



Digital Contention in a Divided Society: Social Media, Parades and Protests in Northern Ireland

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Digital Contention in a Divided Society: Social Media, Parades and Protests in Northern Ireland. Paul Reilly. Manchester University Press, £80, pp. 264 Manchester, 2021.

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Writing on Northern Ireland post troubles society is a challenge in itself; identifying and deciphering the social media culture wars between multiple opposing parties within the Northern Ireland is even a bigger challenge that Paul Reilly tackled in his book *Digital Contention in a Divided Society*. The book is a solid case study of affective publics contested via the microblogging site Twitter between 2012-2016. This is a period that has serious methodological repercussions for social media researchers due to polarising Brexit debates and later campaigning in the UK and Northern Ireland. The study is pondering the question of agency where the social media has the power to escalate or deescalate the tensions caused by hybrid media systems (twitter, Facebook, print press, YouTube etc). Reilly's book is attempting to look at the ICT's potential to promote positive intergroup contact within deeply divided societies. The research is also aiming to engage question of deliberately sharing of wrong information seen in two recent US elections, most recent Brexit referendum and elections around world influenced by false claims as news as in Turkish general and municipal elections (Saka 2018). The first main case study of the project stems from the Ardoyne parade disputes (July 2014 and July 2015), a costumed band march in Belfast by the protestant loyalist Orange order/UUVF backed ritual that makes a point of passing through the Irish Republican neighbourhood, a move interpreted as offensive by the Irish residents. The second one originates from the Belfast City Council's decision to permanently lower the British flag except for national commemorative days, which is perceived as part of culture wars by the protestants. Reilly identifies societal cleavages, zero-sum perceptions of space

and politics and investigates how online groups for and against the two sides for each issue has impact in the easing of the differences.

One strand of debate Reilly identifies through deep searching twitter and Facebook posts is the constant othering and deep contention of victimhood in a divided society. The book attempts to link ICTs to inclusive peacebuilding framework that engage populations directly affected by conflict and decentralise power from political elites (6). The aim is to test the hypothesis of whether these platforms will enable a psychological environment to engage and work together to resolve differences. The other problem he identifies is the self-reflecting problem on both sides, the inability to empathise with the other group and to self-question methods and tactics and discourse that would be hurtful to the opposing sides. Take this way, the work is an attempt to recontextualize digital citizenship and finds a very relevant example through the practice he dubs as silly citizenship as a new way of reutilizing social media practice (10). The silly citizenship here practiced by the parody group of possible mixed group of Northern Irish Catholics and protestants who are against the contentious politics and include such tactics as the use of memes (remixing), wordplay (hashtagging), creation of parody accounts and intertexts. Another interesting find is that twitter is a toxic place for women and almost all of the participants in online engagement were men. Reilly is aware that the social media platforms themselves are commercial enterprises that are there to make money and advocating peace in communities may not be their number one priority. He is aware of the data scandals like Cambridge Analytica or possible Russian interference through trolling in elections in different countries.

The mixed research methods and knowing the limits of the research outcome are Reilly's strengths. He utilizes thematic analysis (TA) to identify and evaluate the online frames of civil actors in Post conflict Northern Ireland. The book analyses semi-structured interviews from relevant stakeholders such as bloggers, community workers and representatives of communications teams from main political parties. Social media data is also collected through text-mining software tools and time frequency graphs are created to identify peak periods of use through the contentious parade and flag disputes commentaries were shared online. The book makes a good solid point of raising the issues of privacy when analysing this data, whether to reveal the identities of the commenters or the comments would could cause immediate social (and even legal) harm in a post-conflict society. The other limitations include the unreliable uses of geotagged data due to the use of VPN, to evade this limitation Reilly is able to assess well the extent to which geographically dispersed affective published helped reduce sectarian tensions. The book also acknowledges the fact that it is difficult for individual researcher to verify the representativeness of this data (17). Finally, the author views the social media data analysed in this book as 'traces of behavior' of a small but vocal minority which lacks the robustness of traditional opinion polls. He accepts that the majority of the contributors to online comments would not be making public contributions and text-mining tools would to be able to detect the views of their audience

Overall this study represents a significant contribution to the discussion about the evolving relationship between social media , contentious politics and social media movements in post-conflict societies. It is a solid contribution to test the polysemic nature of Twitter hashtags and their capacity to mobilise affective publics in contested and polarised social media environments. The study was able to point out to the negative side of such affective publics when it came to the mocking of poor spelling of working-class Belfast accent; whether to see

if as just playful or perpetuating negative stereotypes. Reilly's book is invaluable when it mentions the unprecedented opportunities for citizens to engage in areas such as sousveillance in the face of reporting perceived police violence. Reilly's work joins the ranks of upcoming scholarly work relevant in the field such as Denisova (2019), Ozduzen (2020) and El Issawi (2021). It is a brilliant example of adding to the author's previous work (2010) building upon field research and data mining techniques and able to define its own strengths and limitations of the approach. It is a perfect academic study for identifying public engagement in the times of the dysfunctional politics searching for reconciliation through new conceptual tools like silly citizenship in post-brexit Irish border that will remain disputed in the years to come.

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