

Digital weapons in a post-conflict society

Faith Gordon and Paul Reilly examine how social media is being used by all sides in current-day Northern Ireland where paramilitary style assaults remain endemic

Anti-social behaviour remains high on the community agenda in Northern Ireland, as demonstrated by media headlines in 2018 such as 'Residents 'at the end of tether' over anti-social behaviour in North Belfast' (Irish News, May 28).

Media coverage typically positions children and young people as the main perpetrators of anti-social behaviour within these communities (Gordon 2018). This is congruent with official youth justice policies directed towards children and young people, which frame this social group as being primarily responsible for anti-social behaviour, social disruption and low-level intercommunal violence near sectarian interfaces (Jarman and O'Halloran 2001; Gordon 2018).

Such stereotyping has often been linked to the suspicion that surrounds groups of young people hanging around on street corners in these areas (Hamilton et al. 2003: 13). This often distracts policymakers and audiences from the paramilitary violence perpetrated against children and young people within these communities; indeed, there is a long history of young people being exiled or subjected to so-called paramilitary 'punishment attacks' for alleged anti-social behaviour (Hillyard et al. 2005: 190).

This chapter will explore the relatively under-researched issue of how social media is used in relation to paramilitary style assaults in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the preliminary findings from an ongoing study by the authors, it will explore how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are being monitored by the police in order to identify such incidents and to encourage citizens to report them to the authorities. The chapter concludes by assessing the impact of the #stopattacks campaign and the role of community-based organisations and youth workers in establishing an alternative discourse in this area.

Research context: post-conflict society

Northern Ireland has the youngest population of any jurisdiction in the UK and is also one of the poorest regions in the European Union (EU), with 25 per cent of children said to be living in poverty in 2016 (Barnard, 2018). Its communities continue to suffer from 'conflict-related trauma', after more than 30 years of violence, 'pervasive sectarianism, hard-line policing, military operations and paramilitary punishments' (Scruton 2007: 148). As previous research demonstrates, paramilitary violence against children and young people remains endemic within communities (Gordon 2018). For example, the 'Above the Law' report by The Detail found that 4,336 paramilitary style assaults were reported to the police in Northern Ireland between January 1990 and the end of October 2014 (Torney et al. 2015). As a social group, it is children and young people in particular who are at the receiving end of such violence.

Paramilitaries' use of social media in the digital age

Contemporary research such as Gordon's (2015; 2018) has explored the impact of naming and shaming and media intrusion upon children and young people. In this research, children, adolescents and their advocates provided examples of how paramilitary style assaults and vigilante assaults, followed sustained negative media coverage. Significantly, the research found that when they were also subjected to abuse and bullying (and in some instances paramilitary style assaults) after creating social media content that challenged negative stereotypes of young people living in working class communities (Gordon 2018). This was congruent with previous

research which found that police and community workers expressed concerns about the use of these platforms to facilitate new forms of anti-social behaviour that had the potential to exacerbate tensions in contested interface areas within Belfast (Reilly 2011; 2012).

One underexplored issue is the use of social media by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, to police children and young people. Historically, these groups would punish young people deemed to be engaging in anti-social behaviour using methods such as displaying posters in public spaces, tar- and-feathering attacks, and banning them from using local community-based services.

In the digital age, there have been some reports that Facebook has been used by paramilitaries to post the names and photographs of individuals accused of anti-social behaviour. Such posts were said to be published online before or after a series of paramilitary style assaults in communities (see BBC Newsline, January 19, 2017). In one such incident, a republican paramilitary style assault on a 17-year-old man in West Belfast was linked to a hit list that contained the details of 50 people accused of crimes such as drug dealing and burglary and that had been circulated on social media (Rutherford 2017).

Yet, preliminary research by the authors into newspaper coverage of paramilitary style assaults suggests that few of them involve social media. While it is likely that such incidents are under-reported, our study of the three main Northern Irish daily newspapers (Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and News Letter) found that there were few other examples; the aforementioned hit list story was the only one of 144 articles focusing on paramilitary style assaults in these publications to mention social media being used in this way.

While the scale of the use of social media by paramilitaries to threaten young people has yet to be established, evidence has emerged suggesting the police are monitoring social media with a view to prosecuting individuals involved in organising or instigating violence.

During the public disorder seen during the union flag protests (December 2012-March 2013), the then Justice Minister, David Ford, confirmed that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was monitoring social media for messages which amounted to incitement to hatred or to commit criminal offences such as arson (The Guardian 6 December 2012). Statistics obtained from the PSNI under the Freedom of Information Act showed that 2,111 social media-related incidents had been reported to the police between January and May 2013, compared to 2,887 reported incidents during the calendar year of 2012. A total of 229 of these cases were reported in relation to the content posted during the peak of the flag protest movement in January and February 2013 (Spencer, 2012).

Yet, PSNI Operations Superintendent Ken Pennington would point to the problem of verification of social media content, when asked about why the police had not done more to address the sectarianism and threatening behaviour on social media (Nolan et al., 2014: 40). Moreover, this emphasis on policing the role of social media in inciting violence has often been at the expense of investigating whether platforms such as Facebook have been used to organise and promote paramilitary style assaults within working-class loyalist and republican communities.

Tools for campaigns and as a means of resistance

There is a growing body of literature exploring the use of social media as a tool for social activism that challenges power relations (see Meikle 2018 for an overview). In contrast, there has been relatively little research investigating how children and young people, as well as their advocates, utilise social media as a tool of resistance in calling for social change in a post-conflict society. In such contexts, children and young people may benefit significantly from the ability to use social media to challenge the aforementioned negative stereotyping of this social group as being folk

devils who are primarily responsible for anti-social behaviour and other societal problems (Gordon 2018).

Active resistance towards paramilitary violence and intimidation has emerged in the form of the #stopattacks campaign, first launched in 2009 by social enterprise Public Achievement under the guise of its Where is my Public Servant project (WIMPS). Led by Public Achievement's Chief Executive Paul Smyth, #stopattacks has used social media to hold the PSNI Chief Constable to account for the poor clearance rates of paramilitary style assaults, which are reportedly below four percent (Smyth, 2017). What started off as a campaign that provided a voice to the families and victims affected by paramilitary style assaults, has evolved into a highly sophisticated social media campaign involving the sharing of video content on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

A key strategic objective of #stopattacks has been to improve media reporting of these attacks, which have tended to downplay the consequences for the victims and their families. Most recently, the campaign has commissioned a short film in which young people from Belfast interview families, victims and the emergency services who respond to such incidents. This has been shared on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with the stated intention of the content being used by schools and youth groups in Northern Ireland to facilitate discussion on this issue. Future work should focus on the efficacy of this campaign in challenging the media stereotyping of young people and paramilitary style assaults in the context of a deeply divided society.

What now?

There remain many questions as to the role of social media in paramilitary style assaults in Northern Ireland. As discussed above, it is clear that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are being used by loyalist and republican paramilitaries to threaten and intimidate children and young people, particularly in working-class communities in sectarian interfaces. Yet, the scale of such activity is difficult to estimate due to the low reporting rate of such incidents and media coverage that tends to either overlook or misrepresent such attacks.

Nevertheless, social media does appear to have potential as a tool to resist such practices, as demonstrated by its use by the police and other key stakeholders to gather data on paramilitary style assaults. Future work should focus on the efficacy of such campaigns to increase the reporting of these attacks within these communities and to improve the discourse that surrounds these issues in policy circles.

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Dr Paul Reilly is Senior Lecturer in Social Media & Digital Society at the University of Sheffield. He specialises in the study of online political communication, with a specific interest in how social media is used to promote better community relations in divided societies. He has written one book on the role of the internet in conflict transformation in Northern Ireland ('Framing the Troubles Online: Northern Irish Groups and Website Strategy,' Manchester University Press 2011) and is currently finishing his second on the role of social media in contentious politics in the region (due 2019). His work has been published in a number of journals including *First Monday*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *New Media & Society*, *Policy and Internet* and *Urban Studies*. This research has been funded by a number of organisations including the British Academy, EU 7th Framework Programme for Research (FP7), EU Horizon 2020, and the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

