Social Media and Conflict Dynamics on Northern Ireland's Peace Lines

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Abstract

Over three thousand people died and hundreds of thousands more were injured in serious violence during Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' (1969-1999). At interfaces between the Republican and Nationalist Catholic neighbourhoods and predominantly Loyalist and Unionist Protestant neighbourhoods, the violence was particularly raw and volatile, particularly when political and community tensions were high. As the peace process took hold, enormous effort by community leaders, paramilitaries and other agencies has helped to gradually reduce street conflict to low levels. However, the rise of social media in the last 5-10 years has added a new dimension, both good and bad - children and young people use it as a tool to socialise, but ironically also to arrange fights, video and share them. The fights - between individuals - are attended by up to 100 youths and children, aged between 8 and 18, boys and girls. They have often been sectarian, and weapons such as knives, hammers and petrol bombs have appeared in recent incidents, alarming the community, raising fears they could easily morph into more serious confrontation. How does social media impact conflict dynamics in a post-conflict region like Northern Ireland? This policy brief explores the nature of the problem and how those at the frontline such as youth workers, residents and the police use social media to counter it, and offers recommendations for the future.

1. Background

Northern Ireland is a post conflict society still coming to terms with 30 plus years of vicious community and State violence in which over 3500 died and hundreds of thousands were

injured. It is now being openly referred to as a 'war.' The Good Friday Agreement[1] was signed in 1998 paving the way for democratically elected government and 'relative' peace. Paramilitary groups are still active on both sides. Belfast still has 97 peace lines/walls, separation barriers between predominantly Republican and Nationalist Catholic neighbourhoods and predominantly Loyalist and Unionist Protestant neighbourhoods. The biggest wall is higher than the Berlin Wall and has stood for 50 years. "Interfaces" in Northern Ireland refer to a street, crossroad, wall, security barrier, or gate where physical conflict occurs between the two communities (the real, or imaginary boundary between the two communities).

Post conflict Northern Ireland remains a divided society, which is reflected in voting and social patterns: the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) community is mainly in favour of retaining the union with the rest of the UK, while the Catholic Nationalist Republicans (CNR) are more ambivalent. A LucidTalk opinion poll in November 2018 found majority 60% NI support for remaining in the UK, if the UK were to remain in the EU, and an even split (48% each) if the UK were to leave the EU on agreed terms. However, in the event of a 'no deal' Brexit, 55% would favour unity with the Irish Republic.

Social media has had positive and negative impacts on Northern Ireland's (NI) ongoing peace process. Previously, cross community engagement at grassroots level would have been on radio talk shows (BBC Talkback), news and current affairs radio and TV (UTV Live, Counterpoint, BBC Newsline, BBC Spotlight), letters pages of newspapers and in later stages, facilitated face to face talks, at all levels including politicians, community leaders and paramilitaries.

Many serious incidents of intercommunity violence at interface flashpoints were sometimes sparked by a tiny incident, such as a stone thrown by a child. They could quickly escalate, as rumours and fear spread like wildfire, often ending in riots and gunfire, involving hundreds of people, young and old. Many deaths occurred at these flashpoints.

As the peace process took hold, technology was critical. In the 1990s, a network of community workers/paramilitaries developed a 'firefighting' system by using mobile phones to warn their counterparts on the other side of trouble, anxiety, or concerns. Rapid coordinated action was very effective in stamping out violence and reducing tension at the Peace Walls.

2.   Politicians' Use of Social Media

Politicians have learned the power of social media. Young Northern Ireland politicians maintain they are very different from previous generations of politicians in that they are prepared to socialise with political opponents. This is a radical departure from the past and

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[1]The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) or Belfast Agreement was an historic and dynamic peace pact negotiated in April 1998, between the majority of political parties in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish governments. It was chaired by US Senator George Mitchell. It was approved by large majorities in referendums on both sides of the Irish border and created new relationships in tripartite arrangements between Belfast, London and Dublin to foster socio-economic progress. The Democratic Unionist Party opposed the Good Friday Agreement.

marks a progression to what could be termed a 'normal' society. As one points out, "bridges" and "commonality" are being built on issues such as mental health, socio-economic and 'bread and butter' issues that have day to day effects on both communities.

Dale Pankhurst is a young newly elected DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) councillor who describes himself as a "working class Loyalist". He recently took part in a youth debate at Feile An Phobail, a community festival in a nearby Nationalist/Republican area of West Belfast and publicly tweeted afterwards: "Thanks for inviting me. Although the majority of the floor disagreed with my viewpoint (as expected!), it was an enjoyable experience."[2] The reaction on Twitter was very favourable: "More of this please Dale. Build Bridges not trenches"; "Great to see Dale, fair play to you"; "At least you engaged. Credit where it is due."[3]

Dale Pankhurst also uses social media to ease tension and influence young people.

> It is very good as a communication tool to be used between elected reps and community workers. It gels people together as a network, so if there's any interface trouble, we're straight onto it, particularly amongst residents. There've been countless incidents over the past six months where residents Facebook me, or message me about an incident and I see that and I'm straight down on to it. There was actually a chap, a taxi driver, who messaged me about a group of youths who just weren't listening to community reps, so I went down to sort it out. I do know at grassroots level, there is a lot of chat between community workers.

Pankhurst retweeted a comment by Jim Branagh from a North Belfast loyalist area who described how a family member lost his life at an interface incident. Jim said: "Please don't get dragged into it. I've seen the damage it can do to a family and a community. It's not nice. Think before you act please." Pankhurst then adds his own comments[4]: "There's a certain section of young people who want to try rioting. They see archive pictures on TV and they think 'what did I miss? That looks like fun, that looks energetic. Oh my god, there's fire.' Kids don't realise that a petrol bomb, brick or a glass bottle over the head is lethal. You could kill someone. If someone goes up in flames, they're gone. It's a horrible story but it does show what can happen."

> I think it's important to retweet because it helps Jim express his feelings but secondly it can show what can happen. It can serve as a warning to young people. Young people follow me on Twitter so hopefully it clicks with them, like a light switch, and they'll not go out that night. Snapchat is hard to reach because kids can create groups and then send a location where they can meet and then it disappears forever.

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[2] Twitter @Dale_Pankhurst; August 07, 2019
[3] Twitter @PastorJimberoo1, reply to Dale Pankhurst; August 07, 2019
[4] Dale Pankhurst, Democratic Unionist Party councillor in North Belfast; interview with Brendan McCourt at Belfast City Hall, August 2019.

Pankhurst describes what it feels like to engage with someone on social media, as opposed to face to face engagement:

> It's almost like you're sitting in a prison and there is a big glass screen between you and the other person and you can't see the person except through one image. If you can get to talk to them on a personal level, it's much more helpful. The problem with social media is 'keyboard warriors' or "anonymous trolls." On a conversation on Twitter you can take half an hour to respond and think and think and think, whereas, a conversation on a personal level you have to respond immediately. Face to face conversations are the best way to do it because you actually see the person.

Pankhurst believes this generation of young politicians are "very different" from previous generations. They will socialise and 'have a laugh' with politicians from the 'other side'. They also have common ground on many social issues such as mental health, jobs and the economy. Talking face-to-face about those issues helps builds bridges. But politicians need to realise that real bridge-building to consolidate and sustain peace in Northern Ireland requires careful communication on social media. Politicians in post-conflict countries like Northern Ireland would do well to study how social media can help and hurt their communities.

3.   The Role of Social Media in Youth Fights

Young people have found ways to use technology for negative purposes on the interfaces. Ten years ago, youths aged 10-17 years old used the social media site Bebo and texting via mobile phone was used to arrange riots. This was well documented in a research paper by Dr Paul Reilly, University of Leicester, in 2009.[5] In his research and interviews, Reilly uncovers interesting insights that show striking similarities to today's 'arranged fights': 1. The young people involved knew each other; 2. They arranged the riot via text messages on mobile phones and a social networking site; 3. Some youth workers thought there was a sectarian dimension to it; 4. The young people took part because they had little else that excited them.

Interestingly, this activity a decade ago, involved groups of youngsters, compared to today's individual 'arranged fights'. Community workers from East Belfast who made these observations analysed the relationship between sectarian violence and average youth street fights motivated by individual, rather than collective grievances.[6] All of the community workers confirmed that they were aware of incidents of street rioting that had been organised on social networking sites. Two of the North Belfast community workers stated that the violence that marred the lighting of the Christmas tree at Belfast City Hall in December 2009 had been organised on [the social media website] Bebo. A West Belfast community

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[5]Reilly, P. (2011) 'Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: policy responses to young people's use of social media for organizing anti-social behavior. Policy and Internet, 3 (1) pp. 1-23. East Belfast Community worker 1 p10-11

[6]Reilly, P. (2011) 'Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: policy responses to young people's use of social media for organizing anti-social behavior. Policy and Internet, 3 (1) p11

worker also asserted that violence between youth gangs on the Springfield Road/Shankill interface was organised via SMS text messaging and Bebo. A common theme in the interviews was that many of the participants in these street riots were friends with members of the 'other' community. An East Belfast community worker reported that the so-called 'recreational rioting' in their area had been organised on Bebo by youth who knew each other from the local integrated college. One interviewee stated that the violence in their areas should be characterised as anti-social behaviour rather than a return to the sectarian violence synonymous with the 'Troubles': Rioting is designed to get a "bit of craic" (fun) with the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland), young people self-justify their violence, defending their community, feel as if they have missed out on the conflict. (East Belfast community worker 1).

Community workers from West Belfast also supported the thesis that this was antisocial behaviour rather than a return to the 'Troubles', with one community worker suggesting that some people were always likely to use social networking sites 'for what it's not meant to be used for.' However, two of the interviewees were uncomfortable with the use of the term recreational rioting, which they felt depoliticised this violence. In the words of one West Belfast community worker: "I think there is also a sectarian dimension to it; children and young people may not know, or have met, anyone on the other side but there is a sense that they are the Enemy." (West Belfast community worker 1)[7]

Some past studies cited in Reilly's paper (Cownie 2008; Centre for Young Men's Studies 2009) suggest that youth were engaging in clashes at Belfast sectarian boundaries because they were bored and it was something to do. Others (Leonard 2008) felt that the underlying political context of longstanding community division was a more important factor than had been previously realised.[8]

By 2009, Northern Ireland's government was relatively stable and the outlook was generally optimistic. Fast forward to today and Northern Ireland has had no government for three years. Brexit, and the deep political uncertainty accompanying it has added a new and unsettling dimension (which is dealt with later in this brief).

Since 2012 and the growth in popularity of smartphones, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, What's App, Instagram and Snapchat have now become the dominant communication medium. A hot topic can go viral within minutes.

Unlike mainstream media, these platforms are unregulated. On one level they have been a force for good. As community barriers have been broken down, especially among very young people, through superb, groundbreaking work by youth leaders, genuine friendships and relationships have developed and deepened on social media across the divide. The next generation are socialising, meeting in each other's areas, having children and even moving

[7]Reilly, P. (2011) 'Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: policy responses to young people's use of social media for organizing anti-social behavior. Policy and Internet, 3 (1). pp. 1-23. West Belfast Community worker 1 p11.

[8]Reilly, P. (2011) 'Anti-social' networking in Northern Ireland: policy responses to young people's use of social media for organizing anti-social behavior. Policy and Internet, 3 (1) p4.

'across the line' to live in what was once classed 'enemy territory'. Ten years ago, this would have been unthinkable.

But familiarity can sometimes take a strange turn. Those involved in the organised fights met through cross community projects. "We'd been mates. We all got on", says one young man who was interviewed in the Irish News, a local paper.[9] There had been some organised fights in the area (North and West Belfast) at weekends, arranged through social media. "It didn't start as sectarian," says his friend, from across the peace line, "just groups arranging to meet and fight." The mixed group of friends listened to music on a boombox and enjoyed each other's company. Then, according to one, someone played "Protestant songs". Then the other side played Irish rebel songs. Some young people had been drinking. It quickly escalated from pushing and shoving to full-blown physical fights. From that night, in the middle of February, it escalated to two fights a week. "Things became more violent as the weeks went on."[10] Some kids then brought along weapons "for protection". At this point, youth workers and police stepped in, fearing dire consequences. The two young lads and others were selected for a trip to South Africa to learn about deadly gang culture. Now they have more focus, having learned about choices in life: "Every choice leads to a consequence, good or bad."

4.   Social Media as a Force for Good and Bad Among Youth

Youth workers on either side of the peace lines have also recognised the benefits of using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter as tools to enhance community cohesion and to counter mainstream media who often only report the 'bad' news from the area. Since January and February 2019, after up to 40 'arranged fight' incidents, youth workers have been out on the ground at night, on regular shift patterns, enabling them to respond quickly to police and residents' concerns. When incidents do occur, they quickly collect evidence at the scene and upload it to WhatsApp to keep the community informed and to counter malicious rumours and distortion of the facts.

They also upload content containing positive news stories about individuals and events in each other's territory and frequently 'like' and 'share' each other's content. One group has appointed a full-time communications officer, to underline its commitment. It's difficult to assess the real impact of such a strategy in the short term. It certainly creates a 'feel good' factor among youth workers and young people involved in youth clubs and demonstrates there is a positive community spirit that reaches across the divide. These stories seldom reach mainstream media. Additionally, there are groups of young people living in these areas who are 'hard to reach', preferring life 'on the street', and who do not want to be part of any structured engagement with youth workers.

On the other hand, there is evidence that intensive work and reaching out can turn around some young people. Tommy Turley from Ardoyne was involved in 'arranged fights' before

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[9]Bimpe Archer. The inside story of organised fights blighting Belfast, Irish News, March 2019.
https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2019/03/04/news/-you-re-going-because-friends-are-going---the-inside-story-of-organised-fights-blighting-belfast-1564354/
[10] Ibid.

mobile phones existed. He recalls how they were organised through word of mouth (in the Catholic Nationalist Republican community) among themselves, and with his peers in the Protestant Unionist Loyalist community, by literally shouting across the peace line. He was convicted of riotous behaviour in 2003. As part of his community service order, he worked with a youth group. Within five years, he went to university, gained a degree and became leader-in-charge at Ardoyne Youth Club. Today he works with kids involved in 'arranged fights'. Tommy says fights are now much easier to organise through social media.[11]

Shane Whelehan, a community worker with Ardoyne Youth Enterprise[12] (Catholic Nationalist Republican area) in North Belfast says his organisation consciously uses social media as a force for good.[13] Whelehan says the relationship with their partner organisation on the PUL side is strong. They follow each other on Twitter, frequently talk and share each other's initiatives.

> WhatsApp has been a great thing for us. Particularly when we're doing collaborative work with groups in other parts of Belfast. In an enhanced outreach programme from January to March this year, we partnered with youth groups in Shankill, Ballysillan (PUL) and New Lodge (CNR). The speed at which WhatsApp allows people to communicate with each other, if only to let people know 'there's an incident, or is there anyone near this interface'. So, on a 6pm shift for example, we can upload pictures of the four outreach workers in each area, they're on tonight. It keeps people informed and there's a thirst for news. WhatsApp has really helped us out.[14]

Community worker Isaac Andrews (PUL) is based at Farset International on the Springfield Road in West Belfast.[15] He points to the beneficial side of social media in averting an escalation in community tension[16]:

> I was managing a parade in Clifton St on the 12th of July[17] (Premier event in PUL calendar when thousands march). There was a bit of black smoke arising. Right away there someone was putting on social media that cars were being burnt and the parade was being attacked and a few pictures went up of the rising smoke nearby and people began to tweet that the parade had

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11 Tommy Turley interview with Brendan McCourt at Ardoyne Youth Club, August 30, 2019.

12 http://www.ardoyne.org/

13 Shane Whelehan, Ardoyne Youth Enterprise Director; interview with Brendan McCourt June, 2019 at Ardoyne office.

14 Ibid.

15 Farset evolved from local communities in West and North Belfast striving to deal with the issues experienced in their daily lives. Farset has branched off in many directions offering a range of social and charitable initiatives in the areas of youth, health, training, employment and conflict resolution. At the same time Farset endeavours to develop links and network with other communities in Belfast, Ireland, Europe (East and West in particular) and the rest of the World. It aims to "be a positive dynamic for peace, prosperity and stability at the heart of the community it serves."

16 Stephen 'Isaac' Andrews, community worker, Farset International, West Belfast, interview with Brendan McCourt, at FI, September 2019.

17 Up to 100,000 Protestants, Unionists and Loyalists stage marches across Northern Ireland to commemorate the triumph of King William of Orange's over the Catholic King James at the Battle of the Boyne (1690). During the Troubles (1969-1999), it was often marked by heightened tension and at times, serious violence between the two communities.

been attacked. Very quickly I found out that was untrue. It wasn't happening. There was no trouble. Myself and a few others got that message out on social media very quickly, which was a good thing and helped ease the tensions in and around that time. So social media is helpful in defusing tension. I use it quite a lot in my daily work.

Earlier this year, Stephen Andrews was on the ground with other youth workers every night, also noting the high level of social media attention to the violence:

> We were quickly able to gather the facts if someone was hurt. It's hard dealing with some young ones who react quickly to that. Sometimes they would put up photos of an incident that didn't even take place and an injury that didn't take place – some of these photos were not even from Northern Ireland. There was a recent incident of a stabbing in the New Lodge (CNR) but people were circulating a picture of a policeman who had been attacked with a machete in England. I was able to contact a lot of these people via direct message asking them to delete it right away as it was certainly not the case. A lot of social media is anonymous. I've no doubt there are people manipulating it for their own needs.

Youth workers, community organisations, the police, politicians and Belfast City Council, are engaged in a constant battle to win the hearts and minds of young people engaged in 'arranged fights'. The consensus is that this phenomenon will not end anytime soon. From talking to these agencies, there is a clear sense that the fights do not intentionally have a sectarian, or political undertone. Occasionally, by accident, or design, it can sometimes happen. This has ominous implications for the wider community at the interfaces. The smallest incident can suddenly explode into something much bigger and more serious. Social media platforms have a powerful role in this dynamic - as escalators of tension and as tools to diffuse it. It's imperative that the multi-agency approach is properly resourced and targeted, both in the short and long term on the ground and online and that this issue is treated with care, sensitivity and urgency.

5.   Arranged Fights, Police and Social Media

The challenge today for the community and the various agencies is when young people organise gatherings and fights on closed groups such as WhatsApp at very short notice. They do this for a reason - to avoid detection by the police and other agencies. This 'cat and mouse' game with the police is ongoing.

Shane Whelehan states[18]:

> The cops would have a more authoritative idea of what these sites are called and what platforms they're on because they're *monitoring* them. Very often we might get a call from the police to say 'we are informed that X is going to

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[18] Shane Whelehan, Ardoyne Youth Enterprise Director; interview with Brendan McCourt June, 2019 at Ardoyne office.

happen at this location. We have to take their intel as correct and if it's in our
area we'll try and deal with it in the best youth work fashion.

Sometimes, the police tactic is to put out an alert on mainstream and social media that a
fight is going to happen as a way to warn parents.[19]

On this occasion, the author arrived at the 'arranged fight' scene at Ormeau Park in South
Belfast to find the police patrolling in armoured cars. Young people were nowhere to be
seen. They had simply re-arranged the fight at a different location.

Ironically, an arranged fight can sometimes originate in a cross-community project, which
is designed to foster reconciliation and friendship between young people in a divided city.
Whelehan recounts how a small incident can quickly grow. He recently took a group of
young people from his area (Ardoyne) in North Belfast to a Protestant area in East Belfast
(Tullycarnet) on a cross community trip. Whelehan describes it like this:

> A local young fella shoved a phone into one of our group's faces and the
> phone was broken. It very quickly escalated into a sectarian name calling
> row. Security stepped in to stop it. Somehow the young people involved man-
> aged to connect online, through befriending young girls in the group. They
> searched and found each other on social media. it went from joking to name
> calling to "something more serious."

A fight was arranged between two young men, as the Ardoyne bus was returning the
following week.

> Our youth worker heard about it and gave a heads up. The police became
> aware of it and tipped us off. It was defused very quickly. The young person
> involved was not allowed off the bus. He was given a severe talking to and
> his parents were called to take him home. It could have been a lot worse. You
> could have had windows smashed on the bus and kids getting shattered with
> glass. That is a typical instance.

Police service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Sergeant Nick Williams is based at Tennent St
covering North and West Belfast. He was on the ground, with colleagues, in armoured jeeps
every night too. (Armoured jeeps are necessary in an area where the police could be
attacked with bombs, guns, or rockets by dissident Republican groups, opposed to the peace
process.)

Nick Williams analyses the role of social media in conflict dynamics today in Northern
Ireland.

> What you have is a society divided and damaged by 'The Troubles'. There is
> the physical infrastructure (Peace Walls) which you don't notice if you live

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[19] Maurice Fitzmaurice amd Orlaith Clinton. Parents warned of South Belfast 'arranged fight' plan. Belfast Live.
26 August 2019.

and work here. They are there because there are folk who are in fear of what's on the other side. These are issues the police can't solve at this time. They are attractive areas for kids to gather. The challenge sometimes is if you're a resident you see a large crowd who you fear are potentially gonna cause trouble and throw stones at your house. In a crowd of 50 kids, only a handful may want to fight, or throw stones - sometimes at the police. It can be unpredictable and at times, volatile. Sometimes it can escalate into a sectarian row, without warning. We do have a social media capacity where we are watching stuff but we rely on help from the public, teachers and youth workers.

Earlier this year, petrol bombs were thrown at the police in one incident and in another, police found a cache of petrol bombs, after devices had been thrown across the peace line. There have been five incidents where someone was seriously injured as a result of an arranged fight. None of this information has been put in the public domain. It was revealed to the author in conversation with youth workers on the ground and from talking to local residents who live at the interfaces where the incidents occurred.

Other outreach workers have revealed to the author how they have disarmed young people carrying weapons or have retrieved them after witnessing young people dumping them down drains, or in hedges, when police or youth workers arrive on the scene.

The PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) refuses to "confirm or deny" that it actively monitors closed social media group sites where fights are arranged, or that it tips off youth workers. However, it has been confirmed to the author by a number of youth workers on the ground that the police are able to identify 'ringleaders' and regularly monitor closed groups such as WhatsApp and Snapchat. They also rely on tip-offs from teachers in schools who may overhear or be told of conversations about arranged events. Residents at interface areas also report large gatherings of young people to community leaders, youth workers and the police.

The police also have CCTV cameras positioned at interface 'hotspots' and while these are not monitored 24/7, they can help to verify reports of incidents, and movements of large groups.

The police have told the author they believe 'arranged fights' on social media will not end anytime soon. "Young people like to gather on the street. It's what they do and what they have always done." Interestingly, Reilly's paper in 2009 came to the same conclusion: "The use of social media to organize recreational rioting in interface areas is likely to continue sporadically until such time as the causes of this anti-social behavior are addressed in these contested geographical areas."

Unfortunately, interface areas in Belfast have been blighted for decades by a toxic legacy of inter-communal violence. Hard work on the ground over many years has been successful in keeping it down to a low level and preventing it escalating to something more serious where lives could be lost. However, at times of political tension in the community, emotions can

run high and may be open to exploitation by paramilitaries with their own agenda, both criminal and political. It remains to be seen in which direction this will go.

* A number of requests to the PSNI for statistics and data on 'arranged fights' have been made over the past six months. To date, that request has not been met.
* For reasons of child protection, the author has not approached children/young people engaged in 'arranged fights' A number of requests have been made over the past six months to youth groups and individual youth workers for supervised, anonymized interviews with young people engaged in 'arranged fights' To date that request has not been met.

Clearly, the issue is deemed very sensitive and there is resistance to a wider media focus.

5.   Brexit and its Consequences

The UK's possible exit from the European Union has added a new element of instability to Northern Ireland's peace process. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement was a truce that creatively and ambiguously blurred the border between the North and South and allowed Catholic, Nationalist Republicans and Protestant Unionist Loyalists to both feel secure in their identities. Brexit has ripped that detente to shreds. Nationalists/Republicans in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government fear that any new deal between the UK and the EU could mean customs posts and security infrastructure at the border that could inflame dissident Republicans.

In a recent interview with the British national newspaper, the Sunday Times, which took place after the murder of journalist Lyra McKee in Derry on April 18,[20] a spokesman for the 'New IRA' (Irish Republican Army) said that Britain's decision to leave the European Union presented them with an opportunity to recruit young supporters because it underlined the presence of the border in Ireland and the partition of the island in 1921.[21]

On the other hand, the latest negotiated deal between the EU and the UK has now put a 'customs' border in the Irish Sea, (between Northern Ireland and Great Britain) which has raised the hackles of PUL politicians and paramilitaries.

An interview with Dale Pankhurst affirms a similar point of view:

> The problem around Brexit is the rhetoric that's coming out from all sides. The scaremongering and the speculation over what is going to happen is doing more damage than the whole thing is going to do itself. That is the worrying thing. Talk of a United Ireland by Nationalists is seen as exploiting the circumstances that are happening at the minute, but the problem is we

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[20] Lyra McKee was a young journalist who, along with other journalists, was observing a riot in the New IRA stronghold of Creggan in Derry. A gunman emerged from the rioting crowd and fired at an armoured police jeep. Lyra McKee was struck in the head and died shortly afterwards. Her funeral was attended by the leaders of all the main political parties in the UK and Ireland at St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast.

[21] Mooney, John. New IRA: Brexit helps us recruit more supporters. The Sunday Times. April 28, 2019.

have just emerged from a conflict. A real deep-seated conflict that still rumbles on today through dissident Republican violence.

Nationalists and Republicans have been equally unnerved by comments from Loyalist paramilitaries and those close to them who speak of a 'Brexit betrayal' and Loyalist "anger at boiling point."

The fears of both sides are played out on social media sites but most particularly Twitter. Twitter was very influential in the 2016 Referendum campaign in the UK where voters were faced with a simple binary choice of leaving or staying in the EU. In an extensive analysis of 7.5m tweets, Max Hanska and Stefan Bauchowitz found that "the predominance of Euroscepticism on social media mirrored its dominance in the Press."[22] Their study found that the balance of Eurosceptic information, views and opinion on Twitter thus appear to be leaning in the same direction as the balance of information in the press, meaning both online and offline citizens were more likely to encounter Eurosceptic voices. In addition, they concluded that overall, Twitter users who supported leaving the EU were much more active and motivated in advancing their cause, than Remainers were in advocating continued EU membership.

Hanska and Bauchowitz warn that social media now changes the ways news and information is distributed, accessed and engaged with.

> We are forced to consider its implications for both journalism's role in shaping public discourse, but also for the way media conveys information back-and-forth between citizens and the political system. How can people's desire to engage and participate in the creation and distribution of information be reconciled with journalism's role in making judgements about the importance and veracity of competing pieces of information? As the linear and hierarchical gate-keeping structures which define the broadcast age have ever-less purchase on our evolving news and information ecosystems, the messy, multi-directional, bottom-up practices of diffusing and absorbing information will play an ever-greater role in processes of public opinion formation.

The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal also springs to mind as an alarming example of how the personal data of millions of voters was illegally harvested and used for electioneering purposes. The threat to democracy is clear. Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK, will face an election in the very near future in which Brexit will be a major factor. Meanwhile social media is being used for another purpose. Some Loyalists are organising a series of rallies and threaten a campaign of 'civil disobedience'. The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland has warned of 'potential' for disorder.[23]

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[22] Hänska, Max and Bauchowitz, Stefan (2017) Tweeting for Brexit: how social media influenced the referendum. In: Mair, John, Clark, Tor, Fowler, Neil, Snoddy, Raymond and Tait, Richard, (eds.) Brexit, Trump and the Media. abramis academic publishing, Bury St Edmunds, UK, pp. 27-31.

[23] Brexit: PSNI chief says potential for loyalist disorder if Brexit threatens union. BBC News. 23 October 2019.

At both micro and macro level, impartial, fact-checking journalists have a vital role to play in ensuring that malicious lies and manipulation and distortion of the truth are rigorously challenged. To date, only major news outlets such as the BBC, Channel 4 News and The Guardian have the resources and capacity to deliver.

Northern Ireland's peace has always been fragile. Most agree there is no desire to return to the nightmare of our bloody past. Those watching closest are the people, who fear they will be affected first and worst, in any breakdown of peace - men, women and children who live in the shadow of Belfast's Peace Lines.

6.   Policy Recommendations

To address social media threats to conflict dynamics in Northern Ireland, a variety of approaches are necessary. Civil society, tech companies and governments can work together to better address these challenges.

For Civil Society

1. Civil society can promote a sustained effort targeting young children and teenagers in Peace Line schools to stimulate discussion on their thoughts and use of social media. This could include a history lesson on the human cost of violence to their communities. This should be reinforced by peers, real-life victims and perpetrators, warning of the dangers and explaining how events like 'arranged fights' can escalate or be exploited in a way that could bring danger or serious harm, to innocent friends and family.

2. Civil society groups can organise a timetable of regular cross community events involving parents, teachers, youth and community leaders that foster good relations and build community trust and bonds to counter the role of social media in increasing polarisation between communities.

3. A multi-agency approach has worked well among youth leaders, politicians, police and other stakeholders. Civil society should be empowered to shape the ways in which we are able to engage in 'public spaces' by continuing to disseminate 'good news' stories and positive examples of community spirit and goodwill.

For Governments:

4. Governments must be more assertive in holding social media giants to account. They should be required to have a legal 'duty of care' towards users, particularly children, young people and vulnerable adults. Heavy financial penalties and the threat of imprisonment should be applied to those who break the rules.

5. The US government should consider 'breaking up' the tech companies and more competition should be encouraged. (Already proposed by Presidential challenger, Senator Elizabeth Warren.)

For Tech Companies:

6. Platforms should be forced to take responsibility for harmful or fake content on their sites, not just when they are alerted to it. Some countries have introduced new laws which apply these measures. For example, in Germany (NetzDG law) online platforms face fines of up to €50m (£44m) if they do not remove "obviously illegal" hate speech and other postings within 24 hours of receiving a notification. A seven-day period is granted for removal of "illegal" content. In Australia, the Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act creates new offences for content service providers and hosting services that fail to notify the Australian federal police about or fail to expeditiously remove videos depicting "abhorrent violent conduct". That conduct is defined as videos depicting terrorist acts, murders, attempted murders, torture, rape or kidnap. And Singapore, among other countries, is preparing a law to combat fake news and those who spread malicious lies.

7. Tech companies should be mandated to fund projects which actively promote religious tolerance, diversity and equality, particularly in areas or instances where social media has been used in a harmful way For example, after the Christchurch atrocity against Muslims in New Zealand in which 51 people died, the country's Ethnic Affairs minister Jenny Salesa put in a bid for more funding for the Office for Ethnic Communities and received $9.4m over four years in the most recent New Zealand government budget - a level of investment she describes as "historic". Yet, for tech companies, this is a drop in the ocean.

The Author

Brendan McCourt is a BAFTA nominated, AIB (Association for International Broadcasting) and RTS award winning producer, director and journalist based in Northern Ireland, where he has lived and worked for most of his career. He has worked with RTE (Irish TV) BBC, Channel 4, VRT (Belgium + Holland), and PBS America. For 20 years he was a producer/director with BBC Spotlight and Panorama, making over 100 documentaries about crime, politics, social issues and sex abuse by the Catholic Church and Northern Ireland's ongoing Peace Process. In recent years, he has been using Virtual Reality as a tool to work with young people and women's groups on Belfast's peace lines. He is currently writing a book about groups such as the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA, who are violently opposed to the current Peace Process.

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