

New media and young people in interface areas of Belfast

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We are living in an era of unprecedented developments in the nature of communications technologies. It is important to consider how these new technologies may be influencing the nature of inter-personal and inter-communal communication and relationships. In positive terms, new media is espoused as providing individuals and groups with an opportunity to increase their social circles and communication skills.¹ It also had made information available in an unprecedented manner.² However, from a more critical perspective, it has been suggested that interactions on new media platforms and technologies mirror the nature of inter-communal relations offline and therefore may actually serve to reinforce existing divisions, negative perceptions and hostilities.³ In the context of Northern Ireland, this has been seen to have had a direct impact on patterns of street violence in a specific interface in North Belfast⁴ as well as being employed as a means by which to organise anti-social behaviour and/or riots.⁵

Research on young people in interface areas has focused on issues underpinning the nature of inter-communal relations in these areas. Issues such as levels of poverty associated with living in areas of multiple deprivation; the impact of sectarianism and segregation; and social exclusion have been revealed as profoundly impacting the quality of life for young people in these areas.⁶ Similarly, the almost wholly homogenous communal composition of these areas means that young people from Catholic and Protestant communities tend to “stick together” in groups (often due to perceived threats from the “other” community). This simultaneously feeds into and (re)produces negative perceptions of the “other” community for young people.⁷ However, recent research has found that in interface areas of Belfast “most” young felt they had opportunities (albeit limited) to meet, interact and become friends with young people from the “other” community.⁸

Media framing and adult perspectives on the use of social networking sites by young people in Northern Ireland has been identified as constituting “moral panic”.⁹ In practice this means that much of the focus on engagement on these platforms has been orientated around the potential for organising or inciting anti-social behaviour amongst young people.¹⁰ Much has been written on the impact of social media on young people specifically and the nature of their communication and interactions. Issues such as cyberbullying, “Facebook depression”¹¹ and exposure to inappropriate content have been identified as negative features of the experience of young people on social media platforms.¹² There has also been some consideration of the positive potential of such platforms in relation to the nature of relationships between young people in interface areas of Belfast. This is reflected by Bell who detailed how social media was highlighted as having both positive and negative consequences on community relations.¹³

This gives us a sense of the potential for social media platforms to provide an accessible and sustainable platform for contact for young people in interface areas. No research currently exists on the extent and impact of the use of new media platforms by young people in Northern Ireland. Given that interface areas of Belfast present us with some of the most segregated and complex social geographies in Northern Ireland, it is important to establish the impact of these technologies on young people in these spaces. What emerged in our research was a focus on how the young people used these platforms in a practical sense: the issues of abuse that they have experienced while online; their experience of “cross community” connections on social networking sites; and their experience of politics and specific events online.

Methodology

This research project has sought to gauge the views and opinions of young people living in interface areas and conducted formal focus group discussions with approximately 60 young people in six interface areas across Belfast. These focus group discussions varied in terms of communal affiliation, with both single identity Protestant and Catholic groups of young people, mixed communal affiliation, and both male and female. The young participants ranged in age from 14 to 21, although the majority were aged between 15 and 18. With the permission of the young participants and youth leaders, discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. All comments have been anonymised to protect the identities of the young people. Young people were consulted in six different interface locations across north, south, east and west Belfast. The research engaged with eight different community and voluntary groups and organisations working with young people in these areas. Statutory

agencies and bodies such as Belfast City Council, the Department of Justice, 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 young people in interface areas.

By engaging with young people, community and voluntary organisations working with young people, as well as statutory bodies, this research was able to ascertain how these platforms are informing the nature of interactions of young people both on and off line. What emerged was a focus on how the young people used these platforms in a practical sense: the issues of abuse that they have experienced while online; their experience of “cross community” connections on social networking sites; their experience of politics and specific events online; and their key concerns with regard to social media.

Nature of interactions on new media platforms

Research participants viewed social media in relation to young people and interfaces as having both a “positive” and “negative” impact. The key focus of the variation in its impact is that it is essentially subject to external influences of particular events and the socio-political environment of an area at a given time. It is important to emphasise that this was documented as primarily impacting communities on a “single identity” or intra-communal basis. Research participants from specific community and voluntary organisations outlined what was termed “risk behaviours” attributed to the use of social media *within* communities. That is to say, that behaviours resulting from the need to appear to be promoting a particular communal identity on social media platforms have had off line, real time implications for the safety of communities in these areas. One research participant described the practice of young people from particular areas entering “the other” community’s area at night and taking pictures of themselves next to murals. The pictures are then posted on social media sites (usually Facebook) in a bid to provoke other young people in the adjacent communities. This has led to a cycle of retaliatory incidents and is of great concern for individuals and organisations working with young people in these areas, given that they fear this may escalate into violence being perpetrated in retaliation from “the other” community. This is evidence of the centrality of social media interactions to the nature of work in these areas, given that social media platforms are effectively a stage on which inter-communal divisions are now manifesting themselves, and are resulting in offline tensions.

Baumann has discussed how the internet and mobile phones provide a “virtual proximity” which “no longer requires physical closeness”.¹⁴ This is

reflected by the young people engaging with this research, who documented that they are now often relating to individuals and groups outside their immediate physical space, transcending traditional physical and social barriers to engage in their own individually determined manner. In practice it indicated that this self-selection of young people into like-minded networks is limiting their social interactions and increasing a sense of social disconnection from their immediate surroundings. This was reflected in the views of youth providers in how they view social media as functioning in relation to young people in interface areas:

They are constantly updating [Facebook] statuses, tweeting and stuff and that leads to a social disconnect in dealing with real people and real life situations... How you deal with your emotions in more than 140 characters [on Twitter]?

This disconnect was viewed as also permeating the nature of relations between young people on both an intra and inter communal level and manifesting itself in abusive interactions online.

Online abuse

The issue of online abuse has recently been the subject of much debate and discussion in terms of how it is minimised and dealt with by social media network organisations and police across different jurisdictions. Online abuse was raised by both the young people and organisations engaging with this research and was attributed to the anonymity often afforded and availed of on social media platforms. This research found that the “faceless” interactions that social media platforms often facilitate are profoundly informing the nature of interactions taking place online. One youth worker encompassed it in the following terms:

People can do it because it de-humanises people. They can say things they would never say in person.

This “de-humanisation” means that online abuse has become a primary feature of online interactions online for young people. In terms of the geographic specificity of this research, sectarianism, while undoubtedly an issue for young people, was not a primary feature of the abuse identified by young people in the focus groups. Online abuse was described as being “general” and affecting “most people” at some point. Many focus group participants made reference to an application which is distributed via an individual’s Facebook page called “Ask FM”.¹⁵ All the young people participating in this research had

been, or were aware of friends or acquaintances who had been, the subject of abuse over this medium:

We get lots of warnings in school about Ask FM... it's like, a site for [verbal] abuse. People tell you to go and kill yourself.

It is important to point out that this occurred predominantly on a “single identity” or intra-communal basis and requires analysis in this context. This is also not an exclusive experience of young people living in interface areas of Belfast but rather a symptom of a wider issue of abuse which characterises the unmediated experience of young people on social media platforms. The experience of what may be described as “general” abuse online by research participants was described as often taking on a sectarian tone. This was viewed as often being dependent on how individuals had represented themselves on their Facebook or Twitter account, in terms of features which may identify their perceived communal affiliation (examples given were flags, football teams or specific music). In a sense, it appeared that online sectarian abuse was almost expected by young people and as a result normalised.

While sectarianism is not the key feature of the abuse taking place online, it was nonetheless an issue which is seen to result in offline hostilities. However, it is important to illuminate that it is also viewed by some research participants as simply re-constituting the nature of relations which already exist. That is to say, that social media is an effective mirror to existing divisions and is not creating them. Or as one youth provider articulated:

The reality is that social media did not create sectarianism, it's been festering away for a long time.

Some young people articulated views that the interactions which take place online are often in no means different from that which they experience in reality. It is imperative to emphasise that there was a sense that social media is simply facilitating hostile interactions in a more immediate manner. That is to say, where previously such information and abuse would have been communicated by word of mouth, it is now accessible in a variety of manners on a variety of platforms such as smart phones, laptops and tablets. This increases the reach of such interactions which, when considered in a small geographic area, is having a profound influence on the nature of both inter and intra communal relations.

With regard to inter-communal contact on social media platforms, anecdotal evidence that social media has been employed and utilised by young people as

a mechanism by which to arrange or instigate inter-communal violence at specific interface flashpoints was confirmed by both young people and youth providers in the course of this research:

It is being used in a very negative way to instigate or facilitate conflict at the interfaces.... What we're seeing is an increased territoriality [in these areas] which is playing itself out over social media with young people.

The use of social media as a means by which to engage in cross community hostilities by young people is also reflected in a lack of knowledge and understanding of parents in how young people are utilising these platforms. A key feature of the contact online was outlined as being written in text language which parents simply do not understand:

Going to parents and finding difficulty as the comments on these pictures are so frightening. Parents don't understand as it becomes another type of youth cryptography.

Online abuse in this context was also viewed as being heightened in relation to specific socio-political events. Many of the research participants working with young people in interface areas were keen to emphasise the prevalence of social media interactions in reaction to protests at the decision of Belfast City Council to reduce the number of days the Union Flag flies at Belfast City Hall. One young person also encompassed this view:

It [online abuse] got far worse around the time of the flags protests... It was somewhere people could fire abuse at each other.

Therefore, while sectarian abuse is experienced by young people online, it is often reflective of the nature of inter-communal relations in particular areas, as well as being subject to the wider socio-political climate. This was also the case in relation to the marching season, a period during which young people from both respective communities felt that online inter-communal interactions are more strained and hostile. However, it is important to emphasise that this research also found that all interactions on an inter-communal basis were not necessarily negative or abusive.

Online cross community engagement

This research identified interactions on social media platforms as an increasingly central component in the nature of relations built and maintained in the wake of these programmes and initiatives. While both youth providers

and young people were keen to emphasise that fact that young people are making these connections online, it was presented as a necessity given the impervious nature of interfaces to the respective communities. In practice, this means that if young people are to maintain or develop nascent relationships built over the course of specific programmes, it is difficult to do so in their own areas. Therefore, social media platforms provide a mechanism over which to organise to meet in what one youth worker termed “safe spaces”:

There is a lot of contact taking place and they're organising their time outside of the group. Relationships have blossomed. They're not necessarily able to go into each other areas so they go somewhere they feel safe and where they're not known by their own peer group or the older generation

This is evidence of the continuing legacy of the conflict on the physical and social spaces for young people in these areas. Indeed, this research presents a contrasting image of social media platforms, given that they are viewed as reconstituting the conflict in the virtual realm, while also providing a challenge to these physical and social barriers. This enabling aspect of social media platforms in terms of relationship building was echoed by young people:

We've our interfaces and there's not a lot of places to hide so if you're going to meet it's difficult so if you're going have to contact each other a lot online.

However, this was countered by both youth providers and young people themselves who also acknowledged the challenges of maintaining relationships in person but also through online platforms. This was mainly attributed to the perception of members of “the other” community by their friends, as well as a perceived safety issue in identifying themselves to members of “the other” community through their contacts’ connections online:

For some people it is discovering through their Facebook page that they are friends with someone who they don't feel safe connecting with. You know, friends of friends.

There appeared to be an awareness amongst young people that representations of themselves were often essentialised or magnified on these platforms. Many young people admitted often projecting a more extreme version of how they perceive their ethno-national identity than they may feel comfortable to do in real life situations. This leads to difficulties when they have engaged in cross-community activities and have added people from “the other” community onto Facebook, for example:

I'm friends with someone I met on a cross community project and when things get difficult I see them posting things about their views and debating it and it annoys me.

“Adding” a friend on Facebook appeared to evoke a sense of exposure amongst young people, many of whom felt it increased the likelihood of them being targeted by members of “the other” community. Individuals working with young people in interface areas felt this was a real concern:

There's a fear with social media that it is so public that more people can see it. So when they are back in their own areas it's more difficult.

This has had an impact on the nature of the work being conducted in interface areas as it provides another consideration in the wake of programmes and initiatives aimed at building relationships between young people.

Young people were keen to emphasise caution with regard to the maintenance of contact through social networking sites in the wake of cross-community programmes and initiatives. This almost wholly involved young males and the sectarian violence they had encountered, which they attributed to being identifiable through a combination of both cross-community activities and social media networks:

More boys kept in contact over Facebook after cross community things. A couple of my friends got beat up after one...

It was important to unpack the view that social media has somehow incited or increased sectarian motivated violence and sectarian hate crimes of this nature being perpetrated between young people. When questioned further on the issue of personal and community safety at particular interfaces in Belfast, some young people made reference to the fact that they simply do not want to engage on any level with young people from “the other” community. The pervasiveness of this sense of fear and insecurity is therefore evidenced in the nature of their interactions online; which in turn manifests itself in a practical sense and reflect existing positions and perspectives which serve to increase the segregation and marginalisation of these communities.

Protest, political activism, young people and social media

The subject of protests and how they are organised was a central subject evoked by those participating in the research. Young people appeared to be in agreement that social media platforms provide space for debate and discussion. There was

also an awareness that in engaging in politically focused debate (particularly on Twitter) that you essentially bring individuals holding opposing political views into debate. One young person from the PUL community described this in the following terms:

I don't go on twitter and say what I think about Republican politicians as you'd just get "trolled" by Republicans.

There was also a sense of the "self selection" discussed earlier in relation to particular networks. This was expressed in fact that young people on Twitter are not necessarily getting "the other sides" points of view on social networks as they are purposely choosing to "follow" like-minded individuals' and groups' accounts or as one young person expressed:

I don't see tweets and updates from the other side...I wouldn't really pick up on it.

Thus, the idea that Facebook and Twitter provide platforms for debate and engagement is challenged by this research, in that by reflecting existing offline networks, social networks are currently limited in their potential to increase online debate and engagement by the offline socio-political context.

Discussions on the issue of online debate and politics were often centred on the issue of the events relating to the decision by Belfast City Council to reduce the number of days the Union Flag flies at Belfast City Hall. The focus was primarily on the role of social networking sites in increasing tensions, as well as perception that social media in effect impeded any resolution to the issue. These platforms were also viewed as providing information to people of what was happening in their areas and beyond:

During the flag protests there was a heightened sense of fear being shown on Facebook and Twitter and people started to go on there to get information.

Indeed, many young people participating in this research correlated the longevity and number of the protests with the interactions of individuals supporting and opposing the protests on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook:

If Facebook hadn't have been there, it [protests] would have gone away much more quickly...

and

If there hadn't have been people slabbering on Twitter, it [the flags related protests] wouldn't have been anywhere near as big as it was...

The point here is that during this period, social media was in effect another mechanism by which to emphasise and essentialise difference. It was felt that social media in fact increased, and in a sense worsened, tensions during these protests. This was not viewed as a wholly negative phenomenon, but rather a natural conclusion to tensions, fears and anxieties which had built up in communities and areas, particularly in PUL communities:

Someone needs to take control of the flags protests organisations... we need to get people articulating the feelings.

A key point in relation to this issue was that social media was viewed by some as being the primary mechanism for organising protests during this period. Facebook was perceived as giving a public and easily accessible platform for those organising protests to convey their particular messages:

Since and during the flags protests there has definitely been a move to event organisation on Facebook and you have mini essays popping up.

One research participant did question the reality of the perceptions that much of the violence which occurred during the period of the protests was organised on online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. They believed that much of what claims to be organised online is more posturing and in reality the organisation of such events takes place via direct face to face networks and mobile networks:

People don't organise riots on open pages, they do it on private ones, but they can say silly things and they can wind each other up but it doesn't really amount to much.

Indeed, the sense that "it doesn't really amount to much" was viewed by some youth providers as being reflected in the numbers "liking", "retweeting" and generally showing support for the flag related protests. In the context of this research, it is important to make reference to the huge numbers "liking" pages supporting the grievances of those organising and participating in protests against the decision by Belfast City Council. Facebook pages such as the "Petition to keep the Union Flag over Belfast City Hall" page had over ten thousand "likes" illustrating the level of online support for the cause. The level

of support online was not reflected in any means by the numbers attending protests in reality. The emotive issues involved for the respective communities means that social media platforms provide much more publicity and traction for specific causes. Socio-political issues are magnified in interface areas, and as such these spaces provide fertile ground for the maintenance and development of inter-communal hostilities and divisions. This reveals the potentially destructive impact of social media platforms for these areas. This research found that the issue of rumours and inaccurate information to be a primary area of concern in relation to events culminating at the interfaces, particularly in relation to young people.

Rumours

The issue of online rumours and false information being generated on social networking sites is having a genuinely inhibiting impact on the nature of relations between young people in specific interface areas. One community worker outlined an example where they had been standing on the particular street a Facebook update had claimed had been under attack from members of the community on the other side of the interface:

We were standing there on the street and saw on Facebook that someone was updating [their facebook status] that that very street was under attack, but it wasn't – we were standing there. Other young people started to come as they'd seen it on Facebook and wanted to come down and defend the area.

Rumours and false information have undoubtedly served to further alienate young people from each other in certain interface areas, where false reports have been circulated about specific incidents of violence or violence perpetrated against one or other community. These rumours are often circulated in a bid to allocate blame for violent incidents in areas on the “other” community, even when this may not be the case:

People started writing on Facebook that we're under attack when it's people from their own area throwing the blast bombs. There's a local group who came out and challenged it.

The issue of rumours being spread on social media platforms was attributed by a community worker in a PUL community as being symptomatic of wider issues of negativity and a sense of “hopelessness” which he viewed as characterising experiences for many young people and communities in interface areas:

I can understand we're living in a time of austerity... there's nothing for young people to do but sit on social media and key bash and have these conversations. All that unites them is conflict and the bad things....Young people can't address positives as there are none.

Facebook and Twitter were described as having developed into empowering platforms for young people in these areas. This coupled with the vulnerability suggested earlier, gives us a sense of the problematic relationship between the use of social media and young people in interface areas. Indeed, the circulation of rumours is an element of this issue of empowerment:

Rumours on social media are the biggest issue for conflict at interfaces. Rumours build on rumours and people always believe the bad things in society. People will refuse to believe the good things, they embrace the negative things and it empowers them to do what they want to do and behave how they want.

The rumours and false information attributed to online interactions between young people in interfaces appear to serve the purpose of facilitating the maintenance, or indeed expansion, of divisions by emphasising difference and intra-community solidarity in terms of territory and identity. It is important to emphasise that social media is also viewed as effectively reaffirming power structures within communities:

Power is the cause of the conflict. People will come in and try to motivate people and direct them in a negative way.

However, the question of who this misinformation actually serves was raised by a number of youth providers and community workers. False information and/or rumours were viewed as often not originating amongst young people but rather from other sources and constituted what one research participant termed "a smokescreen". The resulting tensions and interface violence which were described as being directly related to online interactions and information were viewed as in a sense maintaining a divisive status quo for those who benefitted most from them in the respective communities, i.e. paramilitary members.

The control within communities associated with paramilitarism is viewed as central to the issue of online interactions with the information being distributed on it serving as a stark reminder of the positioning of such organisations in communities:

There's people using social media to empower themselves into positions, it's for paramilitary control...There's people that communities know and they make political statements and instil fear because they are affiliated with paramilitary organisations. It's about control.

Therefore, the rumours and false information generated and sustained through online networks are viewed as serving the needs of those who seek to assert their roles and to underpin the need for their existence (as paramilitaries) by tapping into that innate fear of “the other” community by emphasising associated threats in the most accessible manner for young people; online. This analysis challenges the stereotype of segregation and violence in interface areas as being solely generated by young people, and speaks to wider structural issues of the legacy of the conflict which are manifesting themselves in these spaces. It also reveals that the same divisions and power constructs which inform the nature of young peoples’ lives in these areas also characterise their time on online platforms.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how abuse is a primary feature of the nature of online interactions between young people in interface areas. While this is certainly not confined to these specific areas and communities it nonetheless requires consideration in this context. Many young people had also experienced online sectarian abuse and this is serving to function as another mechanism reaffirming existing essentialised notions and fears of “the other” community. This sectarianism which is manifesting itself on social networking sites is directly correlated to the wider socio-political climate. Therefore, online interactions require attention and prioritisation in terms of work aimed at building relationships in these areas. It was found that young people are employing social media as a means to maintain and develop inter-communal relationships. However, the challenges facing these areas are magnified in this context with young people feeling compelled to leave “their” areas to engage with young people from “the other” community. The issue of post-programme online connections requires attention given the propensity of such online relationships to compromise certain young people. At present, much of the work to combat these issues is reactive. Organisations must put the issue of how young people are utilising social media at the centre of programmes and work with young people.

In terms of youth civic engagement, social networking sites were viewed as removing barriers between young people and political actors, while increasing awareness and knowledge of socio-political issues and debates. Social media was a key factor informing the organisation of protests in relation

to the Union Flag disputes in late 2012 and early 2013. It was felt that the period of protests was prolonged due to social networking sites and as such illustrated the power of such sites to inflame specific issues between young people in interface areas. Contrary to the view that social media solely drove such events, it was found that the concentration of engagement and organisation on these platforms was reactive rather than proactive.

Rumours and false information on social networking sites were a key issue impacting young people in interface areas in Belfast. The immediacy and reach of such misinformation has negatively impacted relations in these areas in an unprecedented manner. This research found that there is a belief that paramilitaries are causing this proliferation of false information. This is often with a view to reasserting physical and social barriers and was viewed by research participants as a key tool in the maintenance and expansion of the divided *status quo* by paramilitaries.

Notes

1 Castells, 2012.

2 O'Reilly, 2005.

3 Ó Dochartaigh, 2007, p.480.

4 Ó Dochartaigh, 2007, p. 476

5 Reilly, 2011, p.5.

6 Hargie et al., 2006; McVicar, 2000; Roche, 2008; and Smyth, 2004.

7 Leonard, 2008, pp. 484-485.

8 Bell, 2012, p.38.

9 Reilly, 2011.

10 Leonard, 2008.

11 "Facebook depression" has been identified as occurring when young people spend a significant time on social media sites such as Facebook and then exhibit classic symptoms of depression

12 O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011.

13 Bell, 2012.

14 Bauman, 2003, p.62.

15 Ask Fm is a website and associated application which requires individuals to establish an account where people can ask them questions anonymously. This research found that what resulted was often inappropriate questions and/or abusive comments on the individual in question. A number of focus group participants described it as "banter" while others were keen to emphasise the destructive impact of this abuse.

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