also meant that these views are extending beyond individuals' immediate social and political circles. One P/U/L community worker from north Belfast stated:

> *It has been a tool to reach people that previously you wouldn't have been able to have a conversation with, and personally to expose individuals to my own views, particularly around parades and protests. I think Twitter has become really like a lightning rod for peoples' views and opinions*

This is an important point, as it reveals that social media is being used as a means for individuals to articulate views, but also that it is facilitating individuals and groups in engaging with others with different opinions and views on parades and protests. The community worker(s) felt that social media is empowering and encouraging individuals to communicate their views online, and is providing "safe spaces" for those who may not feel sufficiently empowered to engage in discussions with individuals and groups from "other" communities, while simultaneously encouraging contact with individuals and groups of alternate views. Similarly, a band member felt that sites such as Twitter provided a space to articulate views in a more

instantaneous manner, and providing an opportunity to what they described as a "vent". There is a view that this sense of social media as in effect facilitating indirect expression. While this may be viewed in positive terms such as reducing the possibility of violent confrontation between communities, it may lead to a sense of false security amongst the online community. In practice, this has led to extreme views being articulated, which have legal implications and have consequences offline.

Underlying much of the discussions with community workers on the space social media provides individuals and groups with, the opportunities to articulate viewpoints which may be aligned with particular perspectives on either parades and/or protests was raised. One community worker encompassed this in the following terms:

There are so many unheard or hidden voices in communities. The community [P/U/L] *I reside in feel voiceless. Social media has provided them with a political alternative.*

This "political alternative" refers to social media as a tool to express the views of individuals and communities where it is felt that there is a lack of political representation in terms of articulating particular experiences and viewpoints. This evidences social media as a tool of agency, which is born out of a need to express particular perspectives in a way that is deemed to accurately reflect the perspectives of particular individuals and communities. Some of the interviewees perceived that social media reduced the distance between communities and civic leaders, such as their elected representatives. For example, one focus group participant from a rural based loyalist band used social media to express their criticism of the anti-internment parade held by republicans in Belfast city centre in August 2014:

I got involved with the debates and protests about the internment parade online… I contacted the politicians, because you need to hold them to account and social media is a good way to do this.

This sense of "holding politicians to account" was shared by other members of the group and in other interviews. The public nature of social media means that politicians are perceived to be more accessible and as such those engaging in protests, or indeed counter protests, view social media as an essential component in ensuring their viewpoints are being heard. This speaks to a wider sense of political

alienation that was raised by two of the bands engaging in this research, as well as a number of the community workers. Particular reference was made to loyalist communities, with interviewees and focus group participants articulating the view that they feel there an issue of a lack political representation for this community. Social media was therefore a means by which to address how many in the community felt "voiceless" by providing a mechanism by which to contact those directly in the political realm.

The issue of representation, and how social media may be harnessed to express the views of individuals and groups, was one that was raised repeatedly in interviews and focus groups. The majority of focus groups and bands engaging with this research believed that the media vilified the protesters who were behind the Twaddell "peace camp"':

> *There's two sides, on one you have the media. The media are always going to portray the protest like that at Twaddell as just trouble. But then you have social media, where you've people who were there and saw things that were happening to people that were simply using their right to protest, and they were then able to put that out over social media, through videos. It got the message out there that it isn't all bad.*

Social media appeared to be empowering these participants to challenge what they perceived as the negative and inaccurate portrayals of protests, such as the one at Twaddell. Similarly, there was a sense that the media focus was disproportionality focusing on contentious parades at the expense of those protests rather than those that routinely take place without issue:

> *The amount of parades and protests that have happened with no issues and there's no focus or discussions about it in the media or on social media.*

Hence it was no surprise that the majority of both community workers and band members felt that social media was an invaluable tool in their efforts to ensure more accurate portrayals of parades and protests in the mainstream media.

How social media is being used by bands and the Loyal Orders

There was a perception among some participants that social media was more a focal point for bands rather that the Loyal Orders, given that they viewed bands as predominantly being composed of younger members:

> *I think bands are a younger generation so that's why you see them on social media*

While this is a valid point in relation to the scale of use of social media by particular groups, it is nevertheless important to also consider how the Loyal Orders use social media in relation to parades and protests. One member of both a rural loyalist band and Orange Lodge:

> *I think social media can be used as a positive, especially for the Orange Order. For a lot of years the Orange Order was seen to be doing everything behind closed doors, now they have a platform on social media they can use to show what their culture is... It* [social media] *promotes understanding. The Orange* [Order] *is learning* [from their experience online], *we are learning that we need to put our message across to everyone*

This use of social media as a tool for education was just one of the innovative ways it was being used by particular groups. Social media is providing an opportunity to increase the transparency of the viewpoints of groups such as the Loyal Orders and as such is being employed as part of a wider approach to reduce misconceptions about them their practices. This is also recognised in relation to the specific protests at Twaddell, in that social media was viewed as a key component in the dissemination of a specific message underlying the protests, and ultimately the reduction of violence:

> *Twaddell turned out to be positive this year on social media, because there is an element of control that is being brought out on social media. The message of "we're standing together" has moved online, as the general consensus and message from the Orange Order is "no trouble" and this was proven this summer.*

Contrary to perceptions of social media as a sphere of contestation, social media was discussed in relation to the development and fostering of mutual understanding. Social media is already providing some opportunities to reduce misconceptions about particular groups, protest issues, and cultural practices. There is potential to harness social media in a deliberate manner to educate, inform and develop engagement between groups is evident and illustrates the opportunity afforded by social media in relation to work aimed at building relationships.

Conclusion

The interviewees perceived that that there were many positive ways that social media could be used relation to parades and protests. These included: issues of agency and empowerment; inter-cultural understanding; countering misinformation and inaccurate media portrayals of issues such as the Twaddell peace camp. sharing positive experiences of parades, and providing educational resources to those who had little knowledge about the Loyal Orders. Interviewees felt that social media empowered individuals and groups to not only articulate their views, but also to. In some instances this afforded an opportunity to move beyond dominant narratives and reveal the complexity of issues in a bid to increase mutual understanding. In a sense, social media increased the transparency of particular groups' and individuals' views. However, research participants were keen to emphasise that despite these positives aspects of social media, it could also easily be used as a tool to damage relationships between, and perceptions of, communities.

Negative uses of social media in relation to parades and protests

Social media was also identified as being used in a negative way in relation to parades and protests. Participants outlined several negative aspects of social media including: the instantaneous nature of reactions it facilitates; its use to spread false information and rumours; how it appeared to reinforce the sectarian views of some users; the role it played in distorting the narratives of the protesters; and how it has generated fear in certain areas.

The immediacy of social media was identified as a key negative feature of interactions in relation to both parades and protest. Many of the interviewees felt that the immediacy of social media prompted knee-jerk reactions amongst members of the public in response to specific issues:

> *It* [social media] *doesn't call for thoughtful, considered responses. Social media almost calls for people to knee jerk in their reactions…Whilst it allows you to engage and expand the coverage of your message, the downside to it is it becomes emotionally driven.*

These immediate reactions were not considered conducive to constructive engagement with issues that polarised opinion, such as contentious parades or protests. Although the majority of participants agreed that "thinking before you tweet" was good practice in theory, the reality is that many felt an emotional investment in the parades and protests, regardless of their position, and as such this becomes harder to apply in reality. Despite the homophily of online groups, social media remains essentially individualistic in the context of both parades and protests, in the sense that the reactions to specific events and issues are ultimately the responsibility of individuals. These individual reactions nevertheless may have ramifications at the group level. One community worker stated:

> *I think for me personally I am very conscious of the opinions and views that I espouse* [online] *and how that can have a knock on effect on the ground. Also, how that can impact other peoples' views and how they think. I try to be measured but that doesn't always work, as we are emotional animals, so you do*

you get times where you put things out where you may have no if the clock was turned back.

The point here is that social media ultimately provides individuals with a platform to air their views in a manner which reflects the emotion of a given situation and as such it is almost impossible to negate the negative impact of more polemic views once they are in the public domain. This evidences the need for greater awareness of the potential of social media to inform views and the nature of relations far beyond the level of the individual. It also reveals the potential of the immediate nature of social media to present a distorted or reactionary version of events and issues and as such inform wider views of parades and protests.

This relationship between the immediacy of social media and parades and protests evoked discussions on issues relating to false information being disseminated over social media. False information and rumours were not only said to be shaping the nature of parades and protests, but such incidents were said to be undermining efforts to build mutual understanding and reciprocity between communities. This sentiment was expressed by one PUL community worker:

Social media has become a real driver [for inter-communal tension]. *It has become a very negative dynamic, because there was a lot of false information and misinformation and it was fuelling peoples' fears. It was becoming a driver for problems on the streets [during protests]. I saw it in particular in north Belfast, when people were tweeting out things they had heard second and third hand. .*

A recurring theme in the interviews with those engaging in community work was that such false or misleading information increased sectarian tensions in relation to parades and protests. For example, one community worker suggested that the scale of anti-social behaviour reported on social media sites was often exaggerated:

If something happens all of a sudden it's on Facebook…You might find if there's ten lads throwing stones [at a protest]*, and on Facebook and Twitter they've turned it into a full scale riot.*

Another interviewee discussed the misinformation on social media in relation to the specific protests at Twaddell, as heightening tensions. They characterised this as a

form of online "Chinese whispers," with rumours, many of which were generated intentionally, and were often embellished as they were shared from user to user on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Such 'whispers' not only had a negative impact upon how members of the public perceived protests, such as Twaddell, but also had the potential to incite violence and/or tensions near the interface areas of North Belfast..

A number of participants identified an expectation of violence that was magnified in relation to parades and protests as a result of the immediacy of social media.. This was described by a PUL community worker from east Belfast in terms of voyeurism:

> *On the likes of Twitter and Facebook people are almost voyeuristic around violence and tension around parades.*

This relates to the impact of social media on the nature of parades and protests, and evokes a sense of "virtual distance" rather than of the "virtual proximity" discussed previously. In being removed from events on social networks, the reality of tensions and potential violence are being minimised and those discussing these issues and events online have the potential to de-humanise them. This approach may be a factor in the sectarianism many research participants perceive to be abundant on social networks in relation to parades and protests. One participant (involved with both a community group in north Belfast and a loyalist band) viewed it as follows:

> *Generally speaking, social media has reinforced a lot of sectarianism. It's opened up a new front or battleground for those who want to keep battling and are influenced by sectarian attitudes or tendencies.*

This effective new online sectarian "battle ground" is perhaps one of the most negative experiences of research participants in relation to discussions about parades and protests online. Many of the participants acknowledged that the anonymity afforded by social media encouraged some users to express sectarian views online. A minority of interviewees viewed this as indicative of the current political impasse that had left contentious issues such as parading unresolved.

The participants also confirmed that social media was being used to distribute material that heightened sectarian tensions and incited violence. This was referenced in relation to both parades and protests:

> *I remember watching the speeches at protests and they were whipping people up and it was re-tweeted.*

While prominent supporters of the Twaddell protests were keen to re-affirm their continuing belief in the underlying values of their protest, they also felt that the number of times these videos of speeches were shared was *"in a sense an endorsement".* The reality is that despite disparate views of protest and parade supporters in relation to particular statements, social media is facilitating the appearance of protest supporters as a monolith. As such, it does not facilitate understanding of the complex and diverse factors leading individuals and groups to support, or indeed challenge, the basis for particular protests or parades.

The lack of a nuanced understanding of the values of these groups and individuals in relation to protests and parades being expressed on social media is also perceived as having a profound impact on the perception of specific groups and organisations. One research participant spoke of the stereotypes of loyalism that circulated online:

> *The Loyal Orders have been caricatured* [online]…*Social media has upped the ante in the sense of the labels that are placed on bands and lodges.*

This "caricaturing" of some of the groups engaging in parading and protests, means that groups are effectively having to challenge representations of themselves both on and offline and this is having an impact on ensuring the message underlying particular protests is being kept clear in terms of the original intentions, i.e. to ensure that the original parade route is reinstated. Social media provides a challenge for groups and movements in ensuring that their original message and/or aim is the focus of the narrative surrounding protests rather than other issues which emerge online.

Conclusion

The overarching theme of the negative experiences of social media in relation to parades and protests was the manner in which social media is further facilitating the essentialisation of both perceptions and representations of communal identity. This coupled with the immediacy of social networks may have served to magnify inter-communal tensions and conflict. The evocative nature of parades and protests means that social media provides a platform for groups and individuals to articulate polemic views in an unprecedentedly accessible manner. There was an awareness on the part of those engaging in parades and protests of a need to ensure that social media is not a solely negative phenomenon. However, the perceived enormity of the task of ensuring social media does not continue to simply be another sphere of contestation for communities was an underlying theme in the interviews. These concerns are warranted when we consider that social media is also no longer a peripheral tool of communication for communities, conversely in some cases it is the only contact between communities[55].

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[55] O. Young…..

Social media and community relations work in Northern Ireland

This research has documented the positives and negatives of social media being experienced by those engaging in or being effected by parades and protests, but it is also important to gauge how social media is impacting upon the work of groups and agencies seeking to build relationships during and in the wake of such events. The manner in which groups and agencies are utilising social media is also important, in that it illustrates how social media is being employed on a multi-levelled basis in relation to work that is informing the nature of community relations.

This research found that many groups and agencies are strategically utilising social media in a manner which ensures that they are not viewed as actively participating in the debate on parades and/or protests, but rather that they are acting as a mechanism through which groups and individuals could communicate their views on particular issues to the political realm. One agency representative articulated this in the following way:

> *We receive what* [community] *groups want to communicate and put it out. We also want to act as a conduit between community groups and government. Social media is one way of getting these messages out to government and civic leaders.*

This illustrates the increasing centrality of social media as "linking" grassroots action the political sphere. This becomes magnified in relation to parades and protests when social media is being employed as a means to espouse or reject the principles underlying such activities. The immediacy, discussed previously, was described in empowering terms:

> *There's an immediacy about it which is important… There is something very important about communicating this way.*

Research participants also communicated a sense of the need for grassroots based groups and agencies to utilise social media as a means of ensuring that they are accessible in terms of communications as it is "*keeping the lines of communication open*"

However, this apparent need for transparency online was balanced against the awareness of the challenges of occupying an effective "space between" grassroots based groups and the political sphere, and the need to ensure that they do not further complicate issues. A Belfast City Council representative encompassed this in the following terms:

The Council steers away from putting anything out that is any way contentious.

The variation in use also extended to interactions in which groups and agencies seeking to act as a "conduit" during parades and protests are described in challenging terms by one public sector agency representative:

I think social media is increasingly impacting parades and protests… I think you see frankly a lot of nonsense, abuse, criticism, false information and sometimes deliberate, which can have a negative impact. It's used as a lobbying/advocacy tool by others.

Despite these challenges, which were similar to those experienced by the community workers who participated in the study, research participants from public sector agencies were keen to emphasise the ways in which social media enabled them to engage across sectors and engage with groups and individuals who may have been deemed "hard to reach" in terms of work aimed at building better relations between communities in Northern Ireland.

A recurring theme was the issue of resourcing online platforms, with organisations viewing it as necessary to have bespoke social media strategy, but also a dedicated staff to implement it. Any strategy was described as being mainly orientated around information supplied by grassroots groups and individuals. In practice this meant that where agencies engaged with social media, it was at best tentative and driven in the main by a need to present a certain positive image of organisations

We agreed to use the Council page and feed any good news stories through them

However, an interesting point was made by a statutory agency representative that such groups are seeking to ensure their message is being communicated on social networks:

It influences us, in that the partnerships are telling us they want to communicate by social media and get their messages out there, but we've been sort of held back a bit, but we're being advised to work within the Council remit [in terms of social media] *and this creates tension as the Partnership are saying "well, we're a legal entity in our own right".*

Other representatives of statutory agencies were keen to emphasise how little they engaged with social media in their work. Indeed, for some organisations, it was an essential aspect of their work that they distanced themselves from the online debates relating to parades and protests. Social media was considered to be unsuitable for work which was deemed to be "too sensitive" such as mediations and official processes informing the status of particular parades. It was also suggested that while social media provides an opportunity to gain an insight into public opinion on particular parades and protests, they needed to be cautious when responding to such issues online. Social media was not viewed as providing "definitive" evidence of views on parades and protests, or more general issues relating to community relations.

Another representative of another statutory agency conceded that social media was not necessarily wholly representative of wider feelings on parades and protests. However, this representative felt that this was could be rectified by ensuring that individuals and groups are held responsible for the views they express online, much as they would in person:

As we get used to social media, we will learn how to use it better, and that includes framing how we use in a legal sense, as well as a personal sense. There may be things done to ensure that people are held accountable for.

This illustrates one of the key challenges for statutory or intermediary bodies, namely the need to use social media responsibly in order to avoid potential pitfalls, such as the misinterpretation of their online content or any issue which may adversely impact their ability to work with all communities in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

This research engaged with groups and organisations directly engaged in work with communities impacted by parades and protests. It found that there is no standard approach to the use of social media in work aimed at building relationships between communities. In a positive sense, some representatives viewed social media as another channel that enabled them to reach out to local communities. However, many agencies appeared reluctant to fully engage on social media due to a perception that interactions on these sites were "unmanageable". The lack of consistency in the social media strategies of these agencies suggests that there may be a need for a more joined up approach towards managing the impact of social media upon parades, related protests, and, more broadly, community relations. The fact remains, as articulated by those engaged in parades and protests in this research, that social media is now one of primary mechanisms by which individuals and groups are communicating, and as such it cannot continue to have a peripheral role in how statutory agencies and organisations are communicating with those their decisions and activities impact.

Policing, social media and parades and protests

Parading and protests bring into focus the nature of policing and how this manifests itself during these periods. As discussed above, key stakeholders view social media sites as vital communication tools during public demonstrations. The issue of how it is impacting policing during these periods is also of paramount importance. This study found the following areas as relating to social media and policing during periods of parades and protests: the nature of relationships between the police and communities; the representation of the PSNI and policing; and information on social networks.

The PSNI representatives were keen to emphasise the unprecedented opportunities offered by social media in terms of building relationships between the PSNI and local communities:

> *Up to a year ago social media was done by people who liked social media, now it is much more people are starting to get into it as we see there's a real benefit to it.* (PSNI spokesperson 1)

This "benefit" was described in terms of increased transparency, while affording an opportunity to foster relationships through increased communication with individuals and communities, while increasing the accessibility of the organisation:

> *At the heart of it is a sense that genuinely people who use it in our organisation feel it is a very effective tool to engage with the community and our wider community engagement strategy (PSNI spokesperson 2))*

Social media was characterised as an essential component in the current approach to engagement with communities throughout Northern Ireland. This was viewed as having a positive impact on the nature of interactions between the organisation and communities, and, as a result, relationships. However, the PSNI representatives were keen to emphasise that social media alone could not bring about these changes, but rather it had to be part of a wider policing approach to fostering relationships between the PSNI and local communities. They described how social media was facilitating the development of more positive interactions with

communities in areas in which the PSNI had not previously experienced community support:

> *You can notice a slight change in the tone, like Newry and Mourne, west and north Belfast, you would have had negativity every day, but there is a degree of positivity creeping in [online]. A lot of that is built on relationships on the ground.[56]*

A key issue here is perception, and the impact of perception on the nature of relationships, in this case the relationships between the PSNI and local communities. Social media is may be viewed as challenging negative perceptions of the PSNI by providing representations of the service which counter negative narratives In periods of parades and protests the issues of perception and therefore, representation, are key in how relationships are maintained. Indeed, this aspect of social media in relation to policing and parades and protests was identified by PSNI representatives in almost wholly positive terms:

> *It's been a positive tool….It affords us a brilliant platform for engagement.*

This relates to the accessibility afforded by social media for the community to the PSNI, while simultaneously enabling the PSNI to ensure increased control over their own narrative. However, it is important to note that while social media affords the PSNI an opportunity to inform perception of the organisation, it also provides a challenge in they are represented during periods of parades and protests.

Like those engaging in parades and protests, the PSNI described a situation whereby social media has provided both challenges and opportunities in terms of their representation in relation to policing during parades and protests. This is orientated around the positive and negative narratives of policing that have emerged on social media, and as such this has meant that the organisation has had to ensure that these narratives reflect accurately the nature of policing on the ground. One PSNI representative explained it in the following terms:

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[56] The PSNI representative gave the example of the Newry/Mourne Facebook page and a status which sought to dissuade young people from attending a rave in a disused quarry in the area. See: *PSNI hit back over halted quarry 'rave'.* Accessed http://www.u.tv/News/PSNI-hit-back-over-halted-quarry-rave/2fa0a47f-87e1-44b2-a704-9e904370de1c

We're almost fighting for the narrative to pull this back to what really matters.

By "what really matters" the PSNI representative is referring to traditional policing, and not public order situations. This is an effective recognition of the centrality of social media in the public discourse of policing, and how during periods of parades and protests that social media is essential in the nature of communication. The nature of policing during parades and protests provides representations of a public order policing, which the police are now using social media to challenge:

At the height of the tensions in Twaddell, the local area sergeant posted a picture of normal officers on the beat, very mundane and away from all the other images of the area at that point. It got a thousand views and it was put to me that there was no other mechanism in which we would reach that many people with an image like that.

This illustrates the potential use of social media to counter narratives which may unnecessarily harm relationships. The potential for these narratives of policing during parades and protests to negatively impact the nature of relationships, was also related to wider public order, in that these narratives could contribute to problematic public order situations:

A lot of what north Belfast were putting out was not about public order it was about normal policing. When you can fill a public space with images that show policing about being near to the community as opposed to other images that create fear and suspicion, that's a very powerful thing. It's essential to the maintenance of order.

However, it is important to emphasise the awareness on the part of the PNSI that social media is also part of the wider issue of their accountability, in terms of how the public is utilising social media to share events:

One of the big challenges in north Belfast during the flags dispute was how we would respond to everything being videoed. I was filmed being questioned and it gave people a platform and gave us a platform to respond.

In further discussing this with the PSNI officers, they evoked a sense that the medium of video was powerful and had up until then been avoided due to safety fears of specific officers. These representatives explained that the fact that many

members of the public now have access to mobile recording devices which are simultaneously connected to the internet (such as smart phones) means that there is in a sense a requirement to be more open to being filmed. Rather than using social media to solely "push" a certain representation of policing in these videos, the PSNI appear to have chosen to engage with issues raised by members of the pubic via these sites. A PSNI representative stated:

> *We had to either choose to engage with it or ignore it, and we chose to engage with it. (PSNI spokesperson 2)*

This evidences the increasing centrality of social media to the nature how the PSNI are engaging with those participating in parades and protests, during and in the wake of these events.

While this research found that the PSNI found that not only was social media facilitating the portrayal of "traditional" policing (i.e. not public order situations), it also found the issue of rumours and/or misinformation a key feature of their experience of it in relation to parades and protests. PSNI representatives described it in terms that meant that social media is in fact empowering them to counter such misinformation:

> *For us, it* [social media] *is more about knocking rumours on the head, or clarifying information.*

In tandem with this, social media is also facilitating the distribution of accurate information on an unprecedented scale. Indeed, this was described as not being a simple matter of police resourcing but the knock on effect of the "sharing" by individuals and groups online. This was particularly pertinent to public order situations where the mainstream media were viewed as accessing information on the nature of parades and /or protests disseminated by the PSNI on social media:

> *Any benefit we're getting from social media in public order situations is almost by proxy. Journalists are picking up our stuff and tweeting it. Our message gets out.*

There is a sense that the PSNI are mindful of harnessing the "viral" aspect of social media. This was viewed as being particularly effective in ensuring that correct information was provided and disseminated in relation to what constitutes both a peaceful *and* lawful protest:

> *There was some stuff we put out about how people could have a peaceful protest… We wanted to re-communicate how people could keep protests peaceful and lawful.*

This was described as a "key" message in relation to the PSNI's engagement with protests concerning Belfast City Council's decision to alter the number of days the Union Flag flies at Belfast City Hall. However, it is important to note that the PSNI recognised how the physical form of protests are informing their responses, and as such there is a tailored approach in terms of how they choose to communicate via social media with protesters and provide information on a given protest. This is exemplified in the differentiation between different protests in Northern Ireland:

> *Our experience of the G8 protest[57], was that people gather under a banner but that they are disparate groups, as they don't have any structure for negotiation. It's different to the profile in Northern Ireland where there is a defined leadership and narrative and stand in between those cohesive groups.*

Therefore, the defined groups in protests such as the flag related protests, or those continuing at Twaddell are more conducive to engagement via social media given that the PSNI has more experience of working with the groups and communities involved, as well as a better understanding of the issues at stake. The PSNI also conceded that social media is at times providing them with information on events as they relate to parades and protests:

> *From the intelligence view, our first in* [-sight to potential protests/public order situations] *is sometimes social media*

There was a sense from these comments that the PSNI are practically engaging with parades and protests, and other public order situations in their initial stages via social media. However, given the earlier discussion on misinformation, this was also recognised as requiring confirmation in relation to the extent which reports on social media can be employed as the basis for a particular course of action for the PSNI:

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[57] See: "Marchers protest in Belfast against G8 policies". Accessed at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-22909025

Part of the challenge is holding your nerve… There's so much stuff on social media… One maverick individual can make a statement about a protest and if you take that as gospel you could have difficulty in terms of knee jerking in your reaction. That's were traditional policing comes in and things need to be corroborated.

Therefore, while social media is a key factor in how parades and protests are being policed, it is not the sole basis for how the PSNI are reacting to situations, but rather a component of a wider strategy in relation to how the police are engaging in these events.

Conclusion

The PSNI demonstrated a significant awareness of the centrality of social media to the nature of parades and protests in Northern Ireland. This included the impact of social media on the nature of relationships between the police and communities; the representation of the PSNI and policing; and information about parades and protests on social networks. The Service has sought to embrace social media as a mechanism to increase transparency in relation to the policing of both parades and protests, as well as increasing their accountability. While this has may be viewed as a positive development, this research also indicated the significant resources required to develop this approach. However, the capacity for the Service to ensure that police work is a sense de-mystified, means that social media is being harnessed as a powerful tool in relation to how the PSNI is building relationships with communities. This approach is also underpinned by an awareness of the centrality of social media in how parades and protests are concluded on the ground. The PSNI representatives articulated a need to ensure that accurate information regarding parades and protests is being communicated on social media platforms, revealing social media to have an increasingly central role in the nature of the policing of both parades and protests.

Part 3. Tweeting the Twelfth: How citizens used Twitter during the Orange Order parades in July 2014.

In July 2014, Northern Ireland Secretary of State Teresa Villiers praised the Orange Order, as well as nationalist and unionist political representatives, for helping deliver the most peaceful Twelfth in recent years.[58] Fears of a repeat of the sectarian clashes previously seen in North Belfast, in relation to the Parade Commission's decision to ban the return leg of the Ligoniel Orange lodges from passing by the Ardoyne shops, were not realised, with parades across Northern Ireland passing off without incident. While it is beyond the scope of this study to fully explain these events, the ways in which critics and supporters of the Orange Order used social media to express their views about the contentious parade merit analysis. Previous research has suggested that sites such as Facebook and Twitter have played an increasingly important role in the orchestration of anti-social behaviour in interface areas, alongside other modes of communication such as the SMS text messaging services available on mobile phones.[59] Therefore, this study was designed to empirically investigate the ways in which the peaceful protests of loyalists and nationalist residents in July 2014 were digitally mediated. The second author collected the dataset and explored the themes that emerged from the comments posted on Twitter, in relation to the Parade Commission's decision to reroute the parade, the 'graduated response' of unionists and loyalists and events as they unfolded on the 12th July[60]. The study also explored how users responded to rumours and misinformation spread on the micro-blogging site. Such information has been identified as having a negative impact upon cross-community relations in areas such as North Belfast, particularly amongst young people in interface areas.[61] The nature of the debate amongst those 'tweeters' who commented on the contentious

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[58] The full text of the Secretary of State's comments can be found here:
https://www.gov.uk/government/news/villiers-commends-intensive-work-to-bring-about-peaceful-12th-july
[accessed 10 October 2014]
[59] P, Reilly "'Anti-Social' Networking in Northern Ireland: Policy Responses to Young people's Use of Social Media for Organising Anti-Social Behaviour", Policy & Internet: (2011) Vol. 3: Iss.1, Article 7, 5.
[60] Further details on the 'graduated response' were released by unionist and loyalist spokespersons on the eve of the controversial march, which included plans for a six-minute pause at all Orange marches on the Twelfth to represent the time it would take for the North Belfast march to return home via its traditional route and a series of peaceful protest parades later that evening.
[61] O. Young, "New Media and Young People in Interface Areas of Belfast", Shared Space, 14 (Belfast:NICRC, 2014),

Ardoyne parade was also investigated, with a focus on whether they used inflammatory, sectarian language in response to the events as they unfolded.

Specifically, there were three research questions that emerged from the preceding literature review:

1) How did supporters and opponents of the Orange Order use Twitter to respond to the rerouting of the contentious Orange Order parade in North Belfast?

2) Was there much evidence of rational debate amongst these users in relation to the parade dispute?

3) How did these users respond to the rumours and misinformation that surrounded the parade?

Sample

These questions were explored through a critical thematic analysis of content posted and circulated on Twitter between 11th and 14th July 2014. This period included a number of key events in the 2014 marching season, including the annual 'Eleventh night' bonfires, the outward and return journeys of the annual Twelfth parades across Northern Ireland, and the planned protests by loyalists and nationalist residents in relation to the rerouted parade in Ardoyne. It was anticipated that most eyewitnesses who wished to share their perspectives on these events would have done so within this period. Furthermore, rumours and misinformation about these events were most likely to be circulated online within this 72-hour period.

The second author used the text-mining software tool Discovertext (www.discovertext.com) to collect and archive the tweets that contained a number of relevant keywords.
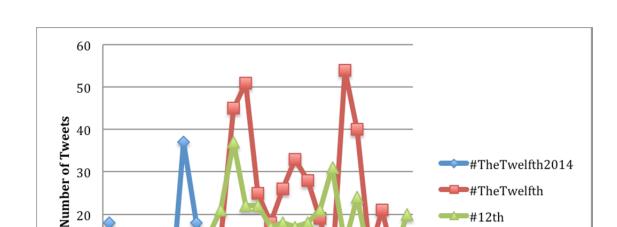
Twelfth hashtags

Three hashtags, '#12th,' '#Twelfth' and '#TheTwelfth2014,' were identified and used to capture the Twitter activity surrounding the demonstrations on the Twelfth. Both opponents and supporters of the Loyal Orders were expected to tweet about their experiences using one of these hashtags. A total of 2,233 tweets posted under these hashtags were analysed as part of the study. The one most frequently used in this sample was the #12th, which was referred to in 1,136 tweets collected during this period (see Table 1). It should be noted that most users contributed only once to each hashtag. For example, #TheTwelfth2014 had the fewest number of tweets (258) and tweeters (210), with only 23 users tweeting or retweeting content more than once during this period. A similar trend emerged from analysis of #TheTwelfth and #12th, with the former having 92 users who tweeted at least twice and the latter just 89.

Table 1: Tweets collected under Twelfth hashtags

Hashtag	Number of tweets	Number of unique tweeters
#12th	1,136	771
#TheTwelfth2014	258	210
#TheTwelfth	839	441

As anticipated, most tweets were posted under each hashtag on the 12th July 2014 (see Figure 1). A closer inspection of the data revealed that Twitter activity peaked on these hashtags at significant milestones during the Twelfth. The peak of #12th coincided with the morning march (10am), whereas most tweets were posted under #TheTwelfth shortly after their return leg at 7pm. This preliminary review of the tweets collected under each hashtag also revealed that a small number of tweets

made no reference to the Twelfth parades. For example, a spam message written in Mandarin referring to 'Future Diary' was retweeted multiple times under #12th. The same hashtag, which had the highest proportion of non-relevant tweets of those analysed, also featured an advertisement for an event that was due to take place in a nightclub in Oakland, California. However, the vast majority of these tweets were deemed to be relevant to the study.

Figure 1: Twelfth hashtag trends, 12 July 2014.

Ardoyne

An additional keyword search, 'Ardoyne' was used to identify tweets that referred specifically to the decision to reroute the parade by the Ligoniel Orange lodges, and related flute bands such as the Pride of Ardoyne (POA), in North Belfast. A total of 1,842 tweets were identified that mentioned the name of the North Belfast district. Like the Twelfth hashtags, most tweeters (717 out of 1,025 unique users) only posted one tweet mentioning this word during this period of data collection. The 'Ardoyne' tweets also peaked at the same time (7pm) as those posted under #TheTwelfth (see Figure 2). One interpretation of this finding might be that that viewers of 'flagship' teatime news programmes such as BBC Newsline and UTV

Live, which had provided coverage of the day's events, had turned to social media to seek out information about the 'homeward' leg of the parade.
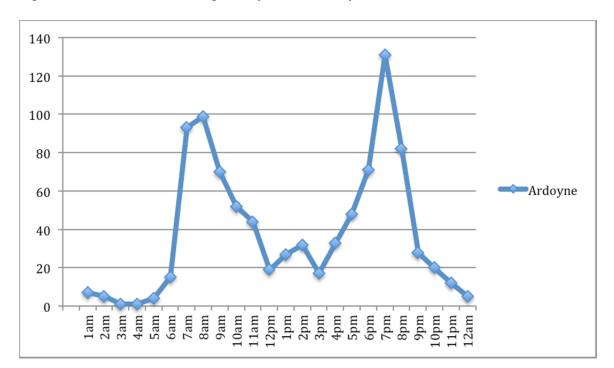
Figure 2: Tweets mentioning Ardoyne, 12th July 2014

The preliminary review of the data revealed that a small minority of the tweets were non-relevant to the study. Most notably, a picture posted by BBC Northern Ireland (BBC NI) television reporter Mark Simpson on 27th June 2014, showing a cross-community 'sleep-out' in Ardoyne, was retweeted 53 times (and 'favorited' 55 times) during the period of data collection. There were also a few tweets circulating during this period that promoted community events, such as a family fun day due to be held by the Ardoyne GAA club in July.

There were two limitations that should be acknowledged. First, despite Discovertext allowing researchers access to the complete public data stream of Twitter (also known as the 'firehose'), it is difficult to verify the representativeness of these tweets. [It is also possible that some tweeters may have been talking about the contentious Ardoyne parade without using some of these keywords. Second, these tweets might be better characterised as the "traces of behaviour" of a small but vocal minority that

nevertheless lack the robustness of traditional opinion polls.[62] Although guidelines provided to journalists by organisations such as National Public Radio (NPR) indicate that retweets are de facto endorsements of the original message,[63] many tweeters still provide disclaimers on their accounts stating that no such judgement should be made in relation to their retweets. Therefore, in the absence of corroborative evidence, it would be misleading to make too many inferences about the attitudes of those responsible for these posts. The same might be said for those who did not express their opinion on the content of such tweets in online spaces. Previous research has indicated that the majority of individuals who access online spaces are unlikely to make public contributions, such as comments on social media sites.[64] The views of these 'watchers' (often described as 'lurkers') on contentious parades in Northern Ireland are virtually impossible to detect using text-mining tools such as Discovertext.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this study was to analyse how critics and supporters of the Orange Order used Twitter to respond to contentious issues such as the rerouting of the Ardoyne parade. Therefore, it was appropriate to focus on the themes that emerged from these tweets despite the inherent limitations, such as the generalisability of the results, outlined above.

Critical Thematic Analysis

 A critical thematic analysis of these tweets was conducted in August 2014.[65] It focused on the words most frequently used by tweeters in their interpretation of key events relating to the contentious Ardoyne parade. The forcefulness of these tweets, as well as the use of derogatory and sectarian language, was noted in order to

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[62] M. Mahrt, M., & M. Scharkow (2013). The value of big data in digital media research. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 57(1): 24. .

[63] For more on these guidelines see this article: http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/07/at-npr-retweets-are-endorsements-after-all/ [accessed 10 October 2014]

[64] Z. Papacharissi (2010) *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites.* London: Routledge.

[65] V. Braun, V. and V. Clarke, (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3 (2). pp. 77-101. ISSN 1478-0887, Available at: http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735/2/thematic_analysis_revised_-_final.pdf [accessed 10 September 2014]/

assess the nature of the debate surrounding these issues, in a similar vein to previous work involving the study of YouTube comments.[66]

Direct quotes from public figures such as bloggers, politicians and professional journalists were used to illustrate key themes. However, a number of measures were taken to protect the anonymity of those unaware participants who lacked the resources to control information about themselves in the public domain.[67] These included the removal of Personally Identifiable Information (PII), such as username and gender, and paraphrasing their tweets in order to avoid them being located using a search engine. This was congruent with previous research that has suggested that the granularity of using verbatim quotes from participants is not essential in order to convey the key themes that emerge from datasets.[68] Such themes were also illustrated through the use of word clouds that visualised the prominent keywords in the dataset. The content collected from Twitter in this study was manually entered into the open-source tool Tagul (https://tagul.com) in order to create the word clouds that feature below. While PII was removed in order to protect the anonymity of these tweeters, offensive and sectarian language was included in order to assess the nature of the debate surrounding these contentious issues.

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[66] M.G.Antony and R.J. Thomas (2010) 'This is citizen journalism at its finest': YouTube and the public sphere in the Oscar Grant shooting incident. *New Media & Society* 12(8): 1280–1296.

[67] R.V. Kozinets, (2010) *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, London: SAGE.

[68] P. Reilly, (2014) The 'Battle of Stokes Croft' on YouTube: The development of an ethical stance for the study of online comments, *SAGE Cases in Methodology*.

Results

Positive, family-friendly images of the Orange Order dominate the Twelfth hashtags

Analysis of the three hashtags revealed how the Orange Order and their supporters were using Twitter to convey a positive, 'family-friendly' image of the Twelfth. This was illustrated by the frequent occurrence of words such as 'celebrations' and 'wonderful' in the #Twelfth2014 corpus (see Figure 4). Many tweeters created '#Twelfthieselfies', 'self-portrait' pictures taken on smart phones by members of the Orange Order and shared on social media sites such as Twitter. Members often took these at the site of Eleventh night bonfires or as they made their way to morning parades on the 12th July. Spectators also hashtagged pictures of their relatives taking part in the parades across Northern Ireland, with no accompanying text that could be construed as an attack on either the Parades Commission, nationalist residents' groups, or their political representatives. For example, there were nine retweets of one picture of an unidentified march that was captioned 'looking great boys!' With so few of these tweets geotagged, it was impossible to verify exactly where these images had been taken. Nevertheless, Belfast, Markethill, and the Rossnowlagh in County Donegal were amongst those locations referred to by tweeters responsible for this content.

Figure 3: Most frequently occurring words in #Twelfth2014 sample (11-14 July 2014).

The Orange Order also used Twitter to promote positive images of the Twelfth. The Order's official Twitter account (@OrangeOrder) was the most frequent contributor to the #TheTwelfth2014, which appeared to be their official #Twelfth hashtag. The Order tweeted frequently throughout this period, providing links to media coverage of the Twelfth and sharing numerous images of the Eleventh night firework displays and scenes from the 17 demonstrations that were taking place across Northern Ireland. A recurring theme in these tweets was the high turnout at these events. Although it is difficult to independently verify such claims, they described the numbers who participated in parades such as the one in Kilkeel as "impressive."[69] There were also many tweets directing users towards a statement on the website of the Grand Orange Lodge issued on behalf of Grand Master Edward Stevenson, in which he referred to the "unprecedented numbers of people" who had joined in the celebrations of the 324th anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne.[70] Stevenson also praised his Orange brethren for their peaceful demonstrations against the Parade Commission's Ardoyne determination and contrasted this with the 'hate crimes' of republicans that had resulted in several Orange halls being vandalised during this period.[71] These attacks were also highlighted by a small number of users who had tagged their tweets with #TheTwelfth.

That is not to say that there were no tweets found in these hashtags that appeared critical of the Orange Order. Rather, there appeared to be a small but vocal minority who 'hijacked' these hashtags in order to highlight their opposition to what one user described as the 'annual hate fest' of the Twelfth. These tweeters went as far as to compare the Orange institution to the Klu Klux Klan and claimed that they were 'fascists' who 'hated everyone.' A few contributors to the #Twelfth2014 tweeted a link to an article on the news media website *The Journal* (www.journal.ie) that focused on the viral image of a five-year old girl who had had the initials KAT (an abbreviated form of 'Kill All Taigs') painted on her face at a Twelfth party.[72] It would be reasonable to presume that the handful of users who retweeted this story were doing

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[69] Orange Order (OrangeOrder). "Impressive turnout of Orangemen last night in Kilkeel #TheTwelfth2014." 13 July 2013, 9.48p.m. Tweet.
[70] The full statement can be accessed here:
http://www.grandorangelodge.co.uk/news.aspx?id=100793#.VHyD7IvjY_u (accessed 10 October 2014)
[71] Graffiti was left on several Orange Halls in Ballycastle and Fermanagh over the 12th demonstrations:
http://www.grandorangelodge.co.uk/news.aspx?id=100793#.VHyD7IvjY_u
[72] The story can be found here: http://www.thejournal.ie/psni-investigating-girl-with-kill-all-taigs-paint-1570811-Jul2014/ (accessed 10 October 2014)

so in order to highlight the perceived sectarianism of the Orange institutions and its supporters. Alongside specific complaints about the disruption caused by the Twelfth, there were also signs that these users continued to hold zero-sum perceptions of politics. For example, one tweeter criticised the hypocrisy of those who claimed that the removal of the Union flag from Belfast City Hall was a hate crime while justifying the burning of the Tricolour on Eleventh night bonfires as 'culture.' The same user also criticised the PSNI for being complicit in what they described as 'hate crimes' that were regularly perpetrated during these bonfires.

Overall, there was a notable absence of sectarian language in the tweets collected under the three Twelfth hashtags. Nor was there any evidence of rational debate about contentious parades emerging between those who had created this content. Indeed, the most frequently retweeted content in these hashtags belonged to professional journalists who were reporting on the parades across Northern Ireland. BBC NI broadcast journalist Clodagh Rice was one of the most frequent contributors to #12th providing regular updates on the Orange Order parades that passed St Patrick's church in Belfast, the site of minor skirmishes between nationalist protesters and marchers in July 2013. Rice confirmed in her tweets that the march had adhered to the Parade Commission's determination that only a single drumbeat should be played as the parade passed the Donegall Street church.[73] While noting that there had been some brief heated exchanges between protesters and the marchers, she reported that the march had passed off peacefully. Similar themes emerged from the Twitter streams of other professional journalists who were reporting on the Twelfth using these hashtags.

Very little to report during the most peaceful Ardoyne parade for years

The absence of violence in the contested interface area meant that there was very little for citizens or professional journalists to comment on during this period. This was perhaps best illustrated by the high number of retweets for humorous posts, such as those that mentioned US singer-songwriter Garth Brooks. He had been the subject of much media coverage north and south of the border prior to the Twelfth,

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[73] Rice, Clodagh (ClodaghLRice). "Fr Michael Sheehan watches Orange parade past St Patrick's Church on Donegall St- single drum beat #12th."12 July 2014, 10.15 a.m. Tweet.

after he had been forced to cancel several Dublin tour dates due to a licencing issue in Croke Park. Local comedian and actor Tim McGarry was one of several users to joke that the singer could "solve all of Ireland's problems" if he agreed to play the Ardoyne shops. This post was amongst the most frequently retweeted in the sample, with 148 retweets between the 8th and 14th July.

Nevertheless, professional journalists were still responsible for the most frequently retweeted content referring to the events in Ardoyne during this period. Analysis of their tweets indicated how little was happening at the scene of the contentious march throughout the Twelfth. The word 'peaceful' was frequently used to characterise the morning parade (see Figure 5), with Ulster Television (UTV) journalist Jane Loughrey reporting that the mood appeared "more relaxed than in previous years."[74] The real-time coverage provided by journalists often focused on the crash barriers, police personnel and vehicles that had been deployed to prevent the violence seen in 2012 and 2013. It was noted by one journalist that there appeared to be "more police than observers" as they awaited the arrival of the march.[75] Newly appointed PSNI Chief Constable George Hamilton was one of those in attendance, as demonstrated by a tweet posted on his official account (@ChiefConPSNI) at 7.48am.[76] This was a precursor to the flurry of tweets that followed the passing of the parade through North Belfast. For example, BBC NI reporter Mark Simpson tweeted a picture showing one of the Ligoniel lodges as they walked past a Greater Ardoyne Residents' Collective (GARC) observer, along with the text: "peaceful start to 12th July marches. No trouble as Orange Order parade passes Ardoyne shops". [77] Posted at 8.41am, this was the most retweeted post by a journalist with 77 retweets and 69 favorites during the period of data collection. Such was the lack of activity throughout the day, BBC NI journalist Kevin Sharkey would humorously tweet "Trouble in #ardoyne," alongside a picture of two dogs squaring off against each

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[74] Loughrey, Jane (Jane_utv). "Although there's a heavy security presence here in Ardoyne, mood appears more relaxed than in previous years." 12 July 2014, 4.58 p.m. Tweet.

[75] Images taken by journalist Tony Rice (@newsmantone) can be found here: http://twicsy.com/i/jEgWWf (accessed 10 September 2014)

[76] Hamilton, George (ChiefConPSNI). "After weeks of planning and engaging communities - Supt Muir Clark on the ground at Ardoyne - keeping people safe." 12 July 2014, 6.48 a.m. Tweet.
[77] Simpson, Mark (@BBCMarkSimpson). "Peaceful start to 12th July marches. No trouble as Orange Order parade passes Ardoyne shops." 12 July 2014, 7.41 a.m. Tweet.

other.[78] He was one of several journalists to regularly tweet pictures from potential flashpoints such as the Ardoyne shop fronts during the day.

Figure 4: Most frequently occurring words in Ardoyne sample (11-14 July 2014).

Journalists such as the News Letter Political Correspondent Sam McBride also provided text-only updates on breaking news, such as the failure of GARC to obtain legal aid that would enable them to mount a legal challenge against the morning parade. Unlike the Twelfth hashtags, there were some signs that journalists were being challenged on their reporting of the day's events. News outlets such as the BBC and UTV were heavily criticised by loyalists for reporting that the traditional route of the parade went through Ardoyne rather than past the shop fronts on the Crumlin Road. This led to some heated back-and-forth arguments between a number of loyalists and a few users who nominally identified themselves as republicans. In one such exchange, a tweeter accused the "pan-unionist front" of lying about the route of the parade and repeated the media claims that it passed numerous Catholic homes.

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[78] Sharkey, Kevin (tv_KevinSharkey). "Trouble in #ardoyne." 12 July 2014, 7.53 p.m. Tweet.

The vast majority of original tweets in the sample expressed support for all those who had contributed to the morning parade passing off without incident. It would be reasonable to presume that many of these users were also responsible for retweeting the journalistic content discussed above. The few politicians who commented on Ardoyne expressed similar sentiments, albeit for different reasons. North Belfast Sinn Fein MLA Gerry Kelly tweeted "hopes for calm day grows" on the morning (9.48am) of the Twelfth, noting that it had been the quietest Eleventh night in years and that the morning parade has passed off "without trouble."[79] His party colleague Carál Ní Chuilín MLA tweeted her "huge respect" for the Ardoyne, Oldpark and Cliftonville youth workers who engaged young people in sports and diversionary activities in the run up to the Twelfth.[80] Although no tweets from 'frontline' unionist politicians were found during the period of data collection, unionist political representatives such as DUP Councillor Nigel Kells used the micro-blogging site to express their support for the "graduated response" and to call for the Ardoyne residents to show greater tolerance of unionist and loyalist culture. Such content was often tagged #letthemhome, a direct reference to the Ligoniel Orange lodges that had yet to complete the return leg of the parade that began in July 2013. One interpretation of this finding might be that these political representatives were continuing to perpetrate zero-sum perceptions of space and politics, praising their respective constituents while criticising the intransigence of the 'other' community. However, the same cannot be said for those members of the public who used Twitter to praise both the nationalist residents and the Orange Order for keeping their respective protests peaceful. Self-styled parody group Loyalists Against Democracy (L.A.D) conveyed this sentiment in a tweet that not only congratulated "all concerned" for the peaceful morning parade but used an appropriate hashtag, namely #compromise.[81]

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[79] Kelly, Gerry (GerryKellyMLA). "The quietest 11th night in years and the morning parade passed Ardoyne, Mountainview and the Dales without trouble. Hope for calm day grows." 12 July 2014, 8.48 a.m. Tweet.

[80] Ní Chuilín, Carál (caralnichuilin). "Huge respect for Ardoyne, Oldpark & Cliftonville Youth Providers supporting sport & diversionary activities for youth over past week #Meas."12 July 2014, 8.04 p.m. Tweet.

[81] L.A.D. (LADFLEG)." This morning at Ardoyne the @OrangeOrder proved that there is no need for a return parade. #Compromise Well done to all concerned." 12 July 2014, 7.37 a.m. Tweet.

Little rational debate about the Ardoyne impasse as Loyalists and Republicans accuse each other of bigotry and intolerance

A small minority of users appeared to be using Twitter to blame the 'other' side for the Ardoyne dispute, with little sign of rational debate about how to resolve it. There were proportionately more tweets in the Ardoyne sample that attacked or mocked the 'other' community than had been found in the Twelfth hashtags. This tended to revolve around crude stereotypes of groups and political leaders, rather than specific individuals, except for a few notable exceptions such as one loyalist woman who was identified as being responsible for sharing a sectarian image on Facebook. For example, the hashtag #rerroutetheflute featured in two tweets that mocked the Orange Order and its supporters for their inability to complete the return leg of the Ligoniel lodges via the Crumlin Road. Their 'graduated response' was also mocked in one meme posted on Twitter, which showed a picture of the Orange Order and unionist politicians at its launch, alongside the caption "The Last Supper." Loyalists were characterised as a "sectarian hate mob," emasculated by the Parades Commission and lacking the "muscle" to force their way past the Ardoyne shops. One tweeter went as far as to declare that loyalism was "finished," citing the rerouted parades in Garvaghy Road, Lower Ormeau and Ardoyne over the past two decades as evidence of their decline. Few praised the Orange Order for the role they played in ensuring the morning parade passed off without incident. Indeed, one of these tweeters predicted that it would likely "kick off" during the return parade later that evening and suggested that the morning parade should also be rerouted away from the Ardoyne shops.

These tweeters often highlighted the sectarianism of the marchers as the reason for their continued opposition to the contentious parade. YouTube footage of the violence seen in July 2013 was held up as evidence of the "sectarian hatred" that the nationalist residents had been subjected to as a result of this controversial parade. Pictures also circulated on Twitter showing that the names of several dead UVF members featured on the drum and banner of the POA flute band. The Orange Order was accused of "glorifying terrorism" through their decision to allow this

particular band to lead the North Belfast parade. One of these tweets was directly addressed to BBC journalist Mark Simpson, presumably to bring this to the attention of the BBC and the other professional journalists who were reporting on the parade. Members and supporters of the Orange Order were quick to respond to this criticism. One tweeter pointed out that this drum skin was used during a memorial parade and that it would likely be changed before the Ardoyne parade due to the Parades Commission determination. A different narrative on this issue emerged from the unverified Twitter account of a member of the POA. This user tweeted that the band was "proud" to display the four names on their uniform and flags.

Several users provided links to a YouTube video of the GARC press conference on the 10th July, during which they outlined their strategy to seek a legal injunction that would ban the outward parade. Local blogger Ardoyne Republican (@RepublicanUnity) also identified the "militarisation" of the Greater Ardoyne community as one of the primary reasons why GARC continued to oppose "unwelcome marches," such as those of the Ligoniel Orange lodges.[82] No specific examples were given of this 'militarisation' but it is reasonable to presume that it referred to the heavy police presence in the area during the Twelfth each year. Contrary to the consensus view that the morning parade had passed off without incident, he also confirmed that several breaches of the Parades Commission determination would be reported to the relevant authorities[83] The United Protestant Voice (@unitedprotestan) responded to this tweet by asking Ardoyne Republican for evidence of these breaches and accusing GARC of participating in an unlawful protest against the contentious march.[84] The study also found some evidence of hostile exchanges that had taken place between the republican blogger and the West Belfast Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG) a few days earlier. During the conversation on the 7th July, the former described the latter as the "supporters of UDA fascists" in response to their claims that the Ardoyne residents were being held

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[82] Ardoyne Republican (RepublicanUnity). "Militarising the Greater Ardoyne community has and continues to be one of key reasons why GARC oppose unwelcome marches though our area!" 12 July 2014, 6.14 p.m. Tweet.

[83] Ardoyne Republican (RepublicanUnity). "GARC Activists, Residents and Independent Observers logged a number of breaches of determintion during this morning's march through Ardoyne."12 July 2014, 2.42 p.m. Tweet.

[84] U.P.V. (Unitedprotestan). "@RepublicanUnity breaches ? For instance ? Did these breaches involve an unlawful protest by Garc ?" 12 July 2014, 3.49 p.m. Tweet.

to ransom by "deviant republicans".[85] This prompted another user to respond that both factions in Ardoyne appeared to hate each other, which was typical of the interactions between loyalist and republicans that were found in the sample. However, it should be noted that these were few in number and most tweets did not directly address other users in this way.

Loyalists also appeared to be using Twitter to express their solidarity with the Ligoniel lodges. One tweet on behalf of the POA, thanking their supporters for their support, would be retweeted 13 times on the evening of the 12th July. The hashtag #letthemhome was commonly used in conjunction with such tweets of support for these lodges. Like their republican counterparts, they also used microblogging to blame other groups for the Ardoyne impasse. For instance, the Parades Commission were criticised for supposedly rewarding the republican violence in July 2012 by rerouting the return parade away from the Ardoyne shops. The PSNI were also accused of facilitating "unlawful" GARC demonstrations against the parade on the morning of the Twelfth. However, it was the republican movement that inevitably bore the brunt of loyalist anger on Twitter during this period. The rerouted parade was said to be further evidence of republican bigotry and their intolerance towards unionist and loyalist culture. This was perhaps best illustrated by a tweet posted by the West Belfast UPRG, in which they asked "Sinn Fein/IRA" what it was about the parade that they despised.[86] It was therefore perhaps no surprise that there was much glee amongst these cyber loyalists when news broke of GARC's failed bid for legal aid on the 11th July. PUP representative for South Antrim Scott McDowell urged his followers to "enjoy their day" after the bid by a "very bitter GARC member" had been rejected by the high court.[87]

Loyalists also used Twitter to share eyewitness perspectives on events as they unfolded. These included a picture of a sign posted on a lamppost which stated

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[85] Ardoyne Republican (RepublicanUnity)."@WestBelfastUPRG More bullshite from the supporter of UDA fascists!" 7 July 2014, 8.57 p.m. Tweet.

[86] West Belfast UPRG (WestBelfastUPRG). "GERRY KELLY, SINN FEIN/IRA, PLEASE TELL THE WORLD WHAT EXACTLY IS IT YOU DESPISE ABOUT THE OO PARADE WHICH PASSES ARDOYNE ???" 10 July 2014, 9.58 p.m. Tweet.

[87] PUP-mcdowell, scott (scottieboy32). "THE HIGH COURT BID BY A VERY BITTER GARC MEMBER TO STOP TOMORROW'S MORNING PARADE PAST ARDOYNE HAS FAILED !!!!!!!!! NOW LET'S ENJOY OUR DAY." 11 July 2014, 4.14 p.m. Tweet.

"Take the hint, take the alternative route" and a picture of a "republican camera man" trying to find a fault with the parade as it passed the Ardoyne shops. Much of this user-generated content focused on the "unlawful" GARC protest at the Ardoyne shops. One seemingly sarcastic tweet, which featured an image of a large crowd gathering at the North Belfast interface, noted a large crowd of republicans that had gathered there even though all the shops were shut. The West Belfast UPRG would post a picture of the same scene 45 minutes later, albeit from a different vantage point. This tweet described GARC as "dissident filth" that were engaging in an illegal protest within the "PC sterile zone" of the shop fronts, the latter presumably a reference to the Parades Commission determination.[88] Few of these tweets named individuals within GARC, with the exception of two tweets that mocked its spokesperson Dee Fennell. One of these sarcastically urged Fennell to take the "alternative route" to the GARC protest, while the other questioned whether Fennell and his colleagues would protest over the Glenbryn bonfire, which in the attached picture was shown to have an anti-GARC banner placed on top of it. Like their nationalist and republican counterparts, loyalists appeared more likely to use Twitter to criticise groups, rather than individuals, who they perceived to be responsible for the Ardoyne parade dispute.

There were of course some loyalists who felt that the 'graduated response' did not go far enough. This vocal minority used Twitter to call for stronger action to be taken by the Orange Order and its supporters in order to overturn the Parades Commission determination on the return parade. One user proposed that loyalists should boycott the businesses that belonged to family members of the Parades Commission. Others argued that the fact that the parade had been rerouted in the aftermath of rioting by Ardoyne residents in July 2012 showed that violence, rather than peaceful protest, was more likely to generate results. Hence, one tweeter urged the Ligoniel lodges to ignore the wishes of the Ardoyne residents and to "plough on up" the Crumlin Road. However, it should be noted that very few of these tweets used sectarian language to describe GARC and the nationalist residents. Those that did use such language often endorsed loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Defence Association

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[88] West Belfast UPRG (WestBelfastUPRG). "GARC DISSIDENT FILTH HOLDING AN ILLEGAL PROTEST WITHIN THE PC STERILE ZONE AT ARDOYNE SHOPFRONTS #SHAREDSPACE." 12 July 2014, 7.46 a.m. Tweet.

(UDA) and were hashtagged #nosurrender. Clearly, it was impossible to tell whether these tweeters were actually affiliated with these organisations. The absence of contextual information, as well as the appropriation of loyalist tropes by L.A.D, meant that no generalisations could be made about the attitudes of those who used such language.

Twitter users move quickly to debunk rumours and misinformation

Rumours in the Ardoyne sample appeared to have a short life span. There was some evidence to suggest that both loyalists and republicans were checking the veracity of claims made by each other on the microblogging site. Loyalists were accused of digitally altering pictures in order to portray GARC and the nationalist residents in a negative light. A picture of one of the protesters that had gathered outside the Ardoyne shops began to circulate on Twitter shortly after 7.30pm on 12th July. The placard being held aloft by the protester contained a mock-up road sign indicating that the Orange Order was not welcome in the area. One tweeter suggested that this was evidence of the intolerance of republicans and highlighted the fact that the Ardoyne shops were closed, presumably a reference to the unlawful nature of the GARC protests against the march. Twitter users immediately appeared sceptical of the authenticity of this image. Visual evidence suggesting that this was a photoshopped image was shared on Twitter within a few minutes of this tweet being posted. The original image showed that the protester was involved in a peaceful Christian protest at the shop fronts. His placard contained the motto "love Thy Neighbour," not the anti-Orange Order slogan that had featured in the doctored image. This was corroborated by an image of the same scene taken by BBC NI journalist Kevin Sharkey a few hours earlier and shared on the microblogging site. Many users were prompted to tweet the Twitter user responsible for the sharing the photoshopped image accusing them of spreading lies about what was happening on the ground at Ardoyne. It was perhaps no surprise that the number of retweets of the altered image declined significantly after this revelation.

Loyalists also reacted angrily to "Republican lies" about not only the route of the contentious parade but also an alleged attack by Protestants on a Kilkeel chapel. They also responded quickly to online rumours suggesting that an image of Oscar

Knox, the five year old who had died of a rare form of childhood cancer, had been burnt on an Eleventh night bonfire in Randalstown, County Antrim.[89] A picture supposedly showing the bonfire began to circulate on Twitter late on 11th July, prompting many angry responses from Twitter users. The Orange Order was the subject of many sectarian and abusive tweets that questioned how this could be considered a legitimate expression of loyalist culture. Some tweeters speculated that it might have been due to Knox's Catholic background, with Irish tricolours and stolen statues of the Virgin Mary having already been seen on Eleventh night bonfires. These rumours were quickly refuted and condemned by unionist and loyalists on Twitter. The Ulster Unionist representative Bill Manwaring tweeted that those spreading "lies" about the bonfire were the "lowest of the low."[90] Loyalists also used Twitter to 'name and shame' two accounts that they believed to be responsible for starting these rumours. However, it should be noted that it was not possible to verify their claims, particularly given that one of these accounts was closed down in the early hours of 12th July.

Many of these users shared visual evidence showing that the image had been photoshopped. The Randalstown Sons of Ulster Flute band uploaded a picture of their Eleventh night bonfire to their Twitter account (@RandalstownSOU) at 12.39 am on 12th July. The accompanying text asked people to retweet the image, confirming that no image of Oscar Knox had been burnt and stating that the five year old "was a hero,"[91] This was the most heavily retweeted in the sample, with 380 retweets and 93 favourites during the period of data collection. Further evidence that the image of Oscar Knox had been digitally inserted into the picture emerged later that evening. One tweet provided a link to the original image of the bonfire that had been taken by photographer Stephen Barnes in July 2013.[92] The image of Knox that had caused so much anger amongst Twitter users a few hours earlier was noticeably

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[89] For an example of one of the blogs that referred to the alleged burning of the image of Oscar Knox on an 11th night bonfire, see: https://beingweirdlyawesome.wordpress.com/2014/07/12/horrible-people-everywhere/ (accessed 10 October 2014)

[90] Manwaring, Bill (billmanwaring). "Those who started lies about Oscar Knox pictures burnt on a bonfire are the lowest of the low #OscarWasAHero please RT." 12 July 2014, 12.02 a.m. Tweet.

[91] Randalstown SOU (RandalstownSOU). "If everyone could retweet this and confirm! There was no Oscar Knox memorabilia/flags or objects on Randalstown bonfire. Oscar was a hero!" 12 July 2014, 12.30 a.m. Tweet.

[92] The original image taken by Stephen Barnes can be found here: http://www.demotix.com/news/2246569/protestants-prepare-11th-night-bonfires-northern-ireland#media-2246528 (accessed 10 October 2014)

absent from this picture. Loyalists who challenged those repeating the Knox rumour throughout the night would refer to both these images. It was noticeable that the number of tweets that referred to the Knox incident sharply declined after this visual evidence began to circulate online. As had been seen with the image of the protester, Twitter provided a platform for both sides to correct misinformation and rumours that had the potential to increase the sectarian tensions surrounding the Ardoyne impasse.

Conclusion

The quietest Twelfth in recent years was illustrated by the family-friendly images shared on Twitter between 11th and 14th July 2014. The Orange Order, and its supporters, highlighted the positive experiences of those who attended these parades through the innovative use of hashtags such as #twelthieselfie. The users that contributed to these hashtags tended to be full of praise for the peaceful and non-violent conduct of the Orange Order. In particular, there was much support for its 'graduated response' to the Parade Commission's decision to ban the return leg of the Ligoniel Orange lodges from passing by the Ardoyne shops. That is not to say that there was much evidence of cross-community consensus emerging on the legitimacy of parades and related protests. Rather, zero-sum perceptions of issues such as the disputed Ardoyne parade continued to be expressed by a small but vocal minority of Twitter users during this period. Some users attempted to hijack the Twelfth hashtags in order to criticise the Orange institution and to depict its members as sectarian bigots. There were also many cyber loyalists who peddled crude stereotypes of the GARC and the Ardoyne residents, accusing republicans of being intolerant towards unionist and loyalist culture. What was perhaps surprising was that so few of these tweets used sectarian language in their attacks on members of the 'other' community. However, the limitations in the sampling strategy outlined earlier might partly explain this finding. It is also feasible that some users may have deleted or removed offensive content shortly after it had been posted, therefore making it unavailable to the researcher.

Much of the Twitter activity during this period focused on the ongoing dispute over the controversial return leg of the Ardoyne parade. Loyalists and republicans articulated competing narratives on contentious issues such as the route of the

parade, the Parades Commission determination, and what constituted 'lawful protest' during this period. With a few notable exceptions, there was very little debate between loyalists and republicans on these polarising issues. In this way, Twitter appeared to reinforce the zero-sum perceptions of politics held by rival groups, which was congruent with the findings of a previous study of the website strategies of Northern Irish political groups.[93] However, Twitter might not be the most appropriate platform to facilitate rational debate about contentious issues such as the Ardoyne parade dispute. The complexities of such issues are unlikely to be explored through the exchange of messages that are restricted to just 140 characters.

A related concern would be the representativeness of the Twitter users who engage in such online debates. Recent research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project has suggested that social media perpetuates the "spiral of silence," whereby people only speak in public about certain policy issues if they believe that their views are shared by others.[94] Therefore, generalisations about the attitudes of loyalists and republicans cannot be made based upon the themes that emerge from tweets that address controversial issues, such as the Parades Commission decision to ban the return leg of the Orange Order parade from passing by the Ardoyne shops. Future research should consider how such events are mediated on Facebook, identified as a key organisational platform for the union flag protests, as well as other media channels that afford users more space in which to express their opinions.

Twitter arguably functioned as a newswire during the Twelfth; allowing members of the public to follow events, such as the morning parade in North Belfast, in real-time. Although there was no equivalent of the "crowdsourced newswire" that emerged via NPR editor Andy Carvin's Twitter account during the 'Arab Spring,' Twitter did provide users with an array of information sources courtesy of the citizen and professional journalists who were tweeting their perspectives on events as they unfolded.[95] The study suggested that the latter were more influential in these information flows, primarily due to the high number of retweets for content produced

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[93] P.Reilly. Framing the Troubles Online: Northern Irish groups and website strategy, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011),

[94] K. Hampton, L. Rainie, W. Lu, W.,M.Dwyer,I Shin, & K. Purcell (2014). "Social Media and the 'Spiral of Silence.' Pew Research Center, Washington, DC.   Available at http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/08/26/social-media-and-the-spiral-of-silence/ (accessed 10 October 2014)

[95] B.Stelter, Twitter feed evolves into a news wire, New York Times, 13 February 2011. Available at: http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/twitter-feed-evolves-into-a-news-wire-about-egypt/?_r=0 (accessed 10 October 2014)

by journalists from BBC NI and UTV. Such coverage often revealed that very little was happening on the ground, as demonstrated by the large number of images that were shared showing police personnel and members of the public standing at the Crumlin Road interface. Citizens were quick to check the veracity of the reports emerging from the scene. The results also suggest that loyalists were using Twitter to challenge what they perceived to be inaccurate or misleading reports by professional journalists, such as those that discussed the traditional route taken by the Ligoniel lodges in North Belfast. There were also several examples of citizens using the site to refute rumours and expose those responsible for photoshopping images, as was seen with the Randalstown bonfire and the picture of a protester in Ardoyne. The relatively short lifespan of these rumours, not to mention the lack of media coverage they received, illustrated how effectively tweeters corrected misinformation during this period. While acknowledging that social media has often been used to reinforce divisions between rival communities in Northern Ireland, this study suggested Twitter facilitates modes of communication that have the potential to diffuse sectarian tensions around the marching season.

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