# Social media can play a key role in campaigns against paramilitary-style assaults in Northern Ireland

Assaults on young people in Northern Ireland by paramilitary groups remain prevalent, though under-reported. **Paul Reilly** and **Faith Gordon** detail how social media has been used both by such paramilitary groups to 'police' young people and how it can also become a tool for organising campaigns against such violence in the long term.



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Northern Ireland has the youngest population out of any jurisdiction in the UK and is one of the poorest regions in the European Union (EU), with 25% of children said to be living in poverty in 2016. Its communities suffer from 'conflict-related trauma' after more than 30 years of violence, 'pervasive sectarianism, hard-line policing, military operations and paramilitary punishments'. Paramilitary violence against children and young people remains endemic within loyalist and republican communities. The Detail found that 4,336 paramilitary-style assaults were reported to the police in Northern Ireland between January 1990 and the end of October 2014. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of such incidents was said to have increased by as much as 60%. As a social group, it is children and young people in particular who bear the brunt of such violence. Shot by my Neighbour, a recent BBC3 documentary presented by Stacey Dooley, showed how children under the age of 16 were being targeted by paramilitary gangs for 'anti-social behaviour' such as drug dealing and car theft. These paramilitary-style attacks leave young people with a host of life-changing physical injuries, as well as long term psychological trauma that often manifests itself in alcohol and drug misuse and depression.

# Paramilitaries' use of social media to intimidate young people receives little media coverage

An under-researched issue is the use of social media by loyalist and republican paramilitaries to 'police' children and young people. There have been some reports that Facebook has been used by paramilitaries to post the names and photographs of individuals accused of anti-social behaviour. In one such incident, a republican paramilitary-style assault on a 17-year-old man in West Belfast was linked to a 'hit list' circulated on social media containing the details of 50 people accused of crimes such as drug dealing and burglary.

Yet, our preliminary research into newspaper coverage of paramilitary-style assaults suggests that few of them are directly linked to social media. While it is likely that such incidents are under-reported, our study of the three main Northern Irish daily newspapers (Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and News Letter) found that the aforementioned 'hit list' story was the only one of 144 articles focusing on paramilitary-style assaults in these publications to mention social media being used in this way.

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## Campaigns against paramilitary-style assaults

Active resistance towards paramilitary violence and intimidation has emerged in the form of the <u>Stop Attacks</u> <u>Forum</u>, a coalition of youth workers, academics and activists led by youth worker <u>Paul Smyth</u>. The campaign has set out to address what Smyth characterises as a <u>'societal shrug'</u> about paramilitary-style attacks in Northern Ireland, whereby they are justified by many citizens <u>(35% in</u> one recently reported study) who believe that the victims must have done something to deserve punishment. Stop Attacks has also sought to hold the PSNI Chief Constable to account for the poor clearance rates in relation to paramilitary-style assaults, which are <u>reportedly</u> <u>below 4%</u>. What started off as a forum providing a voice to victims and their families, has evolved into a highly sophisticated campaign involving the sharing of video content on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

A key objective of #stopattacks has been to improve media reporting of these attacks, which has often downplayed the consequences for the victims and their families. Most recently, it commissioned <u>a short film</u> in which young people from Belfast interview victims, their families, and the emergency services who respond to such incidents. This was shared on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to facilitate discussion on this issue within schools and youth groups in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Justice in Northern Ireland has also launched its 'Ending The Harm' campaign in October 2018, as part of its 'Tackling Paramilitarism Programme'. While it does encourage citizens to come forward with information about these attacks, it is primarily a public awareness campaign designed to highlight the impact on victims, their families and local communities. Four videos, each telling the story of a paramilitary-style attack from the perspective of the victim, the victim's mother, the paramilitary member who perpetrates such attacks and a witness, feature on a dedicated website. These campaign materials have been distributed on social media, as well as on billboards, radio and television advertisements.

Public awareness campaigns on social media are unlikely, in the short term at least, to address the 'societal shrug' in relation to paramilitary-style attacks. This is a longer-term project that will require greater levels of trust between the PSNI and those communities blighted by such incidents. However, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide stakeholders with unprecedented opportunities to shape public debates about these issues by highlighting their negative impact on these communities.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.

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