Researching Protest on Facebook: Developing an ethical stance for the study of Northern Irish Flag Protest pages.

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Introduction

Physical co-presence may no longer appear to be a pre-requisite for political campaigns (Earl and Kimport 2011), but mass public demonstrations continue to be central to the repertoires of dissent networks and protest movements (Carty, 2011). Images of these demonstrations shared on social media not only help protesters build a counter-narrative to that promoted by traditional media, but may also raise questions about the policing of such incidents while simultaneously 'humanising' those groups that experience political oppression (Reilly, 2015). These images were frequently shared on social media during recent high-profile mass public demonstrations such as the Egyptian 'revolution' in January 2011 (Gerbaudo, 2012) and the anti-Putin demonstrations in Russia in early 2012 (Oates, 2013). The connective affordances of sites such as Facebook and Twitter have helped dissent networks mobilise 'affective publics' through the use of protest frames that can easily be personalised by users and shared with their online social networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015). These publics are able to express their emotional connection and solidarity with protest movements through actions such as 're-tweeting' and 'liking' social media content (Papacharissi, 2015). This has implications for the traditional media ecology through the unprecedented opportunities afforded to these non-elite actors to challenge dominant media narratives and make their own contributions to the 'political information cycle' (Chadwick, 2013).

However, a 'cyber realist' critique of these so-called 'social media revolutions' has suggested that the use of these tools has made it easier for both democratic and non-democratic states to identify and arrest protest leaders (Morozov, 2011). For example, Turkish authorities have increasingly targeted social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube since the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, even going so far as to prevent their citizens from accessing these services during high-profile public demonstrations (Genç, 2014). The pervasiveness of state surveillance of the Internet was further highlighted by documents leaked by US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden in June 2013, which revealed details of the PRISM programme whereby US intelligence operatives were collecting information on activists who operate in these online environments (Zuckerman, 2015). This suggests that researchers might be exposing 'unaware participants' to potential punitive measures by the state through the verbatim reproduction of their online comments in academic publications.

Clearly social media provide researchers with new opportunities to investigate the affective dimension of contemporary protest movements. Such work requires scholars to combine big data approaches with more in-depth analyses of how socio-political contexts shape and influence the outcomes of online activism. It also raises some important ethical concerns for researchers, particularly in relation to the extent to which qualitative online research should be sensitive to its specific offline context (Eynon, Fry and Schroeder, 2008). The 'do no

harm' principle suggests that researchers should be cognisant of the specific threats deriving from local contexts and work towards minimising the potential harm to participants (Markham et al., 2012). This paper sets out to add to the emergent literature on online research ethics by exploring the ethical implications of researching the use of social media to organise protests in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland. Specifically, it will explore how an ethical stance was constructed for the study of loyalist flag protest pages on Facebook in January 2013. These protests against the decision to alter the flag protocol of Belfast City Hall were viewed as a 'lightning rod' for loyalist dissatisfaction with the peace process, as well as a manifestation of their increasing alienation from their unionist political representatives. Loyalist flag protest pages, such as the Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater (LPPU) that is the subject of this paper, would be subject to increased scrutiny by the police as a result of a high court injunction in January 2013, which followed death threats that had been posted against an unidentified Catholic man in North Belfast. At the same time, critics of the flag protests such as the self-styled 'parody group' Loyalists Against Democracy (LAD) began to use social media to highlight the sectarianism of the protesters. Their mocking of loyalist tropes, which often appeared to focus on the poor spelling and grammar of the protesters, was criticised by some commentators for further reinforcing negative stereotypes of working class loyalist communities. It was in this context that the comments posted on public Facebook pages during the peak of the flag protest movement were investigated. This paper presents an overview of the literature on the ethical approaches towards the study of protest movements on social media sites such as Facebook and outlines the ethical stance that was implemented in this study of the LPPU page.

Ethical Dilemmas in researching the use of social media by protest movements

The study of the use of social media by protest movements presents ethical dilemmas for researchers at two different stages in the research process, namely data collection and the presentation of results.

Data collection from Facebook and the issue of consent

A key issue to consider at the start of any study of online protest is whether data collection itself might expose protesters and their supporters to potential harm. Is it ethically appropriate for researchers to freely download content, metadata and personal information from group and individual social media pages or does it breach the privacy of these unaware participants? In order to address this question, researchers must first consider whether social media content should be treated as a published text or the property of human participants. Early research into online communities in the nineties suggested that there was no need to seek informed consent from online commentators due to the public nature of the sites to which they contributed (King, 1996). The most influential guidelines for online research ethics in the 'Web 2.0' era have encouraged researchers to either seek informed consent or anonymise datasets in order to protect social media users from any harm that might occur from the use of their data (British Psychological Society, 2007; Markham et al, 2012). That is not to say that all subsequent research involving social media datasets has conformed to these standards. Rather, studies of the role of Twitter during the popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in January 2011 identified individual users in data visualisations and reports without having sought their permission to do so in advance (Lotan et al, 2011). This was presumably justified on the grounds that these users tended to be public figures, such as journalists, rather than members of the public who lacked the resources to manage any reputational harm that might

have occurred as a result of their identification in these publications (Kozinets, 2010). However, concerns have continued to be expressed about whether such strategies inflict unnecessary harm upon these unaware participants (Krotoski, 2012). It may also be expediant for researchers to evaluate the risk to these online communities on a case-by-case basis given that expectations of privacy are likely to vary between different social groups (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Facebook, the subject of this paper, might be characterised as a 'semi-public' site because it not only hosts private and public groups, but also requires users to register their details in order to avail of its full range of services (Sveningsson Elm, 2009). This presents significant challenges to users who are required to negotiate the different audiences that view their content on this site, a concept known as 'context collapse' (Baym and boyd, 2012). Recent work on users' perceptions of privacy on Facebook has suggested that most people see such online social spaces as "loci of public display rather than private revelation" (Burkell et al. 2014: 974). This tendency for users to expect a certain degree of scrutiny of their 'private' social networking profiles by strangers would appear to provide implicit consent for researchers to 'lurk' on Facebook and report verbatim what they observe without the need to ask permission to do so.

However, a closer inspection of Facebook's Terms of Service reveals that users are expected to obtain informed consent when collecting information from other Facebookers and to explain how it will be used; the exception being content published using the public setting, which is freely available for "everyone, including people off Facebook, to access and use" (Facebook, 2015). This raises the question of whether researchers should post 'Research in Progress' signs that inform members of these online communities about their intention to collect social media data. Clearly this may increase anxiety amongst supporters of online protest movements who already suspect that their comments are being scrutinised by the police and the media. In such circumstances the researcher might have to respond to accusations that they are increasing the risk of inflicting reputational harm to these individuals within their respective communities (Zimmer, 2012). A related concern might be that this awareness of being monitored could hinder the expression of dissent that was the focus of the research, with some users reluctant to post information that might incriminate them (Farrimond, 2013). Therefore, researchers may have no choice but to opt for some form of covert observation in order to capture the conversations between activists on Facebook, including those that mention the surveillance of these sites by the police.

Presentation of Results

Covert observation must be accompanied by the anonymisation of datasets in order to minimise the risk of potential harm to unaware participants on Facebook. This typically involves the removal of Personally Identifiable Information (PII) such as username, age or gender that could lead to the identification of those users responsible for online comments. However, there remains the possibility that these users can be re-identified if other information pertaining to the identify of these individuals is not redacted, as was seen with the information disclosed on cohort size that revealed Harvard College as the anonymous University that featured in the 'Tastes, Ties and Times' (T3) project in 2008 (Zimmer, 2012). Internet Search engines such as Google can also be used to locate those users responsible for direct quotes that feature in academic reports (Markham, 2012). Although search engines cannot directly access Facebook content, new applications such as Graph can be used to

identify the authors of content quoted in research publications even when the researchers have sought to remove all personal identifiable information (Trevisan and Reilly, 2014). This limits the ability of the researcher to guarantee full anonymity when citing social media content verbatim. It also might bring those who use the social networking site to mobilise mass public demonstrations to the attention of the police and other intelligence agencies in both democratic and non-democratic states.

The direct quotation of Facebook content in order to illustrate key themes from the conversations about protest movements on the site may therefore prove problematic, with the exception of those that cannot be found using search engines. Researchers must therefore consider what level of disguise they are willing to bestow upon these unaware participants in the presentation of results (Bruckman, 2002). Markham (2012) suggests that they should create composite accounts that illustrate the broad themes that emerge from social media datasets without reproducing verbatim what individual users have said on these sites. However, this fabrication strategy has the potential to distort and manipulate the voices of marginalised groups, such as protest movements, that often receive very little mainstream media coverage. A medium-cloaked approach towards data anonymisation, which uses selective direct quotes and paraphrases the words of unaware participants in order to protect them from harm, would appear better suited towards the study of these groups online (Kozinets, 2010). For example, word visualisations and the use of quotes that could not be traced back to their original authors were deployed to illustrate key themes from a recent study of the public Facebook pages of UK disability rights groups. Congruent with the participatory ethos of disability studies, it was decided that the focus should be on "what was said instead of trying to establish who said it" (Trevisan and Reilly, 2014, p. 1143). This paper will explore these ethical dilemmas by drawing on the lessons from a study of loyalist flag protest pages on Facebook in January 2013.

The Union Flag Dispute, December 2012- March 2013

On 3rd December 2012, Belfast City Council voted in favour of a new protocol that would see the UK's union flag fly over City Hall on 18 designated days rather than all-year round, as had been the previous policy. The Alliance Party, who had proposed designated days as a compromise between unionists and nationalists, bore the brunt of unionist and loyalist anger at the decision with the home of two of its councilors attacked, its Carrickfergus office destroyed in a suspected arson attack and a death threat made against East Belfast MP Naomi Long (Melaugh, 2013). The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) were accused of 'whipping up hatred' towards the Alliance Party by distributing 40,000 'anti-Alliance' leaflets to households across Belfast a few weeks prior to the vote, which encouraged people to contact Alliance representatives to voice their opposition to the proposed changes to the flag protocol (Kane, 2012). Yet, none of Northern Ireland's political parties could have anticipated the scale of the protests seen across the region between December 2012 and March 2013 (Guelke, 2014). The 'people's protest' was in fact coordinated by a number of loyalist actors that opposed the peace process and were critical of the failure of the unionist parties to block the new flag protocol. These included newly formed political organisations such as the Ulster People's Forum, members of loyalist paramilitary groups including the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in East Belfast, and 'protest provocateurs' such as loyalist activist Jamie Bryson, former British National Party fundraiser Jim Dowson, and victims' campaigner Willie Fraser.[i] The repertoire of this often chaotic protest movement consisted of marches to and from Belfast City Hall, the picketing

of public buildings and street protests that illegally blocked roads and caused significant disruption to commuters and local businesses (Nolan et al, 2014). The Northern Ireland Confederation of British Industry estimated the loss of revenues to Belfast traders at between £10 million and £15 million, as customers stayed away from the city centre due to the number of protest rallies held there during the festive period.[ii]

Although the majority of the flag protests passed off peacefully and without incident, a minority ended in violent clashes between loyalists and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Baton rounds would be used to disperse rioters who had thrown petrol bombs at police officers during violent disturbances in towns such as Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey in January 2013. The police were also attacked by loyalist mobs for six consecutive nights near the sectarian interface that separated the predominantly nationalist Short Strand district from the surrounding loyalist community of the Lower Newtownards Road in East Belfast (Melaugh, 2013). Senior members of the UVF were said to have orchestrated this violence and were held responsible for a gun attack on police officers in East Belfast on the 5th January.[iii] These incidents arguably marked a turning point in the protests as the PSNI made clear that it would no longer facilitate illegal street protests and warned the rioters that they would face prosecution. Whereas the protests had attracted 10,000 people at their peak between 17 and 23 December 2012, numbers dwindled to less than 1,000 people per week between mid-January and March 2013 (Nolan et al, 2014,p. 60). Nevertheless, the cost of policing the protests and related incidents throughout this period was estimated by the PSNI Chief Constable Matt Baggott to be as high as £20 million.[iv] A total of 147 police officers were reportedly injured during the flag protests, with 246 protesters arrested and 188 charged with committing offences between 3 December 2012 and 31 January 2013.[v]

The Flag Dispute: the final straw for loyalists?

Many observers felt that the union flag dispute was a 'lightning rod' for loyalist dissatisfaction, not only with the performance of the power-sharing institutions at Stormont – the seat of Northern Ireland's devolved administration- but also with the peace process itself (McDonald, 2013). The decision by Belfast City Council to alter the flag protocol was viewed by working class loyalists as yet another republican attack upon unionist and loyalist culture (Guelke, 2014). The flag was seen a symbol of their 'Britishness' that they felt was being "airbrushed from the 'new' Northern Ireland" (INTERCOMM & Byrne, 2013,p. 7). First Minister – and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party- Peter Robinson was condemned for having 'sold out' these communities through his participation in the power-sharing Executive with Sinn Fein and his failure to protect loyalist communities from this 'culture war.' This was symptomatic of an ever increasing disconnect between the main unionist parties and working class loyalist communities (Nolan, 2014; Novosel, 2013). Loyalists believed that they had not yet seen the economic and political benefits of peace (often referred to as the 'peace dividend') that had been experienced by their nationalist and republican counterparts (Smithey, 2013). 'Truth recovery' investigations were characterised as republican conspiracies that were designed to discredit the British state due to the fact they almost exclusively focused on atrocities committed by the police and army. Such an approach towards dealing with the past was perceived by loyalists as an attempt to valorise and justify the republican 'armed struggle' (McGrattan, 2012). Interviews conducted with those who participated in the flag protests also revealed a deep distrust of the PSNI and the news media (Nolan et al, 2014). Loyalists complained that they had been subject to police brutality during the flag protests while a 'light touch' approach had been adopted towards

the policing of protests organised by nationalist residents' groups. There were also complaints about a biased local media that had focused only on the violence perpetrated by loyalist mobs, with very little coverage of the protests that had been attacked by nationalist residents (INTERCOMM & Byrne, 2013). The metaphor most commonly invoked by the protesters was that the flag dispute was the "straw that broke the camel's back" (Nolan, et al, 2014,p. 96).

The 'culture war' narrative was disputed in the 2014 Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report, which showed that the number of loyalist bands and parades in Northern Ireland had reached record levels by 2013 and that they continued to receive generous subsidies from the EU Peace III Programme (Nolan, 2014,p.162). However, these cultural expressions of loyalism might have increased in frequency due to fears about the further erosion of unionist and loyalist culture. The perceived failure to address such victimhood, whether real or imagined, has arguably been a defining characteristic of the post-violence society created by the Belfast Agreement (Brewer, 2010). The peace accord might have transformed the nature of the Northern Irish conflict (colloquially known as the 'Troubles') but it did not resolve it with zero-sum perceptions of politics and space held by members of rival communities left largely undisturbed (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008; Wilford and Wilson, 2003). The rationale was that ethnic divisions could not be 'wished away' and that the leaders of the main political parties, many of whom had already proven adept at using discourses of 'imagined hurts' to mobilise their constituents during the conflict, would legitimise the Agreement by extolling its virtues to their respective ethnic blocs (Murtagh et al, 2008). The frustration expressed by the loyalist flag protesters between December 2012 and March 2013 would appear to militate against such a scenario. Although designated days was proposed by the Alliance Party as a compromise between unionist and nationalist positions on the flying of the union flag over Belfast City Hall, working-class loyalist communities saw it as further evidence that their concerns were being completely ignored by the political establishment (Nolan et al, 2014).

Social Media and the Flag Protests

Social media played a key role in the coordination of the first wave of flag protests in December 2012. Facebook pages such as 'Save the Union Flag' were used to share information about the street protests that spread across Northern Ireland in the weeks following the controversial vote on the flag issue in Belfast City Council. These pages were also used to highlight alleged PSNI brutality against the loyalist protesters. Whether platforms such as Facebook had a significant impact upon the course of events remains to be seen. Indeed, it has been argued that social media's most important contribution to the flag protest movement was the way in which it "provided a central nervous system for the communication of feeling and construction of solidarity" between the protesters (Nolan et al, 2014, p.70). The zero-sum perceptions of politics held by loyalists were strengthened by the polarised and sectarian discourses surrounding the flag issue that circulated on social media. This was accompanied by an increase in the number of incidents of online sectarian abuse being reported by young people (Young, 2014). One such incident would result in two loyalist Facebook pages, Loyalists Against Short Strand and Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater, being shutdown after it emerged that threats were posted against a Catholic man.[vi] Such threats prompted Justice Minister David Ford to call on the PSNI to monitor sites like Facebook in order to identify and prosecute those who had used them to post hate speech or incite others to commit criminal acts.[vii] In this context, it was perhaps no surprise that flag

protesters perceived sites such as Facebook and Twitter as not being safe spaces to exchange information about the demonstrations (Nolan et al, 2014).

Social media also helped mobilise those affective publics who wished to express their frustration at the violence and disruption caused by the protests. Most notably, Belfast resident Adam Turkington created the hashtag #OperationSitin in response to the loyalists' #OperationStandstill, encouraging people to stand up to the protesters by supporting businesses in Belfast that have suffered a massive downturn in trade due to the disruption caused by the protests.[viii] However, self-styled 'parody group' Loyalists Against Democracy (LAD) would emerge from the flag protests as one of the most prominent critics of the flag protesters.[ix] The anonymous 'pro-union' group was heralded by political commentator Newton Emerson as the 'online sensation of the year' for their use of Facebook to share sectarian and offensive comments posted by loyalists online.[x] Supporters praised LAD for holding up a mirror to the "naked sectarianism, bare racism and transparent illoyalism of the protesters" (Spencer, 2013). They would also share a number of memes such as 'Belfast Bigot' under the hashtag #flegs, mocking the protesters' pronunciation of the word 'flags'.[xi] Such activity was said to have generated much hurt and anger amongst loyalists, who organized mass reporting campaigns to force Facebook to remove the page.[xii] LAD was accused of reinforcing middle class stereotypes of working class loyalists through their constant focus on the poor spelling and grammar of those who left comments on the flag protest pages (Mulvenna, 2013). Yet it is clear that the satire of LAD did play a key role in exposing the narratives of anti-Agreement loyalists that were often overlooked by the news media. This study set out to add to the limited empirical data available on this issue by focusing on the ways in which Facebook was used to articulate the perceived grievances of the flag protesters. The Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater (LPPU) page was selected for analysis due to the aforementioned high court injunction that named it as one of the key organisational hubs for the flag protest movement. This paper focuses specifically upon the ethical stance that was constructed for the aforementioned study.

Constructing an ethical stance for the study of flag protest pages

Whiteman (2012) argues in favour of localised ethical stances that are informed not only by the ethical guidelines of organisations such as the British Psychological Society, but also by the socio-political context in which data is collected and analysed. Having already established that content published on this public Facebook page could technically be used without the permission of its authors, the first ethical dilemma related to whether the LPPU administrators should be notified about the researcher's intention to collect and analyse this data. Like with the posting of a 'Research in Progress' notification, there were concerns that contacting the administrators might inhibit the expression of dissent on the page, perhaps even leading to restrictions being placed on which users could view and contribute to. Previous research suggested that young people in particular were likely to use SMS text messaging to organise anti-social behaviour in contested urban interface areas in circumstances when their social media profiles were subjected to greater surveillance by local community groups, the media or the PSNI (Reilly, 2012). It was considered highly likely that many of those who contributed to the LPPU page might do the same if they were made aware of the presence of the researcher. Subsequent interviews with loyalists would reveal that many were indeed wary of exchanging information about the flag protests on public Facebook pages that might be used to incriminate themselves or other protesters (Nolan et al, 2014). Hence, it was decided to covertly observe the conversations between
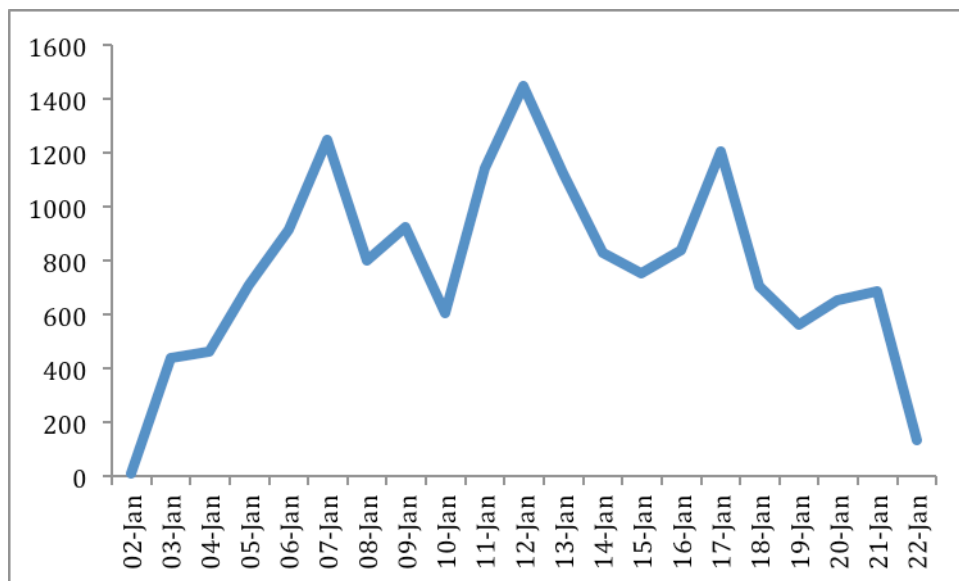
users on the LPPU page in order to explore the narratives of loyalists who have felt increasingly marginalised and isolated within 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland.

Data Collection and Preliminary Findings

Text-mining software package Discovertext (www.discovertext.com) was used to collect and archive 16,203 posts on the LPPU page between 2nd and 22nd January 2013. This period included a number of key events in the flag dispute including #OperationStandstill and the related #OperationSitin campaigns, as well as the violent clashes between police and protesters in East Belfast that were seen as a turning point in the policing of protests. Most Facebook users (2096 out of 3,991) posted only once on the page during this period, with the LPPU administrator responsible for the most comments (1725 posts). It was difficult to verify the representativeness of these comments given that the page appeared to have been heavily moderated throughout this period.

It was decided to focus on 3899 Facebook posts that related to the three 'peaks' in activity on the page during this period (see Figure 1). These reflected key stages in the flag protest movement, such as the decision to move to white-line protests, which are explored in more detail below.

Figure 1. Number of comments on Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater page, January 2013

The six stages of critical thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013), which start with the initially reading of the posts and end with the identification of key themes from the dataset, were thus implemented for this corpus in March 2013. Although a full overview of these themes is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that there was some evidence to corroborate the findings of previous research into the experiences of the flag protesters (see INTERCOMM & Byrne, 2013; Nolan et al, 2014). The page administrators provided logistical information, such as the time and location of demonstrations relating to #OperationStandstill, and used Facebook to explain changes in strategy, such as the move from blocking roads to white-line protests that dominated discussion on the page on 17th

January. There were also frequent allegations of police brutality towards the flag protesters on the page, most notably on 12th January when cyber loyalists' vented their anger at video footage that appeared to show an unprovoked assault upon a pensioner by several police officers during one of the demonstrations in Belfast city centre.[xiii] This 'political' policing was viewed as one manifestation of the 'culture war' against unionist and loyalist culture perpetrated by Sinn Fein via a compliant and biased news media. The DUP and UUP were heavily criticised on the page for failing to articulate the concerns of working class loyalists in relation to these issues. This alienation from mainstream unionist parties was further illustrated by the angry response of loyalists to a speech in which DUP East Antrim MLA Sammy Wilson challenged their claims that they had not benefited from the 'peace dividend'. While the page administrators expressed personal support for the UVF-affiliated Progressive Unionist Party and the anti-Agreement Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), the majority of posters characterised the movement as 'people's protests'. The analysis also provided further evidence of the lack of cohesion in the organisation of the flag protests, as illustrated by the accusations that the leadership had told the media about the change in strategy towards white-line protests before they had consulted their grassroots.

Managing potential reputational harm for unaware participants

The next step was to consider how best to convey these themes without exposing participants to potential reputational harm. The critical thematic analysis provided some evidence of the 'virulent sectarianism' that was said to be circulating on these Facebook pages during the peak of the flag protest movement (Nolan et al, 2014). For example, some users characterised the residents of the nationalist Short Strand enclave in East Belfast as 'fenian bastards' or 'taigs', sectarian terms of abuse for Catholics in Northern Ireland, after violence flared near the sectarian interface in East Belfast on 5th January. There were also claims that there were 'too many Catholics' in the PSNI, particularly when unsubstantiated rumours circulated suggesting that many of the Tactical Support Groups deployed in East Belfast were in fact members of the An Garda Síochána, the police service of the Republic of Ireland. There were also several hostile exchanges between loyalists and republicans on the LPPU page that involved the trading of sectarian insults. However, these interactions were not typical of those observed on the page throughout this period. The page administrators appeared to have acted quickly to delete presumably offensive or threatening comments from threads on the page. In addition, they frequently urged users not to respond to 'republican trolls' and to be careful about what they were posting, after threats against an unidentified Catholic man on the page had led to its temporary closure via court order in January. Loyalists were warned that they were vulnerable to the 'online shaming' of parody group LAD, who had been taking screenshots of comments posted by users on the page and sending these to their employers.

The repeated warnings about the visibility of posts on the LPPU page might provide a prima facie justification for the use of direct quotes from these participants. As observed in previous research into public perception of online privacy (Burkell et al, 2014), it is reasonable to presume that these users were aware that their comments were likely to be scrutinised by a range of external actors such as the news media, PSNI and critics of the flag protest movement. The risk of exposing these participants to potential police prosecution for posting offensive or threatening comments appeared negligible. In his evidence to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Select Committee on 16 January 2013, then PSNI Assistant Chief Constable Drew Harris reported that much of the online abuse reported during this period did not meet the 'standard of proof' necessary for criminal prosecution.[xiv] Recent scholarship has also challenged the notion that data anonymisation is the best way to protect online

participants from any harm that might arise from the use of their content in academic publications. Scholars such as King (1996) and Whiteman (2012) argue that researchers should educate users about how to deal with the blurring of the boundaries between private and public in online spaces rather than protect them. It also might not be appropriate to 'please' online participants by adopting measures, such as the removal of PII and the paraphrasing of their comments, that preserve their anonymity and stop them being held to account for their views (Herring, 1996). Yet, the researcher was still wary of adopting presentation strategies that might have the same effect as the online shaming of loyalists by groups such as LAD, which was said to have contributed to the hurt and alienation felt within working-class loyalist communities (Mulvenna, 2013). In this context, there appeared to be a convincing case for focusing on the narratives that were present on these pages rather than those individuals who articulated them in specific posts.

A key question was whether it was necessary to use direct quotes in order to represent the perceived grievances of loyalists that underpinned the flag protest movement. Clearly the Facebook comments of prominent loyalist activists, such as Jamie Bryson, could provide an insight into how key decisions, such as the move to white line protests, were communicated to the protesters. The verbatim reproduction of their comments could also be justified on the basis that they were 'public figures,' that presumably had little or no expectation that their comments would remain private. However, the same argument could not be made for those users who did not have the resources to withstand the potential reputational harm that might occur if they were to be identified in academic publications through the use of their posts (Krotoski, 2012). This might further alienate working-class communities who already felt that they were the victims of a 'war' perpetrated by Sinn Fein against unionist and loyalist culture. There was also the strong possibility that such an approach might persuade these users not to contribute to public Facebook pages in the future, thus depriving researchers of valuable insight into loyalists' experiences of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it was decided that it would be appropriate to use direct quotes from leaders of the flag protest movement while taking measures to protect the anonymity of 'rank and file' flag protesters. This was an approach that was congruent with the medium-cloaked approach towards data anonymisation espoused by Kozinets (2010).

Data anonymisation without distorting the voices of flag protesters

It was important to ensure that the voices of these flag protesters were not distorted through the process of data anonymisation. Hence, the 'fabrication' strategy proposed by Markham (2012) was ruled out due to its manipulation of user comments that might further disempower the loyalist flag protesters. The use of word clouds appeared to be a more effective way of illustrating key themes from the LPPU page without compromising the privacy of these unaware participants. This "ethically sound" approach towards the qualitative investigation of social media datasets, which requires the data to be 'cleaned' to remove PII and 'function' words prior to the creation of the visualisation, has already been deployed to investigate the discussion of personal stories on the Facebook pages of UK disability dissent networks (Trevisan and Reilly, 2014). The online word cloud generator Tagul (www.tagul.com) was used to visualise the most frequently used words in the comments posted on the LPPU page during January 2013 (see Figure 2). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these results in more detail, the visualisation highlighted key words associated with the lexicon of the 'people's protest', such as 'Ulster', 'Loyalist' and 'Union' (presumably a reference to Northern Ireland's constitutional status within the United Kingdom). The prominence of words referring to locations such as Belfast City Hall and Short Strand also

illustrated how much of this online activity was driven by offline events such as the violence seen in the vicinity of the nationalist enclave in East Belfast over several nights during this period. There was some evidence of loyalist hostility towards the PSNI through the appearance of words such as 'PSNIRA.'

Figure 2. Words most frequently used in comments posted on Loyalist Peaceful Protest Updater page, January 2013

There were however some important limitations to the use of word clouds that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the focus on word frequency provides no insight into the context in which these words are used on the page (McNaught and Lam, 2010). During the union flag protest, it would be difficult to establish with a high degree of certainty whether words such as 'peace' were being used as a critique of the Northern Irish peace process or to call for loyalists to keep their protests peaceful. A related concern would be how these word clouds fail to capture the hostile interactions between loyalists and republicans on the LPPU page. Indeed, the word cloud provides very little insight into the key themes identified during the critical thematic analysis of the dataset, such as the sectarian language used to describe the Short Strand residents and the lack of consensus in relation to the strategy adopted by the flag protesters. This would appear to militate against the use of word clouds to illustrate the perceived grievances of the flag protesters that were expressed on public Facebook pages. However, they may still be valuable tools for the study of protest groups online. The highlighting of the most frequently occurring words using tools such as Tagul may help researchers familiarise themselves with the content and make it easier for them to construct themes that emerge from the analysis from social media datasets.

In light of the limitations of the data presentation strategies outlined above, it was decided that it would be appropriate to paraphrase the comments of 'rank and file' protesters in order to protect them from any reputational harm that might arise from their identification in the study. While acknowledging that it was not possible to fully guarantee the anonymity of the participants, this would at least ensure that the narratives of these loyalists were not distorted while allowing the researcher to place their comments in context. It would also allow for the

exploration of the perceived grievances of loyalists that were said to have underpinned the flag protest movement.

Conclusion

Social media provides unprecedented opportunities to gain insight into the affective dimension of contemporary protest movements, and, in particular, how social media enables citizens to express solidarity and emotional connection with these campaigns. This raises a number of ethical dilemmas for researchers, particularly in relation to whether 'public' posts on sites such as Facebook can be used without the permission of their authors. While covert observation may be justified on the basis that 'Research in Progress' signs might inhibit the expression of dissent on these pages, the identification of these users through the verbatim use of their posts might expose them to the surveillance of the police and other intelligence agencies. Thus, a medium cloaked approach towards data anonymisation, which only uses direct quotes that cannot be located via conventional search strategies, might be appropriate in order to protect unaware participants from any reputational harm that might arise from the use of their data.

This paper focused on how best to convey the narratives of loyalists who posted on the LPPU page without exposing them to potential reputational harm. The flag protests were viewed as a 'lightning rod' for loyalists who felt increasingly alienated from their political representatives and disenchanted with the peace process. They also expressed their anger at what they saw as a 'culture war' that was being waged by Sinn Fein against unionists and loyalists via a 'biased' news media. Public Facebook pages, such as the LPPU, provided valuable insight into how such grievances fed into the protests against the decision of Belfast City Council to alter its flag protocol. The covert observation of the page in January 2013 found some evidence to support the suggestion that social media had become a 'sectarian battleground' during the flag protests. This created an ethical dilemma for the researcher in terms of what level of anonymity should be afforded to those who posted this content on the page. Page administrators constantly warned users about the visibility of their posts, while the risk of criminal prosecution should they be identified appeared relatively low. It was recognised that the researcher had no obligation to 'please' these participants by protecting them from any reputational harm that might have arisen from their identification. Yet, the researcher was wary of inadvertently contributing to the online shaming of loyalists by groups such as LAD, which was said to have further alienated loyalists. Conceivably this might also have convinced some users not to post on public Facebook pages, depriving researchers of the valuable insight into the perspectives of loyalists. Therefore, the researcher decided to only use direct quotes from public figures, such as the leaders of the flag protest movement, who would presumably have no expectation that their comments would remain private. The narratives of the 'rank and file' protesters were conveyed through the use of direct quotes that could not be traced back to their authors and the paraphrasing of their comments. In light of the limitations of alternative strategies such as fabrication and word clouds, this was the most appropriate way to illustrate the themes from the LPPU without distorting the voices of these users. While for some this might seem like a very strict ethical stance, this reflected the specific socio-political context in which the data was collected and analysed. Data presentation strategies for the study of protest movements on social media should ideally be made on a case-by-case basis, with researchers reflecting upon the potential reputational harm that might be inflicted on unaware participants through the use of their data.

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[i] Protest provocateurs travelled from one protest site to another and were often asked to speak
[ii] The NI CBI called for Belfast City Council to provide financial assistance to traders experiencing difficulties. For more, see: http://www.u.tv/News/Baggott-to- -flag-protest-threat/406e382b-833f-4a63-aaaf-8fa8b5bfe919
[iii] For more see: http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jan/07/senior-uvf-figures-belfast-violence
[iv] http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/apr/03/union-flag-protests-arrested-northern-ireland

[v] Police Federation spokesperson Terry Spence provided these statistics. For more see, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-22781555

[vi] The man was not identified due to legal reasons. For more, see: http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/facebook-loyalist-flag-pages-shut-down-29039564.html

[vii] "Flag protests: Loyalty no excuse for violence, says police chief". BBC, 12 December 2012. Available at:

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20622185 (accessed on 10 August 2014)

[viii] http://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-01-11/belfast-hits-back-with-operation-sit-in/

[ix] The group has used the name LADFLEG. LAD was its chosen moniker during the period under review.

[x] Emerson's original piece featured in the Sunday Times. It was later reproduced on the LAD blog and can be accessed here: http://loyalistsagainstdemocracy.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/real-online-wonder-of-year.html (accessed on 10 August 2014)

[xi] The Belfast Bigot meme was based on footage of a female loyalist protester shouting no surrender through a broken window during the controversial flag vote at the City Hall on 3 December 2012. Further information on this meme and #flegs can be found here: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/northern-ireland-flag-protests-2012-13 (accessed on 10 August 2014)

[xii]The LAD page was published and unpublished by Facebook six times between its launch on the 10th December 2012 and the 6th October 2013.

[xiii] The man captured on camera was subsequently charged with two counts of disorderly behaviour and assaulting a police officer. Loyalist claims that he was a pensioner were also later refuted in the news media.

[xiv] The full transcript of his statement can be found here: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmniaf/877/130124.htm