

How Twitter users can work together to defuse social tensions

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A report co-authored by a researcher from the University of Leicester has found that social media sites such as Twitter can be useful in keeping the peace and defusing tensions during times of social unrest.

Dr Paul Reilly, of the University's Department of Media and Communication, who co-authored the report, investigated the extent to which the [social media](#) activity surrounding contentious parades and protests has affected community relations in Northern Ireland, examining how Loyalist and Republican communities use sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in relation to public demonstrations.

The report, entitled 'Social Media, Parades and Protest', set out to explore the potential role of social media in providing accurate, real-time information to residents affected by controversial parades and protests.

In doing so, it has identified ways in which stakeholders such as local residents' groups can use these sites to reduce intercommunal tensions and improve community relations in contested areas such as North Belfast.

Dr Reilly said: "The findings of this study show how social media sites such as Twitter may be used by citizens to defuse sectarian tensions during the marching season in Northern Ireland. That is not to say that these sites are not being used to reinforce divisions between rival communities during contentious parades. Rather, the tweets analysed as part of this study appeared to be influenced by the calls from political

representatives from all sides to keep the parades and related protests peaceful."

Fears of a repeat of the sectarian clashes previously seen in North Belfast, in relation to the Parade Commission's decision to ban the return leg of the Ligoniel Orange march from passing by the Ardoyne shops, were not realised, with parades across Northern Ireland passing off without incident.

Northern Ireland Secretary of State Teresa Villiers praised the Orange Order, as well as nationalist and unionist political representatives, for their role in delivering the most peaceful Twelfth seen in recent years.

Dr Reilly was responsible for the collection and analysis of Twitter data in the report. Key findings included:

- Twitter provided users with an array of information sources courtesy of the citizen and professional journalists who were tweeting their perspectives on events as they unfolded. The latter were more influential in these information flows, primarily due to the high number of retweets for content produced by journalists from BBC NI and UTV;
- Citizens were quick to check the veracity of the reports emerging from the scene. There were also several examples of citizens using the site to refute rumours and expose those responsible for photoshopping images, as was seen with the Randalstown bonfire and a picture of a protester in Ardoyne;
- The relatively short lifespan of these rumours, not to mention the lack of media coverage they received, illustrated how effectively tweeters corrected misinformation during this period;
- The users that contributed to the Twelfth hashtags tended to be full of praise for the peaceful and non-violent conduct of the Orange Order. In particular, there was much support for its

'graduated response' to the Parade Commission's decision to ban the return leg of the Ligoniel Orange lodges from passing by the Ardoyne shops.

The report is based upon a small research project carried out by the researchers between March and September 2014. It involved a series of semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, as well as a critical thematic analysis of Twitter activity during the Orange Order parades across Northern Ireland on 12 July 2014.

Provided by University of Leicester

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